

The Nervous Tic: Dark Humour and the Surreal in Poetry

Victoria Louise Shirley BA, MA

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Abstract

In the creative part of my project, titled *The Nervous Tic*, I have written poems using dark humour and the surreal to explore subjects that may be considered dark or depressing. Many of the poems demonstrate what happens when you play with the things that you are afraid of, and, by doing this, in line with Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, I turn my store of unpleasure, feelings already in reserve for response to unpleasant things, into pleasure. With a practice that chimes with theories from Camus, Breton and Bergson, using material or topics, such as death, to play with, I demonstrate how laughing at something first before it can hurt you can work effectively as a defence mechanism and generate laughter, which is therapeutic. My poems are a reaction to life's injustice and trauma, and in that way, I see them as a tic, or an anxiety, in themselves, something triggered by life. They explore mortality, failure, fear, resentment, insecurities, self-loathing, jealousy, anxieties, feelings of inadequacy, regrets, and all those foibles that make up the human experience. Purposely avoiding writing poems specifically about things, working with the same anti-method as Russell Edson by never coming to the page with any preconceived ideas, I worked in a constant state of surprise, experimenting and delving into the subconscious to create these surreal pieces.

In my critical work, a thesis on Dark Humour and the Surreal in Poetry, I work through three major areas. Chapter One is based on the Grotesque, in which I look at the work of the Russian Absurdist Daniil Kharms, his miniatures written at the time of Stalin's Great Terror, then the dream-like psychological mock-fables of the American prose poet Russell Edson, and finally the sardonic, occasionally masochistic, poems of the French painter and poet Henri Michaux. In Chapter Two, I focus on female poets, who together encapsulate The Female Grotesque, The Gurlisque, and One-of-the Guys Surrealism, strongly working against common expectations and misconceptions around women and poetry. Satirical American poets Chelsey Minnis and Jennifer L. Knox, and the South Korean Feminist poet, Kim Hyesoon, feature here. In Chapter Three, I investigate the Surreal Narrative, looking at two contemporary UK poets, Tom Jenks and Luke Kennard, and the master of the Surreal Narrative poem, the American poet James Tate. I consider my own work alongside these poets in all these chapters.

In conclusion, this thesis shows how dark humour and the surreal work as a double protection, enabling us to explore difficult subjects by ironic distancing and help us to cope with the anxieties of being human and the existential panic often caused simply by living in the world. Through these poets, the thesis also establishes the potential of joyfully refusing to write about serious issues directly, and in this rejection, how powerful the poetry can become.

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“*You* may not be interested in absurdity, ... but absurdity is interested in *you*.”

Donald Barthelme

Introduction

A link between dark humour and the surreal was first officially established 1919-1924. André Breton (thought of as the founder of the Surrealist movement), and his associates, experimented with 'automatic writing' based on Freud's free association exercises from which Soupault and Breton's writings were published as *Les Champs Magnétiques* (The Magnetic Fields) (1920) The surrealist comrades realised that the unconscious, uncensored thoughts, i.e. thoughts 'exempt from [...] any moral concern' (Breton, 1924) contained the absurdity of dreams and were often very funny. Breton later, in his *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940), containing work by Marquis de Sade, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jonathan Swift and Comte de Lautréamont to name a few, describes this style of humour as, not only a 'superior revolt of the mind' (Breton, 2009, p. 22), but as a humour that 'refuses to be hurt by arrows of reality [that is] impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world'. (Breton, 2009, p. 24)

This presentation of dark humour as a refusal to be hurt, no matter the content, builds on what Freud had already spoken of in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), where he talks about 'defence processes [being] the physical correlative of the flight reflex' (Freud, 2013, p. 346) saying that they 'perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources' (Freud, 2013, p. 346/347), instead finding 'a means of withdrawing the energy from the release of unpleasure that is already in preparation and transforming it into pleasure.' (Freud, 2013, p. 347)

In this thesis I explore the link between dark humour and the surreal in the work of poets who have chosen to exercise this 'partly macabre, partly ironic humour', that is the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality' (Breton, 2009, p. 25) and look at how dark humour and the surreal are used as a defence mechanism: against the outside world; against the pressures and expectations of the author's society; even against the self. As a corollary, this will involve an analysis of dark humour and the surreal as a dodge and decoy, used by poets to avoid talking directly about issues, personal or political, and about how powerful that indirectness can be. I will explore how dark humour and the surreal, when together, work as a double protection, i.e. the surrealness allows the dark humour to be pushed further and together they allow us, from an emotional distance, to explore potentially uncomfortable subjects which otherwise could be painful or disturbing to explore, for the writer and the reader.

Breton stated in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), that he was seeking to 'resolve two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into an absolute reality' (Breton). In the coming chapters, I examine the realities created by some poets who I feel are central to the development

of the surreal and dark-comic, bringing us right up to the present day. I will also look at this 'degradation' (Bergson, 2008, p. 64) that Henri Bergson talks of with the comic in his study *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*. Or, as Breton has it, the 'reducing [of] everything [that seems] all-important down to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path' (Breton, 2009, p. 12). In my own creative and critical work, I ask how and why, when explored through the lens of the absurd and the surreal, issues such as poverty, death, disease, and torture could be considered remotely comical, and why this is something we might want to experience.

Surrealism is widely considered a 'post-traumatic movement' (cited in Gascoigne, 2007, p. 34) in reaction to the horrors of World War I. But in 1946, six years after *Anthology of Black Humour* was first published and banned by the Vichy Government, Breton's 'consideration of black humour as a response to the atrocities of World War II' (Lowenthal in Péret, 2011, p. xviii), came under criticism from Raymond Queneau who saw 'the recently defeated Nazis as having put into practice the humour outlined' (ibid) in the book. Kathleen Raine also pointed out in her essay on British Surrealist David Gascoigne and his eventual renunciation of surrealism, that 'evil jokes' (Raine, 1967, p. 201), indeed, for many 'appear[ed] less amusing [once] Belsen and Buchenwald put nihilism into practice on a mass scale.' (ibid). With this in mind, I will be looking at the ethical debates behind dark humour and surrealism and consider criticisms of it in relation to the work of the poets I am examining.

The first chapter of this thesis is an in-depth study of the grotesque in poetry, in which I look at inner and outer politics and the effect our environment has on us. From the Russian Absurdist, Daniil Kharmis, the violence of his 'black miniature[s]' (Cornwell, 2006, p. 166), considering how much his conditions affected his work, to the strange and distorted mock fables of American prose poet Russell Edson, and his more psychological, disturbed-domestic poems.

Daniil Kharmis, a poet and writer, who wrote during Stalin's Great Terror, and eventually died at the hands of it, wrote absurd pieces, often involving absurdly funny, gruesome deaths. From old women falling out of windows and shattering to pieces due to excessive curiosity, to a character who dies from stuffing themselves with mashed peas, to a mini mock-play where all that happens is the characters come on stage and vomit. I consider this a reaction to a terrifying political situation and ask whether this is an example of laughter as a coping mechanism, or something Kharmis would have defiantly done regardless, considering the position he occupied 'between laughter and horror, meaninglessness and the search for divine order' (ibid. p. 177).

Dark humour and the surreal as 'troublesome dreams' (Gallaher, 2015, p. 12) are examined in mostly everyday home settings in the work of Russell Edson. In John Gallaher's essay, 'So are we to laugh or what?', he talks about Edson's poems as 'these little case studies' (ibid), as 'a

confusion of tragedy and comedy that leave readers asking: 'Is this funny? Is this horrible? And answers yes, as no one gets out of an Edson book unscathed.' (ibid) If dark humour is defined in part by featuring the macabre, Edson has it in surplus, often veering to the grotesque. There are dead apes served up to husbands for dinner, blood and monkey hair on husband's whiskers; dead husbands shouted at, kicked and chopped up by their wives; men punching themselves, eating their own hands before swallowing themselves. I look at why such gruesomeness is funny, and, also, based on the suggestion of misogyny by Holly Iglesias in her book, *Boxing Inside the Box*, consider the role of women in these 'absurdist parables'. (Iglesias, 2004, p. 8) The collective unconscious also rears its head in relation to Edson and Kharms writing strikingly similar poems decades and continents apart but with no way of Edson being able to read Kharms as forerunner or inspiration given that Kharms wasn't widely translated into English until the late 1970s, after many of Edson's major works had been published.

Therapeutic benefits of writing violent and grotesque work are examined in the work of the French painter and surrealist Henri Michaux: 'Into the very spot of suffering and of obsession you introduce such exaltation, such magnificent violence, together with the hammering of words, that the pain, gradually dissolving, is replaced by an ethereal and demoniacal ball — wonderful state!' (Michaux in Ellmann, 1968, p. xv) 'Through study of my own morbid-comic work in this chapter, I look at how absurdity mocks society, ourselves, all the things we're afraid of and the rituals we hold dear. [I discuss my own work in more detail later in the introduction after overviews of the chapters are given.] The 'pseudo-I' is introduced in this chapter, as is 'ironic distanc[ing]' (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 15) both of these theories are discussed in association to all the writers here and moving forward through the thesis. The mundanity and ordinariness of death is highlighted in Michaux's 'The Executioner' and in Kharms's multiple comic deaths. We consider Barthes' 'Death of the Author', the Sisyphean, Camus' 'cruel mathematics' of life (p. 6), the 'pure superstition' (Mallarmé in Barthes, 1967 p. 144) of the 'intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley, (1946) and Donald Hall's 'serious humor', which are introduced here and also present and relevant throughout this whole study. Finally, what I term 'existential panic' in the poetry is brought in, the absurdity and the desperation of being human.

In my chapter dedicated to women poets, which looks at the female grotesque, the Gurrlesque and one-of-the-guys surrealism (a term coined by Robert Pinsky), I argue against the critic Holly Iglesias's view that male surrealists tend to write flippant, comic, misogynistic poems (unwittingly or otherwise) and that, conversely, women write more heartfelt, emotional poems of greater worth. I discuss women that are writing dark, comic, and surreal poems, who engage in a joyful refusal: a rejection of issues they are expected to discuss in their work. Instead, they choose

freedom from letting emotions dominate their work, giving themselves the same privilege as men. Chelsey Minnis, who was at the forefront of the Gurlesque literary movement, finds new effective, sardonically and ironically charged ways of writing about rape. I will show how she does this by emotionally distancing, playing a metaphoric ironic mind-game with would-be attackers. Also by using sarcastic invitations and demonstrating the '[h]orrible Prettiness' (in Glenum and Greenburg, 2010, p. 11) of the Burlesque, where the Gurlesque in part takes its name from.

Sharing Minnis's, and the Gurlesque's love of kitsch, Jennifer L. Knox's poems seem to show American society's failure, the failure of the authorities, and the stupidity of the culture, whilst never placing herself above it. Kathrine Rooney astutely points out in her *New York Times* review that 'Knox [has a] 'Dark, perverse ... comic-apocalyptic world view' [showing] the threat -- or promise ... of extinction'. She goes on to say that Knox: 'finds the humor in almost everything, and then keeps going to find the sadness.' (Rooney, 2015) In her collection, *Days of Shame and Failure* no subject is out of bounds. In 'Crazy Hairdo, Crazier Head', for example, lines like 'as long as there's cash in chemo, diseases will flow like springs' (Knox, 2015, p. 47) or the topic of bestiality in 'Radical Honesty Night'. In Knox's work, 'death is everywhere' (Rooney, 2015). In her poem, 'Towa Plates', even the dandelions are 'decapitated' (ibid). In this study, I ask, in relation to the two poems I've selected from the book, is this a way of staying impervious to the wounds dealt by the outside world? The apparent moral ambiguity in Knox and Minnis shows women making more refusals (of sentimentality and expected gender roles) and demonstrates that easy answers in poetry don't make good art.

The work of South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon (family name Kim) is a reflection of the repression experienced by women in South Korea. The escapism in the surreal that has become so essential for women writers there as it grows in popularity. Like Kharms, Kim has written out of a turbulent political situation, and both writers emerged out of dictatorships, one at the beginning, one at the end of the 20th century. There are similarities in their work too, in terms of blood and violence and a refusal to talk directly about politics. We may observe that Kharms faced greater existential threats, serving time in exile in prison in Kursk for writing 'non-Soviet' work and eventually dying of starvation during the siege of Leningrad, during which he was committed to a psychiatric hospital after feigning insanity. However, Kim has had the added dimension of gender restrictions experienced at multiple levels in society and has inspired a generation of female poets to write and express themselves in ways formerly unacceptable, a kind of liberation. She is still writing today, still at the forefront of Korean Feminist Surrealist poetry. I consider two of my own poems in this chapter for their relation to the Gurlesque, horror and cuteness and the

application of chance to find dark-comedy that unsettles, disturbs and makes us laugh in equal measure.

The study of the Surreal Narrative in the thesis brings sadness and melancholy into the conversation. The late great James Tate, a true master of the Surreal Narrative, inspired by Max Jacob and Benjamin Péret, aimed to 'break [readers'] heart[s]' (*The Paris Review*, 2006, online) as well as make them laugh; the restlessness and ennui of Tom Jenks inform his deadpan humour, his poems bringing boredom, pointlessness, defeatism and faux-naivety into the surreal. It could be said of James Tate, with his father dying as a pilot in World War II, that his nihilistic world view was set from an early age. He tackled the subject head-on in his first collection, but after that, he 'never shared further details of his waking life' (Gioia, 1998), choosing instead to embrace the absurd and the comic, albeit a hilarity which is peppered with sadness. His poems, which show his 'dreams and nightmares, ... fears and desires' (ibid), can be funny, melancholy, surreal, dark, breezy and carefree, all at once. Often exercising this 'degradation' (Bergson, p. 64) of the everyday and the things that are supposed to mean something. I will also ask if humour is used as a defence mechanism by Tate to avoid dealing with painful issues or if in fact it presents us with the 'royal road to the unconscious' (Freud, 1900) and a deeper understanding of our traumas, our sadness and our ambivalence.

Links with loss and sadness between Tate and Jenks are found, and biographical fallacy is considered. Jenks' 2016 book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a social media rewrite of Robert Burton's 1621 book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, is process driven and Oulipian in style and approach. In this rewrite, he used tweets with the word melancholy made in January 2014, January considered the most depressing month, as his source text to compose poems with stanzas in a 10-line form à la Keats' 'Ode to Melancholy', so it is safe to say that melancholy is a strong concern of Jenks. In his book *A Long and Hard Night Troubled by Visions* a book of surreal prose poems the deadpan humour and emotional flatness create feelings of emotion in the reader, such is the feeling of hopelessness and yearning evoked.

Luke Kennard's unreliable narrators introduce 'annoyingness' into the picture in one poem that is examined, and a touch of folk horror into the other. Across his oeuvre, the Forward Prize-winning poet's work contains a high amount of murder and death, there is also failure, depression, fears, cruelty, anxieties, and all manner of subject matter, which shouldn't be funny, but somehow is. 'Grisly' (Kennard, 2009, p. 4) murders, children instructed to 'gather' (ibid) their father's 'remains' (ibid), 'decomposing clown[s]' (Kennard, 2007, p. 9.), the suggestion of eating a 'brain' (ibid), all feature in his comic poems in his collection *The Harbour Before the Movie*. Do the surreal juxtapositions serve as reassurance, supporting the already established funniness in the darkness,

by making it clear that this is definitely not serious? Or is it a case of the more awful the situation depicted, the more it makes us laugh? Looking at one poem from his first collection and another from his second all this is explored.

The idea of the joyful refusal in this chapter is examined more deeply when biographical detail, that gives the right to joyfully refuse, is again considered. As is the necessity of experiencing real sadness in order to have the ability to feign faux-sadness, in absurd comic situations. The mini-narrative, the building of miniatures in my sequence *Corpses* (Sublunary Editions) is reflected on, as is the psychological disturbance in my poem ‘The Executioner’, which unknowingly chose the same title as Michaux’s studied in Chapter One. Ultimately, we come back to Donald Hall’s idea of ‘serious humor’, which combats accusation of comic poems having less worth than the ‘heartfelt’.

All of the poems of my own I have selected here for comparison and analysis have been published and made up my pamphlets *Grotesquerie for the Apocalypse*, published with Beir Bua in 2021 and *Corpses* published with Sublunary Editions 2021, both were written and published during the duration of my doctoral study (I have provided page numbers to the books within the thesis, as well as the poems being included in full after). In addition to this, my sequence, *Poets*, was published this year, 2022, as a pamphlet with *The Red Ceilings Press*. I wrote an introduction for *Grotesquerie for the Apocalypse* and feel that it is relevant and appropriate for me to include it in its entirety here, as it sheds light on how I came to write the poems and about my artistic involvement with many of the poets and work looked at in this study:

The first part of *Grotesquerie for the Apocalypse* came out of an intensely creative period in the first year of my PhD, which explores Dark Humour and the Surreal in Poetry. Focussing on the grotesque, I was immersed in, and obsessed with, the work of the Russian-Absurdist, Daniil Kharmis, and the strange and surreal fable-like poems of Russell Edson. My chapbook, *Corpses* (Sublunary Editions), was written during this period too. Not since my discovery of the surreal narratives of James Tate have any writers resonated with me more than Kharmis and Edson. (Tate was a huge influence on my collection, *The Continued Closure of the Blue Door* (HVTN Press), and his work was responsible for a defining turning point in my writing.) Donald Hall once said, whilst speaking of Edson's work: “It’s fanciful, it’s even funny—but his humour carries discomfort with it, like all serious humor.” This “serious humor” is something I strongly connect with.

Part of the reason people liked *Corpses*, I think, was because of the grotesque times we were experiencing at that moment. It was published when Trump was still in office and when Covid had just struck. People needed the release of laughter and they needed to laugh hard. This was when my 'Apocalypse Poems' were written. Like Kharms, I am a fan of the black miniature. Like Kharms, we were, and still are, living in dark times.

I have included Kitty Ring, an exploration of Japanese cuteness and horror created from the text of *Hello Kitty Collected Storybook* and Koji Suzuki's horror novel *Ring*, in this volume, as I feel it fits perfectly with the rest of the poems here. The sequence was created for Aww-Struck, a 'cute studies' conference, and one of these poems was featured in the associated anthology of the same name. I visited Japan in Spring 2019 and have always been fascinated with its culture. When this opportunity came up to get involved with Aww-Struck, it got me thinking about Kawaii, and cuteness's counter aesthetic, the grotesque, which I was already deeply involved with. I decided to explore these extremes, cuteness and horror, which the Japanese seem to do so well.

We don't always know why we are drawn to the things we are, in such an urgent manner, but we must actively pursue these urges. To me, writing is about desire and obsession and having somewhere to channel your weirdness. Exploiting your weirdness. Exploiting the darkness. It's about flipping the things that hurt you or you're afraid of and turning them into a source of amusement for you and others. Obsession and desire are how things happen, get invented and created. Resist it at your loss.

The work I produced over the entirety of the PhD I hope will make up *The Nervous Tic*, a full-length collection, including all the pamphlets above, which will be my second full-length collection.

Finally, while this wasn't by design, and while I have not set out to write a thesis about the form, prose poetry is the form of most of the poems discussed and the majority of the poems I write. The prose poem seems to lend itself very naturally to humour. As Charles Simic's description of prose poetry in his short essay explains:

The secret of the prose poem lies in its economy and surprise. It must dazzle, and it must always have a lightness of touch. I regard the comic spirit as its true muse. Playful and irreverent treatment of every subject is usually the

custom. In order to free poetry of its mannerism and tics, the prose poem should not take itself too seriously. Impossible to write, illegitimate in the view of so many poets and critics, it must remain an object of ridicule to survive.

Simic, 2015, p. 108

There were other poets and writers that could have been, and nearly were, included in this study of Dark Humour and the Surreal. I carried out research on the surrealist Joyce Mansour, admired by Breton and Michaux, known for her 'unique erotic intensity and wild humour' (Rosemont and Kelley, 2010. p. 165). She will be included in the monograph that this study develops into, in the chapter on the Female Grotesque. In terms of the Grotesque, I would also like to include the Swedish poet Aase Berg. I discovered her too late for this study but am including her poetry in a workshop I am running for the Poetry School on the Grotesque. I have also run a course on the Surreal Narrative and included many of the writers studied in chapter three, like the very short fiction writer Diane Williams, on whom I also did substantial research. This would have fitted quite nicely alongside Joyce Mansour in what was originally supposed to be Women and Sex section. Perhaps a chapter on The Erotic might be worth considering including Mansour and Williams. I could easily have included Charles Simic's Pulitzer Prize winning *The World Doesn't End*, and had initially planned to include him, Benjamin Péret, Max Jacob and Caroline Bird too. As the study developed, however, the theories and parallels I was able to draw out proved sufficient to the development of my own poetics and precluded their analysis. They are all writers I look forward to returning to in time.

In addition to these, the poets Ian Seed, Selima Hill, Mark Waldron, Jane Yeh, Michael Earl Craig could have been included and will be incorporated into the continuation of this study. Seed, Waldron and Yeh I was able to publish in my capacity as editor of the 'Surreal-Absurd' feature in *Mercurius* magazine and I would certainly be looking to include them in the extended work. I would like to bring in more poets of colour from around the world, and to build on the Korean surrealism already featured here. Exploring dark humour and the surreal in Japan would link well to Japan's Kawaii cute culture, which would be particularly interesting to look at alongside the Gurllesque.

Many of poets considered but who weren't included in this study so far have appeared in my column that I write for Sublunary Editions. The column is named 'Commitment to Chush' after Matvei Yankelevich's comment about Kharm's 'commitment to [...] chush' (Russian for nonsense) 'even in the bleakest of time's (ibid) and is based on this research on Dark Humour and

the Surreal. So far, I have included Kim Hyesoon, Diane Williams, Daniil Kharms, James Tate, Luke Kennard, Russell Edson and more.

As we shall see, here I have broken up into three sections I found most of interest and most urgent and relevant to the study of dark humour and the surreal: 'The Unsayable: Inner and Outer Environments in the Grotesque-Surreal', 'The Female Grotesque, The Gurllesque and One-of-the-Guys Surrealism' and 'Emotional Punchlines and Turning the Tables in The Surreal Narrative'. Through the work of Kharms, Michaux, Edson, Minnis, Knox, Kim, Tate, Jenks, Kennard and myself, I explore surreal dark-humour and in the process find out a little bit more about being human.

Chapter 1

The Unsayable: Inner and Outer environments in the Grotesque-Surreal

In this chapter I will be looking at writers who incorporate elements of the grotesque into the surreal, and to whom the grotesque is imperative to their dark-humoured poetry. In Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, he finds the grotesque in the combination of the horrific and the comic and writes that the grotesque 'appears to us in paradoxical guise ... and it elicits from us paradoxical responses' (Kayser, p. 14, 1957). In terms of the surreal, 'the imagination always goes to the grotesque', says author Patrick McGrath (quoted in Edwards and Graulund's *Grotesque*). '[W]hat I mean' he continues, '[is] the fanciful, the bizarre, the absurdly incongruous, which again goes back to *The Magnetic Fields*' (Edwards and Graulund, 2013, p. 1), demonstrating that, what I term, the Grotesque-Surreal, is a natural coupling. The three writers I look at in this chapter all have examples of 'disgust mixed with laughter' (ibid, p. 4) and demonstrate the Grotesque-Surreal. I discuss the violent miniatures of Russian-Absurdist Daniil Kharm's, the psychological warped mock-fables of Russell Edson, the mocking sardonic poems of Henri Michaux, and the death-fixated, absurd work of my own.

Just before the Russian Absurdist, Daniil Kharm's is brought into focus, a few words on the absurd itself may be useful, as the absurd has a constant presence in this study. Closely tied to the surreal, if the surreal is dreamlike, or oneiric, and celebrates 'the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (Lautréamont, 1970, p. 177) and if the surreal is about the psychological meanings which lurk beneath the conscious mind, in the subconscious and unconscious mind, then it could be said that the absurd comes down to the meaninglessness of the universe. Linked closely to Camus and existentialism, the 'cruel mathematics' of life (Camus, p. 42), is a phrase I come back to on more than one occasion, one which I feel illustrates the unjust fact that in life one person gets dealt one hand, another person another. For instance, one rich, one poor; one with good health, another bad; one person born to parents who cherish them, another abused by theirs, and so on. In relation to this chapter, Kharm's living in Russia at the time of Stalin's Great Terror, compared with Russell Edson living in America never once having to deal with a cruel dictatorship, and as a result never having to deal with starvation and imprisonment as Kharm's did, is a good example of this. The 'cruel mathematics' of life successfully expresses the unwavering hard facts of injustice and evil in the world, like maths itself one and one makes two, there is no getting away from that actuality.

Baldick's 'modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value' (Cornwell, 2009, p. 2)) is a useful summary of the absurd. The absurd is beyond rationality. Satire and dark humour, often feature, as does incongruity and nothingness. Perhaps the absurd could be considered a bleak realism. Nihilism as well as existentialism is inextricably tied to the absurd. In fact, Cornwell, author of *The Absurd in Literature* says: 'The absurd ... is born of nihilism, out of existentialism, fuelled by the certainty of death (anxiety, dread and death being the scourge of the existentialist)' (p. 5).

Many of the poets in this study exercise both the surreal and the absurd, some more one than the other. Kharms is known as an absurdist, but his work contains many elements of the surreal due to their unrealness and dream logic. Kharms is absurd, in the sense that he is committing to nonsense and the idea that the world and life has no meaning, but his poems go further than showing a bleak realism. His poems are bizarre, comic and fantastic with vivid imagery, conjuring that of dreams.

Daniil Kharms, then Daniil Ivanovich, was born into turbulent times at the end of year known for the 'Revolution of 1905' (Anemone & Scotto, 2013, p. 10), and lived in what might have been, 'the worst 36-year stretch in Russian history' (Cumming, 2013). His father was a political activist who had narrowly survived being sentenced to death by hanging, instead getting away with seven years' hard labour, prior to meeting Kharms's mother. Kharms had a disrupted education due to the political turbulence, which was perhaps represented in his stories later on. He had to move to be with relatives outside Leningrad twice as a child, the first time to escape growing hunger and disorder, the October Revolution, and second time, the horrors of the civil war raging along the Volga. Unsurprisingly, he didn't do very well at school.

Into adulthood, throughout the 1920s, Kharms gained a reputation as an eccentric dandy, often spotted on the streets with butterfly net and pipe, in his bedroom slippers. He was known as an avant-garde artist, a failed one at that, and made his living writing children's literature. In 1931 Kharms was interrogated and imprisoned for charges of anti-Soviet behaviour in the field of children's literature, for the message he gave to children, by switching a science lesson for a pioneer camp, in *What One Must Prepare for Winter*. The book encouraged individual thought, with regard to individual preparations for winter, rather than 'actively social elements of Soviet life' (Anemone and Scott, p. 26). These were charges he confessed to.

In mid-November 1932, after serving six months in preliminary detention and a further several months of exile in Kursk as part of his three-year sentence for being a member of 'an anti-Soviet group of Children's writers' (ibid, p. 27), he returned to his beloved Leningrad to write what would be his most renowned work. Anemone and Scotto explain: 'He would spend the rest of his

life there, devoting most of his creative energy to prose in which black humour and grotesque violence combine to create a universe in which nothing seems solid, the absurd is the norm, and death and dismemberment are commonplace.' (ibid) And yet, still, later this decade, at the height of Stalin's purges, he would insist in his diaries: 'I am only interested in nonsense; only in that which has no practical meaning. Life only interests me in its most absurd manifestations' (in Yankelevich, 2009, p. 11), reiterating a pronouncement uttered five years earlier. As Yankelevich points out, 'Kharm's commitment to 'chush' (nonsense) did not wane even in the bleakest of times'. (ibid)

Far less is known about the life of the American prose poet Russell Edson. He was a self-proclaimed hermit, opposed to the social expectations that went with writing: 'Unfortunately, poetry now is a social club', he said in one interview, 'One has not only to write well, if one can, but be a social creature. The social part is probably the most important part. And I ain't social' (Edson, 1999.) He went to art college and was son of the famous cartoonist Gus Edson. He had no dictatorship to persecute him or regime to resist. He wrote to entertain himself: 'I don't like messages' (ibid), he insisted in all his interviews. Edson lived and died in Connecticut with his wife, after having, as far as we can see, a comfortable life, but yet, like Kharm's, much of his work is full of black humour, violence and the grotesque, alongside a denial that this tendency was the manifestation of any political dimension whatsoever. The poet and critic Donald Hall said of Edson's work: 'It's fanciful, it's even funny—but his humor carries discomfort with it, like all serious humor' (Poetry Foundation, n.d.) 'Serious humor' is something that I will come back to frequently during this study, as all the work discussed could be said to contain, this 'serious humor'. Edson also wrote with the anti-method of 'blank page and a blank mind' and describes this writing as 'dreaming awake ... on the page' (in Tursi, 2004). I will also come back to this 'blank page and a blank mind' technique in relation to my own work as well as Edson's.

Similar to Edson, not much is known about the early years of Belgian-born French artist and painter Henri Michaux. It is suggested that he 'screened much of his private life, especially the early years' (Poetry Foundation, n.d.) and purposely kept much of his past from view. We know that he was alienated as a child, from both friends and parents and that this resulted in feelings of deep 'personal shame' (Ligotti, 2010). After initially wanting to be a priest, then trying and failing at medical studies, he ended up joining the merchant marines travelling all over the world, which might account for the fantastical settings in his poems. Although he didn't grow up in terrible conditions, the alienation and consequential feelings of shame were perhaps what created his turbulent inner environment, the 'inner and outer' (Poetry Foundation, n.d.) conflict that went on to characterise his work. His discovery of the sardonic humour in Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*

seemed to help him and inspire him to both combat and express those feelings. There is much aggression and hostility that seems to be exorcised in these surreal and dark humoured poems that illustrate Michaux's inner politics, and again, violence and the grotesque feature. Unlike Edson's claim to be writing for 'amusement' and Kharms' commitment to 'chush', Michaux could be said to be writing to alleviate pain and inner torment, for 'liberation of an intolerable tension' (in Ellmann, p. xiii). He describes it here: 'Into the very spot of suffering and of obsession you introduce such exaltation, such magnificent violence, together with the hammering of words, that the pain, gradually dissolving, is replaced by an ethereal and demoniacal ball — wonderful state!' (in Ellmann, p. xv)

Considering my own work too, which, with its violence, absurd humour and obsession with death, could be seen as a combination of the above, I will investigate ways to interpret these lives and the surreal dark humour of the works in question. I will look at whether political climate and conditions encouraged the 'nonsense', that Kharms stood by, and whether this was created in defiance, as a form of irreverence (in the face of a jurisdiction which was, among other things, deeply humourless), or whether it was made obliviously and regardless; and whether Kharms went on to find a way to exploit, rather than be oppressed by his conditions. I will also ask if Kharms, Edson, Michaux and myself are using surreal dark humour as a dodge and decoy to avoid talking about anything more serious, or at least to avoid talking about it directly. After all, according to Lacan, it is often what 'remains hidden', and unsaid, that is truly what concerns a person.” (Bailly, p. 112) “[T]rauma”, he says, ‘is unassimilable – at least in its ‘raw’, ‘original’ state’ (in Chapman, 2016.) If we are to take this view, the poetics under discussion becomes a means of assimilation – of experience, of thought, of ideas – which would otherwise be impossible via standard discourse and communication.

Perhaps one of Kharms' most famous works is 'Blue notebook #10'. It has been described as a 'grotesque ... striptease' (Carrick in Cornwell, 2006, p. 172). It is both surreal and absurd and is a story about literally nothing. It is nearly something, but then it 'undermines' itself (Cornwell, p.163). It gives itself then takes itself away, 'destroying itself as a story, as it goes along' (ibid, p. 170):

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn't talk much because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.

He didn't have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back or spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So we don't even know who we are talking about.

We'd better not talk about him anymore.

(Kharms, p. 45, 2007)

The redheaded man is dismantled by his creator. He is made powerless, which, one might infer, is how any writer or artist could have felt in the context of Government censorship. And he disappears, like the people in Stalin's Great Terror: 'Any sudden disappearance of a man is easily equated with political repression, and specifically with Stalin's purges' (Yankelevich, p. 31), as Yankelevich points out in his introduction to *Today I Wrote Nothing*. Talking could also be a dangerous activity in Stalin's Russia. But it is important to note that the redheaded man is made to disappear before he can be hurt or subject to any threat, so the poem could be read as a defence mechanism in itself. 'We'd better not talk about him anymore', could also be read as: you are not allowed to talk, be careful what you say.

The poet John Ashbery, in talking of the method behind his oblique but visionary poems, points towards not writing *about* experiences, but instead 'writ[ing]' out of them' (Stitt, 1983). Thus suggesting that, even at the most fanciful and imaginative, the poet's context (historical, emotional, autobiographical) will always have some bearing on their poetry and thereby reality will always creep into the surreal. 'Blue Notebook #10' could also be about taking back control. If there is no nose or spine to break, they can't be broken. If no stomach, the man can't feel hungry. 'We'd better not talk about him anymore', could also be a refusal to talk about the horrific issues going on all around Kharms.

However, Yankelevich says we should be wary of readings such as these, and that we would be better off considering things like: 'what was he reading? What were people talking about in artistic and scientific circles' (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 31) and avers that Kharms 'consistently denies us our desire to draw any moral conclusions from his work' (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 28). Whether we like it or not, this makes it unlikely that these poems or stories were any form of political statement: 'Every fable ends with a false moral or no moral', he says. (ibid) Yankelevich strongly criticises what he calls 'the trend' of pushing Kharms as a 'counter cultural prose writer battling dark forces and dark times with absurdist humour' (Yankelevich, p. 27). This poses such questions as: why do we, the reader, need to frame him in this way? Is it that we want to find meaning? Kharms's poems deny us meaning, deliberately withholding and frustrating that desire so we, as readers and critics, are forced to search outside of the text, to find that meaning we crave. This

results in us telling ourselves that he *must* be writing about the purges. Then it clicks neatly into place for the critic and reader, and then a sort of trauma narrative emerges with which to make sense of the work.

Yankelevich's view also ties in with Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, 'The Death of the Author', in which he argues against this, considering views through literary history, such as Stéphane Mallarmé's, who viewed this way of thinking as 'pure suspicion' (Mallarmé in Barthes, 1967 p. 144) and Paul Valéry who 'unceasingly questioned and mocked the Author, emphasiz[ing] the linguistic and almost 'chance' nature of his activity' (Barthes, p. 2). Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay, 'The Intentional Fallacy', written prior to Barthes, also argues for the idea that the meaning of a work does not originate from the 'authors' intention' (Wimsatt and Beardsley, p. 470).

If Kharm's work is taken in good faith and accepted as essentially Absurdist, amoral, counter to all the easy all-encompassing answers (or the wisdom we might expect from poetry), then it makes sense and explains why another writer, Russell Edson, decades later, writing in relative peace and comfort is reaching the same conclusions but in a very different context.

In Edson's 'Oh my God, I'll never get home', it is as if a man is literally falling apart:

A piece of man had broken off in a road. He picked it up and put it in his pocket.

As he stooped to pick up another piece he came apart at the waist.

His bottom half was still standing. He walked over on his elbows and grabbed the seat of his pants and said, legs go home.

But as they were going along his head fell off. His head yelled, legs stop.

And then one of his knees came apart. But meanwhile his heart had dropped out of his trunk.

As his head screamed, legs turn around, his tongue fell out.

Oh my God, he thought, I'll never get home.

(Edson, 1994, p.94)

There is desperation in the title. The man is trying to put himself together, but parts of him are falling away. If Daniil Kharm's wrote this, it would be possible to interpret it as a man not in control of his situation. One other reading is that it is a man metaphorically falling apart, unable to 'pull himself together' in the face of life's ordinary frustrations and difficulties. Another that it is a poem about ageing, physically falling apart, like a nightmare in which your body is failing you. But there

is yet another metaphorical reading: the poem could be saying something about the desperation of being human. There is an existential panic, in line with absurdism, as is the humour.

As well as being both absurd and surreal, the plight of the man is also Sisyphean. Assuming, by his own admission, that Edson is writing for 'amusement' (Edson in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, p. 10), one can't help but think he's taken a well-known phrase people use all the time and had fun with making it literal, i.e. imagine if a man was *actually*, physically, falling apart. Edson is interested in the psychological here, in one of what John Gallagher calls, his 'little case studies' (Gallaher, *Field*, p. 12). Coming back to Yankelevich's questions regarding Kharms, 'What is he reading?' Edson claims not to read much poetry at all. In fact, when asked what he reads, he says he does 'as little reading as possible' (Edson in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, 1999, p. 10) but if he does it's 'scientific matter' (ibid) over 'literature' (ibid). And this poem, it seems, is a psychological study around what it means to be human and to experience hardship or frustration, which would appear to tie in. Like Kharms' work, 'Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home' is emotionally distanced, more in common with a psychological investigation, than an emotional one, although, the person's feelings are more prevalent here than in 'Blue Notebook #10'. The character (of sorts) in 'Blue Notebook #10' is completely erased in the third person, whereas the speaker of 'Oh My God, I'll Never get Home' is in the process of self-erasure and, critically, experiences and reacts to that erasure, in a way we might react ourselves, with similar screaming, language and concerns.

Turning to a poem of my own, there is something Sisyphean in the plight of the 'Torso', who is making its way to the kiosk:

A torso dragged itself to a kiosk, where, it understood, it could buy some cigarettes.

It had no head, so wasn't sure how it was going to ask for cigarettes, or indeed smoke them, and with no brain, it was unable to think about it, and was, instead, running on some kind of instinct.

The girl working at the kiosk, which did sell cigarettes, as well as a wide range of newspapers and magazines, was perturbed when the torso appeared, with its macabre snail trail of blood and innards.

But lord knows, this stump could use a cigarette, anyone could see that, and, as it was looking to pay by cash rather than card, she saw no problem with carrying out the transaction.

(Shirley, 2021, p. 6.)

The torso needs cigarettes, but has no head, so is unable to smoke. It has no brain, so it is therefore 'running on some kind of instinct'. It is a pointless quest. A pointless exercise, although arguably a more successful one than Edson's, as the quest appears successful, the Torso is granted its cigarettes. But then the success is undermined by its guaranteed failure. The Torso cannot smoke them, but it does it anyway. What else is there for a torso to do? Like a Kharms miniature, we know nothing about this world we've been plunged into, and there is an 'ironic distanc[ing]' (Yankelevich, p. 15) at play. The grotesque is also present: 'violence and death is made senseless through slapstick' (ibid), so that which might have been shocking is rendered oddly distant. This is exacerbated by the digression of the 'large range of magazines and newspapers' and the flippancy of the transaction at the end. The mundanity of the transaction and its pointlessness are very much in line with nonsense and the absurd: 'Pointlessness ... [is a] .. building block [...] of both nonsense and the absurd', (Cornwell, p. 22). As Yankelovich says, maybe questions around what Kharms is reading are more relevant. Certainly, my work is influenced by reading Kharms and Edson more than it is by Brexit, or more recently Covid, for instance. But, like Kharms' work, mine attempts to 'demonstrate the limits of logical thinking based on scientific structure'. (Oliveira, 2010, p. 66) And, in fact, this form of creative output *is* political, and can be a form of protest, defiance and refusal. To point out these limits, by however surreal a strategy, is a form of engagement with the political and perhaps a powerful one.

Moving away from making a man or a torso disappear to making a woman disappear, next under interrogation is Michaux's 'Simplicity':

What has been lacking in my life up until now is simplicity. Little by little I am beginning to change.

For instance, I always go out with my bed now and when a woman pleases me, I take her and go to bed with her immediately.

If her ears are ugly and large, or her nose, I remove them along with her clothes and put them under the bed, for her to take back when she leaves; I only keep what I like.

If her underthings would improve by being changed, I change them immediately. This is my gift.

But if I see a better-looking woman go by, I apologise to the first and make her disappear at once.

People who know me claim I am incapable of doing what I have just described, that I haven't enough spunk. I once thought that myself, but that was because I was not then doing everything *just as I pleased*.

Now I always have excellent afternoons. (Mornings I work.)

(Michaux, 1968, p. 23)

We are back to a 'grotesque striptease', again, in a more literal sense. Michaux is removing a woman's facial features, as he would her clothes, if they are not pleasing to look at. The poem is a surreal and cruel dissection, paying no respect to or regard for the woman at all. Although completely deadpan, the level of irony and absurdity is clear from the outset. It's called 'Simplicity' but is not about simplicity, in fact, it appears not to be *about* anything at all. The narrator tells us that '[he] always go[es] out with [his] bed now'. This could be a sexual fantasy of sorts. 'Take her to bed immediately', is assuming that the women would *want* to go to bed with him in the first place. It could therefore be an ironic joke about the possibility or non-possibility of that, a parody of a notional Casanova whose irresistibility is taken as read.

Does it undermine itself? Yes, via the faux-seriousness and levels of irony. The woman's feelings aren't important, illustrating emotional distancing. It could be interpreted as a defence against women, of the masculine against the feminine, but there is nothing to suggest that Michaux had a bad experience with women, though we know he felt alienated by his parents. If we are to agree with Mallarmé's 'pure superstition' of this thinking, this wouldn't be relevant anyway. I would instead argue that the attitude to women exhibited in the poem is of secondary importance, whether we read it as misogyny or a satire of masculinity. The speaker taking a bed out with him could be a joke about men always wanting sex but considering that he was strongly against 'deliberate intentions' (p. xiii) in poems, Michaux certainly wouldn't have been looking to write about that: 'The mere ambition to make a poem is enough to kill it.' (p. xiii)

We find ourselves back at Yankelevich's question about what the writer was reading. Certainly 'cruelty' was something Michaux found in the work of Comte de Lautréamont (real name Isidore Ducasse). Lautréamont's 'bursts of sardonic laughter' (p. xi) in his book *Les Chants de Maldoror* had a huge effect on him, helping him find a way of expressing himself, and a way of transferring pain into pleasure, declaring war on 'feelings' (p. xiii). Michaux is exercising his

signature 'scientific coolness' (Ellmann, p. xxi), using this method to conquer the existential panic. He is certainly mocking being human and is perhaps taking back control, playing God and changing the rules of the universe. This poem is absurd as well as surreal, releasing the 'intolerable tension'. (p. xiii). Like a Kharms miniature, we know nothing about this world we've been plunged into: 'none of these characters is round or full [...] His people and situations come out of nothingness; they have no background and only exist in a narrow space' (Ellman, p. xix). And there is that 'ironic distanc[ing]' (Yankelevich, p. 15), the transaction at the end with: 'Now I always have excellent afternoons. (Mornings I work)'. The unnecessary detail has the flavour of someone casually describing their life or routine, to a friend or in an interview or similar. This casts the rest of the poem in a different light, makes it at once more and less plausible, and makes the satirical tensions of the piece clearer. Again, like with 'Torso', the pointlessness and mundanity of the insignificant and unnecessary detail are very much in line with nonsense and the absurd.

In contrast, Kharms' 'Events' is a series of misadventures, and while equally absurd, concerns trauma and disaster rather than romantic and sexual conquest. A series of events where the person in question ends up dying. But the reasons are so implausible, the poem allows us, the reader, to laugh at death. For instance: 'Orlov stuffed himself with mashed peas and died'. It gives permission, and a release to think about, or *not* think about all the deaths that are not funny and indeed our own death. So perhaps this work is about finding a way of laughing at death and death is simply less scary if you make it ridiculous. To look at the piece in full:

One day Orlov stuffed himself with mashed peas and died. Krylov, having heard the news, also died. And Spriridonov died regardless. And Spriridoniv's wife fell from the cupboard and also died. And the Spriridonov children drowned in a pond. Spiridonov's grandmother took to the bottle and wandered the highways. And Mikhailov stopped combing his hair and came down with mange. And Kruglov sketched a lady holding a whip and went mad. And Perekhryostov received four hundred roubles wired over the telephone and was so uppity about it, that he was forced to leave his job.

All good people but they don't know how to hold their ground.

(p. 46)

These are grisly scenes, children drowning in a pond for instance, are less grisly than what was actually taking place in Stalin's Russia. In fact, we might call them less horrific, less systematic, less arbitrary. Kharms presents a sequence of terrible events which could easily parody real-life events

happening under the Soviet regime, employing the dark and macabre humour that 'refuses to be hurt by arrows of reality' (Breton, p. 24). Andrew Stott describes the grotesque as a: 'form of monstrosity devised for satiric purposes, the grotesque marries the repulsive and the comic' (Edwards and Grauland, 2013, p. 93) and we see this played out in the poems. Kharms could be taking these real events a step further, making them ridiculous, reversing our store of unpleasure and 'transferring it into pleasure' (Freud, p. 347). It is possible that he is purposely using fictional death as a decoy to avoid talking about it directly, exploiting it rather than being oppressed by it. A lady with a whip, a grandma wandering highway; the repetition and understated tone, combined with the occasional unnecessary level of detail, make it comic. Death becomes a joke and to emphasise this, he adds a flippant comment at the end: 'Good people, but they couldn't hold their ground'. What does this even mean? Nothing? It is a truism, a proverb; the sort of thing we say in common parlance to render the frightening or horrific more palatable. Perhaps that is the point. Or could it be something one might say in a pub or at home after hearing of a catastrophe that has befallen another family, as in: Well, they were good people, but their problem was a, b, or c. Specifically 'holding ground' could perhaps be read as a territorial metaphor for strength of character i.e. they couldn't do it in the face of whatever arbitrary misfortune, they couldn't do what was necessary to survive. The word 'and' does a lot of work here, its repetition to demonstrate that this sequence is never ending. And somehow the worse it gets the funnier it gets. Despite Yankelevich's argument against the effect of his environment, Cornwell says: 'The Holocaust and Hiroshima may well have felt imminent in the Leningrad of the bleak 1930s' (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 12), so it's not wise to underestimate the impact. And there is no doubt that Kharms is writing 'out of' what was experiencing, the zeitgeist being a part of that, as a (dis)spirit of the times.

My poem, 'The Shelf', seems also to unknowingly be about finding a way of laughing at death. A mother is burned to death. This would be disturbing, if it weren't implied that she was madly in love with a shelf. But does this not give us permission to laugh, so in some way release the negative energy felt when reading about a death in the newspaper? Again, is this a way of 'transforming [...] into pleasure' our store of unpleasure (Freud, p. 347). The loss of a wife, a manipulative mother, obsession, a widowed husband: all serious subjects. Yet, there is a flippant ending, which undermines all this, and 'Too many hobbies and interests' (Please note this line was later cut for the publication for artistic purposes) is 'digression' (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 15) in line with nonsense and the absurd. Like the drawing in Kharms' events, and the '(I work mornings)' comment in 'Simplicity' the reader does not need to know that the deceased had 'too many hobbies and interests'. This is the least of the reader's concerns, but yet, it's presented. The inanimate

objects provide 'ironic distanc[ing]' (Yankelevich, p. 15), required to allow the reader to process these awful events, stimulating a reverse pathos.

Something similar happens in Edson's 'Oyster Stuffing', with the murder of a turkey. The way the murder is presented is funny on two or three levels. Edson plays with 'Thanksgiving, the reason the police are not investigating the murder, but also the laying out of the case, the presenting of the evidence:

It was the last Thursday of November, and a large turkey had been murdered
...
They say he was up in bed reading a cookbook just before sleep. They say
he had just handled his pocket watch; perhaps to wind it and see the time. There was
a feather caught on the winding stem.
On the table next to the bed was an open ink jar with a quill pen stuck in it.
The turkey evidently had been marking a recipe for oyster stuffing ...
His head, still wearing its sleep cap, was on the pillow. The body had
obviously been dragged through the window and across the yard through the snow
....
The investigation has been postponed because of the holiday; most the police will
be having Thanksgiving dinner with their families ...
(p. 190)

This piece is highly ironic, told in a pseudo-serious tone. It is almost gossipy, the way we have heard people talk, or have spoken ourselves, about the events leading up to a human's death many times. This piece illustrates our morbid fascination with death. 'The open ink jar', which had 'evidently' been used by the turkey for 'marking a recipe for oyster stuffing', is a good example of the detail we like to explore. Perhaps it is us trying to make sense of death.

And this is comic, again. We, as humans, of course, kill turkeys all the time, so therefore it this is incongruous in the sense that it would be presented as a rare dramatic tragedy, but, again, it is comic in more than one way. The detail of the 'feather caught on the winding stem' is presented as a delicate poignant detail, which is absurd and hilarious in this context. And critically, this mocks the traditional poetic device of the small resonant detail (the objective correlative) to carry a lot of emotional weight. (In fact, part of the sophistication of this work depends on our understanding of literary traditions so that they can be upended.) Unnecessary detail is given again, with the largeness of the turkey. Why does it matter what size it is, what does this irrelevant minor detail

matter? Ellipses are used for dramatic effect, which is also highly ironic in this absurd situation. Like 'The Shelf' with its inanimate objects, this piece seems to be allowing us to laugh at death. In isolating and exaggerating the tragedy of this ordinary animal death, it allows us to play with the idea of mortality with imagination and humour. This is not simply to 'make light of' a subject so upsetting we would rather not think about it at all, but something more radical: it gives us strategies to talk about our deepest fears, the means of facing our complex, conflicting thoughts on the most extreme subjects. This 'mock-solemn merriment' (Morley, *Serious Play*, 2012) draws comparisons with the 'serious play' associated with the Oulipo movement, and reaches as far back to the Dutch philosopher, Erasmus, for whom 'making an illusion of reality' and 'representing it as real, in a literary manner' was a way of him 'keeping his distance from the unwelcome reality' (Mansfield, 2003). So serious play has been used as a defence mechanism since at least the 1500s.

Similarly, what is funny in Michaux's 'The Executioner', is the placement of feelings and sympathy in this mockery of death:

In view of the weaknesses of my arm, I could never have been an executioner. I would not have cut off the neck properly, or even cut it off at all. The blade, in my hands would have stopped short not only against the imperial obstacle of the bone, but even against the muscles in the region of the neck of these men who have been trained up to effort, to resistance.

One day however, the condemned man who presented himself to die, had a neck so white and so frail, that my candidacy for the position of executioner was remembered; they led the condemned man by my door and offered him to me to kill.

As his neck was oblong and delicate, it could have been cut off like a slice of bread. I did not fail to notice this immediately; it was really tempting. I politely refused just the same, while thanking them effusively.

Almost immediately afterwards I was sorry for my refusal, but it was too late, the ordinary executioner was already cutting off his head. He cut it off in an obvious way, like any old head, following his usual practice with heads, uninterested, unaware of the difference.

Then I was very sorry, I was very vexed and reproached myself for having, as I had, declined quickly, nervously, and almost without realising.

(p. 199-200)

Here the reader is processing, not just death but failure and disappointment too. The piece leads us to experience those feelings, that we are only too familiar with, through Michaux's signature 'mix of horror, cruelty and humour' (Ligotti, 2010.) How funny that the narrator's focus should be on politeness, 'thanking them effusively', the criticism of the style of the beheading as if it were a minor but skilled art form, that the narrator should be disgusted that the 'ordinary' (he says this as if he is jealous, or as if he sees himself as clearly superior and more sophisticated) executioner doesn't appreciate what he has, this rare opportunity of working with this unusually weak neck. The sympathy is with himself, for passing on this opportunity, rather than the man that has been killed. The disappointment is also in the very ordinary execution. The comparison of the man's neck to something so casual as a 'slice of bread', illustrating the mundanity and everydayness of death, almost showing off how emotionally distanced he is, saying yes, I can go here, just watch me. That the final musings should be anger at himself, playing over this missed opportunity, that he had 'declined quickly, nervously, and almost without realising' seems almost faux-narcissism. It would seem that execution in France might be something more reflective of the environment, rather than the usual fantastical environments Michaux creates, but then the guillotine might have been more realistic, as executions by hand weren't really carried out, so, again, secondary and probably not relevant.

In this poem, we are distanced by the treating of beheading as an art form, which, like any art, will have poor practitioners and perceptive, sophisticated practitioners, aware of tradition and innovation. Michaux casts himself as something of a dilettante here, albeit one with great potential in the 'art', who has nonetheless been given an opportunity to prove himself – which he then refuses and then feels disappointed. Could this be related to writing? Could the bad run-of-the-mill executioner represent the bad and boring poet? With Michaux, the protagonist, the misunderstood genius who refuses when given the chance to demonstrate his craft and sensitivity? And on another level it's just funny: the deliberate inadequacy of the analogy is funny, the latent observations on literary reputation and skill are funny – it undermines standard thinking on this.

In Kharms' 'The Carpenter Kushakov', the carpenters' actions are beyond his control:

There once lived a Carpenter and his name was Kushakov.

One day he walked out of his house and went to a Kiosk to buy some carpenters' glue.

It was during a thaw, and the streets were very slippery.

The carpenter took a few steps, slipped, fell and busted his head.

"Oh well," said the carpenter, got up and went to a drugstore, bought a bandage, and taped up his head.

But when he went out on the street and took a few steps, he fell and busted his nose.

"Phooey, says the carpenter, went to the drugstore, bought a bandage and taped up his nose with it.

Then he went outside again, slipped again and busted his cheek.

He had to go to the drugstore again and tape up his cheek with a bandage.

"Listen here" said the pharmacist to the carpenter. You fall and bust yourself up so often, that I advise you buy a few extra bandages.

"No", said the carpenter, "no more falling! [...]"

(p. 53)

In this absurd, rather than surreal poem, more repetitive and farcical than oneiric, the carpenter tries to refuse 'more falling' but things are not that simple. (Interesting to note that 'falling' is one of Kharms's many 'strange and disturbing obsessions' (Cornwell, 2009, p.9). Perhaps Kharms is making a joke of this lack of control, making absurd, as an avoidance or dodge of reality. Again, we come back to the John Ashbery concept, writing out of experience, not about. This narrative expresses the brutality of the environment, without reporting it. The carpenter keeps getting brutally injured through no fault of his own. The ending is tragic as, on top of being injured, he is not even allowed in his own home. Again, it is quite slapstick, in the sense that it's 'an infinite action that never quite arrives, never gets anywhere' (Stewart in Cornwell, p. 20). Contra Yankelevich, the text could be read to be saying: if only the dangers in Stalin's Russia were as simple as slipping up on a path, or: you have to watch where you are going and what you are doing in this environment. But we have no idea if this was an intentional message, being apolitical, we should say probably not. If it were though, the story would be a mockery of the seriousness of the situation, again, dark humour being the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality' (Breton, 2009, p. 10). I'm not convinced that it's intentional and think it might better be called a subconscious reaction. The violence, however is perhaps not a coincidence. If Kharms had lived in idyllic peaceful countryside, would these poems/stories have happened? The violence could be seen as material to work with, the writing: pure expression, of the environment, reality seeping into Kharms's surreal avant-garde writing. The story ends with the carpenter accepting his refusal of entrance into his home, 'spits and goes outside'. There seems to be some an irreverence in the spitting, although there is a tradition of spitting in Russia, a superstition like knocking on wood, so perhaps it is possible to

read too much into this. However, irreverence certainly remains a key word here, as Kharms' absurdism in itself was of course wilfully interpreted by censors and academics of the time to show great disrespect to the government. So it ends up being symbolic, even if unintentionally.

The violence in my poem 'Ticket Counter' (Shirley, 2021, p. 12) seems to be against mundanity, British politeness and etiquette, although this is not what I set out to do. As with all of these poems, or 'absurdist parables' (Gioia in Iglesias, p. 8), it is more a case of 'blank page and a blank mind' (Edson in Poetry Foundation, n.d.) and seeing what comes out. Like an experiment. Like Kharms, this piece is more absurd than surreal. We have a repetition of events, which makes it quite slapstick, this interrupts the poem's protagonist, who has the simple quest to go to the cinema. His experience is interrupted three times by an act of violence from the ticket counter girl. Nameless, like one of Kharms' or Edson's characters, which again adds to the emotional distancing, the 'man' accepts defeat and has to make a complaint, but this is an absurd outcome for the violent acts committed against a man wishing to carry out simple transactions. Shouldn't the punishment be harsher? Would he really wait until the third offence to do something? This is extreme polite acceptance. Working with Edson's blank page, blank mind anti-method (I am calling it an anti-method as Edson says 'It is a way of mind more than a technique' (in Tursi)), you never know what will come from the unconscious mind, it is only afterwards that we can analyse. And if you look at surrounding conditions, the banality of life and the repressive politeness in British society, it is possible to come to the conclusion that it is a reaction to those things. But, again, it is a response to our environment in an unintentional, indirect way.

Given that I, as the author of 'Ticket Counter', can envisage hypothetical critiques of my work which draw interpretations and conclusions from my historical context and subject position quite different to my intentions, it seems wise to allow the same grace to Kharms. Did he intend to write incendiary underlying messages in his work defying a totalitarian state and its excesses. He says not ("I am only interested in nonsense") and we ought to take him at his word. Was it nonetheless very dangerous to write works which were open enough to interpretation that he might be accused of doing just that? Clearly. Is it still dangerous, in a different way, to do so now? After all, according to Barthes:

'[L]iterature [...] by refusing to assign the text [...] a 'secret': that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science and the law.'

(p. 5)

In Barthes' analysis this militantly atheist state is itself a god which demands loyalty, clarity, tributes & sacrifices and won't tolerate, in fact, actively punishes rebellion or perceived insubordination, even within a work of art. Especially within a work of art.

In Edson's 'The Fetcher of Wood' the absurdity is in the wife's insistence that her husband should 'stop being dead':

An old man got into a soup pot and shook a wooden spoon at the sky.
When he had finished he went upstairs and died
When his wife came home she said, stop being dead, there is no reason for
it.

He got out of bed. So you're dead, what of it? she said. I have no patience
with you today - Go fetch wood for the stove.

He collapsed on the floor. Oh go along, you can at least fetch some wood.
She kicked the corpse to the stairs and over the edge and it fell to the floor. Now
fetch wood she screamed [...]

(p. 23)

Possibly the violence here is aimed at death itself. Similar to 'Oh My God, I'll Never Get Home', you wonder if Edson has taken the phrase: 'I'm so angry at him/her for dying' and has made it literal and turned it into a poem. Another reading, in line with criticism from Holly Iglesias in *Boxing inside the Box*, is that it could be interpreted as saying that women don't stop nagging even after death. Iglesias flags up instances of misogyny in the work of Edson and other male prose poets of that era, in their 'absurdist parables'. (Iglesias, p. 8). Again, a domestic setting, Edson's environment, which proves that the environment is a crucial factor, but not that this is the intention. And what makes it funny here is the 'degradation' (Bergson, 2008, p.64) of the dead. The woman doesn't care if he's dead. She'll kick him anyway. In fact, it makes her angry. Her insistence, the 'repetition', (Bergson, p. 41), according to Bergson, also makes it comedic. And, yes, it could be taken as a depiction of a woman who cannot stop criticising and demanding things of her partner even once he has died. But the encouragement of the man at the end, 'Give it hell, baby, give it one for me', seems to nullify that.

Edson's degradation and mistreatment of the dead is not unlike Kharm's 'The Old Woman' short story, which is interesting, as this piece was published in 1964, around seven years ahead of when Kharm's work was available in the US (George Gibian's translated Selected was published

in 1971). The anger at the corpse has quite a lot in common: 'Yeah I can't stand dead people either' (Yankelevich, p. 100). If I were to bump into a dead person, and he wasn't a relative, I'd probably kick him' (ibid). And the protagonist indeed does this to an old woman who has inconveniently died in his room: "Scumbag!" I yelled and, running up to the old woman, kicked her in the chin with my boot.' (p. 94) The fact that Edson could not possibly have read Kharms (as he was untranslated and unpublished at the time) poses questions in relation to Jung's Collective Unconscious, to his archetype theory, which noted 'the same themes in the dreams, hallucinations and delusions' (Stevens, 1994, p. 55) occurring in people from different backgrounds living in different times. One famous example was of a schizophrenic patient who told him 'if he closed his eyes and stared at the sun with half-closed eyes, that he could 'see that the sun had a phallus and that this organ was the origin of the wind.' (ibid) Years later, Jung came across this almost identical vision in a Greek text. The earlier patient was a poorly educated man, who wouldn't have had exposure to any literature of that kind, let alone be capable of understanding it, but aside from any of that, the literature hadn't been published until many years later anyway, so it was impossible that he had prior knowledge. Therefore, as far as Kharms and Edson are concerned, as unlikely as it may seem, the clear parallels in language and phrasing, as well as the almost identical tone and humour, let alone subject matter, might allow us to conclude that humans, when anxious about death take it out on death in the form of a corpse.

In 'Michaux's 'The Heroic Age' we're left wondering if the violence expressed is against humanity, but when we are in a fantasy land with giants, and things have become so fantastical, we cannot relate to anything even closely resembling reality:

The giant Barabo while playing pulled off the ear of his brother Poumapi.

Poumapi said nothing, but as if absent-mindedly, twisted the nose of Barabo and the nose came off.

Barabo in answer bent down, broke off Poumapi's toes, and after having pretending first to want to juggle with them, made them disappear at once behind his back.

Poumapi was surprised. But he was too fine a sportsman to show it in the slightest. Instead he had the air of someone who is not handicapped by a few less toes.

But in the spirit of give and take, he tore off one of Barabo's buttocks.

Barabo, you may well believe, was fond of his buttocks, of one as much as

the other. He dissimulated his emotion, however, and taking up the battle immediately, wrenched off, with great cruelty joined to great strength, Poupapi's lower jaw.

Poumpapi was disagreeably surprised. But there was nothing to say about it. The blow was honest; it had been executed in front of him, without any trickery.

Poumpapi even tried to smile; that was hard, oh but it was hard [...]

Barabo's hands were still vigorous enough, but his grip was bad, he squeezed Poumapi's neck to no avail.

Before this set of adverse circumstances the two brothers' hearts gave way; they looked at each other for a few seconds with increasing indifference, then, each turning on his side, fainted.

The battle was over, at least for the day.

(p. 121/125)

This poem could be read as being about men at war, men fighting, about the first world war, or violence against humanity. It could be a substitute for talking about real issues, about violence, like Kharms' *Carpenter*, a way of talking about the brutality of his environment without addressing it directly. Michaux was in the merchant marines, so I'm sure seeing men fight was certainly not an unusual sight and not far from his mind, although, this piece was written some years later.

The violence is made so absurd that it's funny, and we find ourselves laughing at extreme and grotesque violence between brothers, but because it concerns giants it feels acceptable in the context. Is it also just taking the idea of play fighting to another level an absurd level? Just running with the idea of a play fight, taking in to the extreme. It could be similar to a man 'falling apart' taken to the literal in *Edson*, but here, instead, as in that poem, something is happening *to* a man, they are doing it to each other. Here men are more in control, on the attack, rather than allowing things beyond their control, here the protagonists are doing it to each other. Although, this is not taking into account the ending. Maybe there is a sense of reclamation here, of, after World War I, of men taking the power back.

One of the reasons this poem is comical is because the key of one language is being used in another: 'A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase form' (Bergson, p. 59). So, if we look at this line: 'But in the spirit of give and take, he tore off one of Barobo's buttocks.' The phrase 'In the spirit of give and take' suggests reason, which is also ironic and funny, in this context. Faux-diplomacy and reasonableness: 'Poumapi was disagreeably surprised. But there was nothing to say about it. The blow was honest;

it had been executed in front of him, without any trickery', as if someone is saying, well fair enough, when, in reality, as if anyone would be fair enough about having their jaw torn off in any situation. Stating the obvious too makes it funny: 'Barabo, you may well believe, was fond of his buttocks, of one as much as the other.' Of course Barabo was fond of his buttocks, who would want to lose a buttock?

The fact that it's giants fighting makes it more absurd. A fantasy land rather than Kharms's Leningrad in the 'The Carpenter Kushakov', or Edson's domestic setting in 'Fetcher of Wood' or my modern Britain, in 'Ticket Counter'. It is also strange how similar this work and the work of Kharms is considering that it was created many years before Michaux could have read it. It is unlikely he would have read it in his lifetime, although they were writing at the same time. So perhaps they could be considered Zeitgeists for the same time, but in completely different circumstances. Again, it is quite slapstick, in the sense that it's 'an infinite action that never quite arrives, never gets anywhere' (Stewart in Cornwell, 2009, p. 20). And Sisyphean: 'The battle was over, at least for the day.' This suggests that it could quite possibly happen day after day on a loop, which is also simultaneously hilarious and awful.

The indifference the brothers look at each other with at the end, seems to say something about the futility of war and fighting. Everyone is hurt and is in so much pain whatever you were fighting about doesn't matter anymore, but there is nothing to say that Michaux intended this as, as we know, he felt to plan a poem was to destroy it. We're left, then, with more than a tidy moral ('war is bad') and something a little more porous and dreamlike; a poetics that resists easy answers and obvious protests but nonetheless provides the reader with a different filter through which to view the world. We're left, then, with more than a tidy moral (war is bad) and something a little more porous and dreamlike; a poetics that resists easy answers and obvious protests but nonetheless provides the reader with a different filter through which to view the world.

Kharms' 'Tumbling Old Women', is more surreal, a woman shattering to pieces, although again made absurd by repetition. This violence is so commonplace that it is boring, the final couple of lines seem to say. And maybe not worth worrying about as there is nothing we can do.

Because of her excessive curiosity, one old woman tumbled out of her window, fell and shattered to pieces.

Another old woman leaned out to look at the one who shattered but, out of excessive curiosity, also tumbled out of the window, fell and shattered to pieces.

Then a third old woman tumbled from her window, and a fourth and a fifth.

When the sixth old woman tumbled out of her window, I got sick of watching them and walked over to the Maltsev Market where, they say, a blind man had been given a knit shawl.
(p. 47)

This is being silly about death, driven delirious, to madness, even. 'Excessive curiosity', a hilarious cause for the falling, as it suggests death by nosiness. The shattering is an effective swerve of what the unpleasant reality would be, so playing it out five times brings it into absurd territory. The randomness of the ending succeeds in concluding the joke with a satisfying pay-off. The fact that a blind man has been given a knit shawl is proposed as something worthy to see, is ever more absurd in the context of shattering women, and the whole thing is a farce of sorts. It is exhilarating, embracing the violence, yet again, turning that source of displeasure into pleasure. It seems that there is an element of exploitation, of the writer claiming the power back, using violence for one's own means as a source of fun, rather than letting oneself be oppressed by it.

The story demonstrates the utter banality of the series of deaths. The narrator's boredom seems to be subverting the violence, as a refusal to let it hurt: 'The alienation and imperviousness from external contact demonstrated ... can be directly ascribed to elements of nonsense such as: 'an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, play like presentation' (Oliveira, 2010, p. 68). This lack of emotional involvement is as if the writer is saying: I'm not getting into that, a denial as a rhetorical device. The performance of an objective observer who merely reports, it is not for me to ask why.

In my poem 'Split' (Shirley, 2021, p. 4) there is also boredom, in a more obvious way. The audience is bored and has the boring offenders executed for their banal offences. This poem is also farcical in its repetition and ridiculousness. Gruesome things occur, but are so far-fetched, that emotional distancing and 'absence of feeling' is at play (Bergson, p. 10), which is partly what makes it funny, as 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion' (ibid). The ending is similarly as random as Kharms' and takes a turn from the central narrative and pattern. Death is related to entertainment here, pleasing the crowd; the violence, perhaps, a comment on us seeking approval from others, and the harshness with which we judge and are judged. Again, this was not the intention, and we can only analyse afterwards. The reader is even encouraged to laugh at anxiety here in 'Split', the 'Russian streltsy's anxiety is an inconvenience of sorts to the audience. They don't want someone else's defect to make them uncomfortable, they are here to be entertained. The streltsy is put to death, for his mental health issue. This is a cold, dispassionate response, to

say the least, and the reader is again encouraged to laugh at how appalling this is, as well as the absurdity, so it becomes two tiered.

Boredom, or perhaps more the *mundane* of the domestic, is explored further in Edson's poem 'Ape':

You haven't finished your ape, said mother to father, who had monkey hair
and blood on his whiskers.

I've had enough monkey, cried father.

You didn't eat the hands, and I went to all the trouble to make onion rings
for its fingers

I'll just nibble on his fingers, and then I've had enough, said father.

I stuffed his nose with garlic, just how you like it, said mother.

Why don't you have the butcher cut these apes up? You lay the whole thing
on the table every night; the same fractured skull, then same singed fur; like someone
who died horribly. These aren't dinners, these are postmortem dissections.

[...]

Are you saying that I am in love with this vicious creature? That I would
submit my female opening to this brute [...]

I'm just saying that I'm damn sick of Ape every night, cried father [...]

(p. 118/119)

This is a mix of the grotesque, the perverse and the absurd. Again, humour is created by 'transposing the nature expression of an idea into another key' (Bergson, p. 64) resulting in parody and irony. Again we are back to Bergson's 'comic meaning ... invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase form' (Bergson, 2008, p. 59) And here we have a mimicking of an actual family dinner table chat. It is the same language as bickering at a family table but taken a step further. It is like a man complaining to his wife about having something as commonplace as spaghetti bolognese again, but instead it is an ape. This would be gruesome enough, without the additional storyline of the mother possibly having sex with the ape prior to cooking it. Could this be Edson longing for more excitement at the dinner table, or perhaps the boredom of the everyday routine?

And why is this work *so* dark, if the environment isn't threatening? It seems that it must have something to do with the unconscious, and the question sends us back to original surrealism studies and Breton et al's *Magnetic Fields* experiments. As discussed in the introduction, they realised

that the unconscious, uncensored human thoughts, i.e. thoughts 'exempt from [...] any moral concern' contained the absurdity of dreams and were often both very dark and very funny' (Breton, 1924). So although the environments of Kharms and Edson were very different, and Edson's are often domestic, Kharms's are more out-and-about on the streets of Leningrad. We are led back to Jung's collective unconscious, and the shared experience of being human.

Michaux's 'In Bed' demonstrates boredom paired and expressed with the grotesque again:

The disease I have condemns me to lie in bed absolutely without moving.
When my boredom grows to excessive proportions which, if nobody intervenes, will
destroy my equilibrium, this is what I do:

I crush my skull and spread it out before me as far as possible and when it is
all flattened out, I bring forth my cavalry. The hooves stamp loudly on the firm and
yellowish soil. The squadrons of horse immediately break into a trot, and there's
prancing and kicking. And this noise, this clear and multiple rhythm, this excitement
which breathes combat and Victory, enchant the soul of one who is nailed to the
bed and cannot move a muscle.

(p. 47)

With the masochistic gesture of crushing his own skull, Michaux is hurting himself before anyone else can hurt him. As Richard Ellman discusses in his introduction: 'The poem's posture is nearly always that of attack' (Ellmann, p. xvii). The speaker is attacking the pain, taking power back, showing what can be done by writing, using his surreal and dark humour as a weapon. As 'combat and Victory' suggest, this is war, survival. To escape the painful boredom of reality or the constant threat of the other. A grotesque-surreal act. This 'squadron' is coming to the rescue. This poem is not about feeling sorry for oneself, everything is spoken about in a 'clear' and scientific way. There is no emotion here, there is 'prancing and kicking', these multiple rhythms of the writing that are 'enchant[ing] the soul' and giving some form of relief to someone stuck fast in existence. The environment here seems to be the human interior. As Michaux puts it, 'he who wants to escape the world, translates it' (in Ellmann, p. xvii), illustrating man taking control through art.

In conclusion, ironic distancing through dark humour and the surreal provide ways to explore subjects such as death and violence, which we are morbidly drawn to, even as we back away from them, whilst protecting the writer and reader from the emotional pain felt when these happen in reality, whether direct experience or reportage. In fact, further than this, it allows the store of displeasure to be turned into pleasure and serves as a kind of reverse pathos. It gives us

permission to laugh, in the same way that therapy gives us permission to speak, at things we find uncomfortable, unsayable and difficult to deal with. Michaux, perhaps, takes things further than a defence mechanism, by introducing a form of attack in his poems, through either cruelty or less passivity in the characters. His poems also seem easier to understand or translate in terms of their purpose: writing to get rid of the pain. They are somehow more tangible than Edson's 'amusement' or Kharm's 'chush', and although still unsaid directly: he 'clearly and clinically presents the algebra of suffering'(Ellmann, p. xx).

In the next chapter these ideas are built on, as the posture of attack is discussed in relation to the poems of Chelsey Minnis (in the context of the Gurllesque), Jennifer L. Knox presents a surreal satire of the deeply flawed American society she is part of, and Kim Hyesoon's way of playing with and processing both oppression and the pain of being a women and mother, gives us a perspective on dark-humour from South Korea.

Chapter 2

The Female Grotesque, the Gurlesque and One-Of-The-Guys Surrealism

In 1996, Peter Johnson, editor of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, said in an email to academic and author, Holly Iglesias, ‘very few women [...] rely on humour in their poems; their work tends to be more lyrical’ (Johnson in Iglesias, 2004, p. 15). This was in response to Iglesias’s question as to why he didn’t publish more women. In *Boxing Inside the Box*, Iglesias’s attack on the male-dominated neo-surrealists that Johnson favoured (such as James Tate, Russell Edson and Charles Simic), she refers to their humorous writing as ‘one-of-the-guys surrealism’, a Robert Pinsky term (Iglesias, p. 14), originally in *The Situation of Poetry*, 1976), whilst defending more lyrical, heartfelt prose poems, written by women, which she feels have more worth. But what happens when women like to write ‘one-of-the-guys surrealism’, or at least subvert the kind of poetry expected of them, working against both these comments and attitudes?

Expectations are always attached to women and poetry. There are stereotypes around women, generally, being loving, mothering, nurturing and gentle. We could draw a parallel with attitudes to poetry, which is often expected to be beautiful, lyrical, profound and consoling. In this chapter, I will explore kitsch, which Adorno pronounced: ‘the realm of artificial imagery’ (in Glenum and Greenberg, 2010, p. 15) in the morally ambiguous work of Chelsey Minnis in relation to ‘the Gurlesque’. I will focus on her transgressive play with imagery of rape and rape fantasies, arguably one of the most disturbing and sensitive subject matters. I will then move on to look at the representation and critique of American Society in the hilarious, surreal work of Jennifer L. Knox, before moving on to consider feminist, grotesque surrealism coming out of South Korea, specifically the multiple oppressions and multiple imaginations of Kim Hyesoon. I will also look at my own work, mixing horror and cuteness, and exploring the sexually dark and perverse activities of the dead.

In *Gurlesque: the new grrly, grotesque, burlesque poetics* (2010), an anthology edited by Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg, Greenberg, in her introduction essay: ‘Some notes on the origin of the (Term) Gurlesque’, talks about coining the term Gurlesque for the first time:

I decided on the term *Gurlesque* because of the way it sounds like it comes from the stuff that the Gurlesque comes from: 1. The Carnavalesque. 2. The Burlesque (and the neo-burlesque). 3. The Riot Grrls.

Greenberg (p. 2)

The carnivalesque refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's 'Carnavalesque', its 'ironic decrowning of authoritative discourse' (Miller, 2013) and its chaos and humour. The Burlesque refers to the early form of the performance genre, 1840s-1860s, when women would take on male roles on stage, undermining the male, using male characteristics to emphasise their own female sexuality, and the 'horrible prettiness' (Glenum and Greenburg, p. 11) of the then transgressive entertainment. The Riot Grrls refers to the female punk music movement of the early 90s birthed out of rape culture and out of girls fed-up of male dominance in music, bands and music journalism, wanting to take some power back. As Greenberg puts it, they wanted to 'take back language, take back girlhood, take back their lives' (ibid, p. 5).

Greenburg, in that introduction essay, also talks of the first time ever she used the term Gurlesque, in a review of Chelsey Minnis' *Zirconia* in the *Electronic Poetry Review*, and shares an extract, in which she describes this new style of writing that was in the zeitgeist as: '[...] a feminine feminist incorporating of the grotesque and cruel with the spangled and dreamy (ibid, p. 2).

Reflecting on the literary movement and the phrase coming about she says:

So I was reading all these books where women were writing about and through femininity in what seemed to me an exciting and new way: brashly, playfully, provocatively, indulgently, and while these were overtly poems of women's experiences, of the female body and of sexuality, poems rooted, you could argue, in the understanding of America as a rape culture, there appeared almost no trace of the earnestness, sensitivity or self-seriousness that marked many such poems stemming from second wave feminism. In place of high-minded or moral stance, these new poems had people bashing each other with candelabras in them, they had unicorns in them, and swear words, and vomit. In place of confessional narrative there was fragment and disjuncture, prose and chant. These poems were silly and scary, pretty and dirty, wild and demanding.

(p. 4)

There is further description and definition of the Gurlesque from Lara Glenum in her accompanying intro essay (both editors contributed an introduction essay), 'Theory of the Gurlesque: Burlesque, Girly Kitsch, and the Female Grotesque'. Gurlesque is defined as describing 'writers who perform femininity in their poems in a campy or overtly mocking manner, risking the grotesque to shake the foundations of acceptable female behaviour and language' (p. 11).

Sarah Vap, on the blurb for the book says: 'Built from the bric-a-brac of girl culture, these works charm and repel: this work is fun, subversive, and important', highlighting the contradictions within the genre. Glenum artfully and precisely summarises this, describing it as a 'raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities that can be costumed this way or that', also flagging up the 'disjunctions in identity [that are] not to be worked through or resolved but savoured and tapped for their cultural power' (p. 13).

The Gurlisque's deliberately 'ambiguous relationship to violence' (p. 20), its 'perverse pleasures of horror' (p. 17) and 'the quest for female pleasure' (p. 18), are all key signifiers, she says. In terms of the political, this work is the 'political posing as the apolitical' (similar to Kim Hyesoon who will be discussed later in this chapter) (p. 14). Gurlisque poets 'enact [...] bodies and psyches in crisis' (p. 20) and making the spectator, the reader, 'complicit' (p. 13). With this provocative humour and a degree of pleasure, Minnis even seems to represent women inviting violence.

'Uncut', a title that may be a reference to the grass, but is undoubtedly an ironic reference to sexual violence, the poem starts with the statement that the speaker desires to 'be pushed or shoved down / In a grassy area' (Minnis, 2018, p. 37). An image that seems to communicate a perverse desire to be sexually assaulted. It seems possible that Minnis is taking this position as a type of defence mechanism as if a desire to be 'pushed down or shoved down' de-victimises the victim. The idea that if we appear to want something, it can't be forced on us. This seems to tie in heavily with Breton's 'superior revolt of the mind.' In Mark Polizzotti's 1996 introduction to Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour*, he talks of Freud's 'revenge of the pleasure principle [...] over the reality principle', and of this mindset being 'the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability' (p. 11). In Breton's 1939 introduction, 'Lightning Rod', he draws on Freud extensively in relation to this subject, as well as pinpointing dark humour as a way of thinking which refuses to be hurt by the 'arrows of reality' [insisting] that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world' (p. 24), he also states that it is a 'mode of thought that aims at saving itself the expenditure of feeling required by pain' (ibid). Minnis seems to be doing this here, as a way of reversing the power balance between male and female, victim and attacker, to take back power.

Minnis is playing with the misogynistic attitudes to women who have been assaulted. Whether it is intentional or non-intentional, she is using satire to address wider social issues. In fact she is using what Northrop Frye would call 'militant' irony or sarcasm, in a sense that it 'professes to approve of (or at least accept as natural) the very things the satirist wishes to question' (Frye, 1957, p. 222) and in a sense this could be considered passive aggressive, except it doesn't feel passive at all. It's as if she is taking one of the worst and most familiar misogynistic slurs used

in relation to women's sexual assaults, that 'she's asking for it' as a defence of men's behaviour, but making it literal, to show how absurd. 'This is a real hope', she says, 'But it is not possible [...] to be held down in the uncut grasses with confidence [...] and patience [...] as the soft patterns crush beneath you (ibid).'

'This is a real hope', in relation to the desire to be 'pushed down', on the surface indicates that this is sincere, but is oozing with irony and sarcasm, as all this work is. 'Confidence and patience' is possibly hinting toward good behaviour, at the idea of being a 'good girl'. 'Grasses', plural, perhaps shows that this poem is talking about all women in all these kinds of situations. All women and any women on all the 'grasses'. 'Soft patterns' add a gentleness, a babyiness, to the situation. Beautifying the situation, romanticising it somehow, all ironically.

The speaker struggles to 'understand [her own] resistance.' As if she is thinking 'This is sex, I like sex. Why don't I like this?' The design of the grass engraved on the speakers' bare limbs, is an erotic image, making the reader complicit, as typical strategy of the Gurlisque, as previously discussed.

The design of the grass on skin 'forced to blend' with 'the inhalation of the scent with the coercion' emphasises the key word 'forced' here. What scent we don't know, the scent of sex maybe.

This poem, at this point, could be interpreted as a rape fantasy, as masochistic or some version of Stockholm syndrome. But there is conflict, as the imprint is 'unwanted', and the 'prominent and unwanted imprint' could relate to the names and tags permanently attached to sexually active girls or girls who are sexually assaulted. Again, this conflict is typical of the Gurlisque poet going back to the 'raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities.'

The speaker is 'driven down' (p. 38), Minnis is using the second person, 'you', to make the reader complicit, to draw closer, bring the reader in, or make the reader feel what the victim is feeling. The speaker is driven down with 'hope and trust' (ibid), again bringing in the idea of the 'good girl', the unspoilt, the innocent. She sinks into a 'moment like a solarium. Tanning, beauty, a reference to how American society and culture is built around appearances, looks and the fake. At this moment the speaker realises the 'honor' to be pushed down this way. She never thought she would be 'shoved against a soft green background to be admired.' Suddenly 'released from the format of grasses', she is back, 'the timeline resumes' in the 'sizzling daylight'. The heat throughout, the 'meteor', the 'solarium', the 'sizzling daylight' indicates that the experience is a hot one, perhaps sexual heat, sure, but it burns, is destructive, and can do great damage.

The speaker's memory is now like a 'ball gown with grass stains', because of the 'impression wrought' by the insistence of a person who would not let her go. The ballgown seems to mock the

Cinderella story, that famous line: 'you shall go the ball', what every girl wants, but instead, in reality, in America, what she gets is rape. The poem is self-consciously breaking a taboo, but is clearly aware of the risks of doing so, the potential gross insensitivity and triggering for anyone who has experienced this in real life; so it's a powerful poem because it's taking ownership of a description, and writing very directly about the power dynamics of sex (which in a different context can be consensual), finding these incongruous positives (being admired against a natural background) in a horrific scene. At the core of it there is this irony, this dark humour which like the riot grrls reclaiming of girlhood, is a refusal of victimhood, by use of, as Breton called it, this 'superior revolt of the mind'.

In 'Primrose' (Minnis. p. 41), instead of a speaker talking about her own rape, a speaker is talking about her mother's rape. Having a poem about your mother's rape is in itself subversive and transgressive. Here, in the poem's opening, the reader is informed that when the speaker's mother was raped 'a harpsichord began to play' (ibid). A strange, surreally funny moment, which almost defies the reader to laugh, given the context. With its total discomfort, this puts one in mind of Donald Hall's 'serious humor', as used when talking about the work of Russell Edson, but here taken to the extreme. Minnis's work is more radical and transgressive. It's not something a male poet could possibly write, so there's some table-turning in Minnis asserting herself here, specifically as a woman poet who wants to use these techniques to write about issues, threats and themes specific to her.

Minnis is playing with those confessional expectations of women, by subverting expectations of the confessional poem with the opening of Primrose. By undermining 'when my mother was raped', with the harpsichord, she is telling us that this isn't going to be that kind of poem and we are back to Breton's 'superior revolt of the mind'. She is tapping into as Freud put in and as Breton references, the 'triumph of narcissism' (Breton, p. 24), demonstrating 'the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability' (ibid).

The harpsichord image is so incongruous it makes us feel like laughing, despite the poem being about rape, again making the reader complicit. This totally contrasts with Iglesias' suggestion in *Boxing Inside the Box* that women write heartfelt poems and men write meaningless comic poems. Here Minnis is using her dark humour to mock society, indirectly exploring an explosive subject, as far away from the confessional or trauma narrative, as a women can get.

What's exactly real or not real doesn't matter, in this realm of the artifice. Minnis is using artifice to emotionally distance, placing herself as a woman, above rape, rising above, with her 'superior revolt of the mind', giving herself the same privilege as a man, rather than being ground down by what he is inflicting.

The poem is developed with the line 'red candles melted and spilled down the mantle' (p. 41). This seems to be mocking the drama of rape, as if to say, 'as if I'm bothered.' Here is a sense of the sarcastic, as if to say 'oh it was so bad, this happened, and that happened' etc, in the kind of mocking 'campy' (p. 11) way, mentioned by Glenum in the Gurlisque anthology intro.

'Blood in the courtyard, blood on the bird bath, blood drizzled [...] on brown flagstones as a red fox bared its teeth' (p. 41). It is all so over-the-top and clearly artifice. In fact, the poem is proud of its artifice and revelling in it. There is also something quite Walt Disney and Snow White in the imagery of White harts froze and snow-hares fled and left heart shaped footprints in the snow, that melted in the spring when I was born' (ibid). '[T]he spring when I was born' suggests the speaker is a product of rape and could even perhaps be read as a statement that all women are raped, in one way or another, doing similar work as 'grasses' in the last poem.

'It is torture for my mother' (p. 42) the speaker says now that she, the speaker, is 'luscious' and 'she', her mother, 'is dead', and that she has 'bare shoulders and a flower behind [her] ear.' Presumably the flower is a primrose, the flower in the title, the first flower in spring to bloom and therefore a symbol of youth and renewal. The reader may think that the speaker is saying that her mother would be jealous of her life and youth and good looks, but it continues, and reveals a different reason, as she wears this flower, this symbol of beauty and fragility, as she 'beats gentleman rapists with bronze statues, so that blood oozes down their handsome sideburns or she slashes them with a fire poker or gives them a poisoned mushroom, or the 'corsages and corsages of gunshot' (ibid). So instead, it seems she is saying that her mother would like to be here committing these acts of violence on men as revenge. This is what her dead mother is tortured about.

There are high levels of irony referring to the men as 'gentlemen' and 'handsome', and the corsages of gunshots critique American society itself, with the corsages representing prom, often considered the most important event of a girl's life. This also ties in with the ballgown in the previous poem, 'Uncut'. The 'corsages and corsages of gunshot', seems to epitomise what the Gurlisque is really about: violence and beauty. The abuse being reversed, turned against the abuser. And this poem, seems less conflicted than the last, less confused and ambiguous. The speaker is inflicting pain and harm to men. She is not inviting violence, she is exacting it, using her beauty as a weapon, turning it on the ignorant men who threaten her and who harmed her mother.

There is simultaneously an embracing and celebration of the American feminine ideal in the clothes and deportment in this work, at the same time as placing it in the context of nightmarish sexual violence. This brings us back to the 'raucously messy nest of conflicting desires and proclivities' (p. 13). Greenberg speaks of in her intro. There is a toxicity created by society, which

in some way becomes part of us, due to us living in this environment, but Minnis and the Gurllesque find a way of, again as mentioned in the intro, 'tapping it for its cultural power', rather than being repressed by it. The Gurllesque chooses to exploit the toxicity, rather than be exploited by it. It is perfectly aware of the toxicity, and this knowingness is played to its advantage, and gives The Gurllesque its power. This poetry is not moralistic or instructive. How would we be able to instruct, being such products of our environment. And what a mess it all is anyway. Art becomes a form of therapy for society, although it is not providing answers, it empowers women by starting the conversation, highlighting the issues. It shows the issues, so that we can all be aware and it is up to us what we do with that. As Chekhov famously said, 'The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them', and this is certainly what the Gurllesque is doing.

As a critique of American society, the gun is naturally a prominent symbol and this is addressed in Jennifer L. Knox's 'Crazy Hairdo and Crazier Head', a surreal prose poem based on record producer and murderer Phil Spector. This world is even more fabricated than Minnis's, more surreal, moving deeper into the realm of the artifice. It is a little harder to grasp, and there is more going on at a faster pace.

In this short prose poem Spector pins down twins LaFauna and LaFlora 'like butterflies' (p. 47), someone calls the cops and Spector tells the cops 'sorry my nieces are nuisances, officer'. The Dr. Seuss-like word play parodies both the stupidity of the police and their tendency to overlook the exploitation of girls and women if a rich, successful man tells them nothing is going on. America admires wealth and power and fame, the poem is illustrating, and 'the cops give the girls back to Spector on a platter. If you keep your silver voice down, it doesn't matter what is in your hand (ibid)', silver voice referring to the dollars and cents he is worth or can give, hinting towards corruption and bribery, perhaps, or a reference to his white gold silver platinum records. In Phil's 'case' there is a 'sawed-off shotgun', but still the sirens disappear, representing all the crimes that happen, especially to women, when they could have been stopped by the authorities. It takes a murder, like Spector's murder of the actress Lana Clarkson, for them to finally pay attention to a madman who had been waving a gun in people's faces for decades.

The poem ends with LaFauna fetching 'the bastards hash and hammer' (ibid) and LaFlora holding her breath in between concrete beams in the basement. There seems to be something in the breeziness or ambivalence and ambiguity regarding violence towards females here that links with the Gurllesque, and that the darker the subject, the more playful the poem gets. This poem is extremely playful. With its '[cue canned laughter]' giving it a gameshow feel, another bit of social commentary on America, and word play on 'case': 'In Phil's case, it was a suitcase, seeping, and a sawed-off shotgun cocked in broad daylight.' This juxtaposition of dark and comic seems to make

the darker elements darker and the funny elements funnier. Simultaneously, it is terrifying to think about Spector, a well-known abuser of women and murderer of one, being with two young girls, but somehow these girls are running rings around him. There is an element of power shifting, ‘the revenge of the pleasure principle on the reality principle’, as Freud says, so that the girls come out looking like the heroes, reclaiming girlhood, and it is them the readers remember rather than Spector. The outcome in the basement is unclear, but Knox presenting us with this dark playful image gets us thinking about these issues in a way that is complex, progressive and empowering to the female. Knox is a poet who dissociates, writing poetry as a coping mechanism: ‘I write poems to dissociate in a healthy, purposeful way that doesn’t leave me hungover, in jail, or dead’ (in Matis, *Best American Poetry*). It is clear that Knox deals with life’s darkness by writing surreal and funny poetry, as a survival technique, and this authenticity comes through in how closely she plays near the tracks. Knox often plays at the line of what’s going too far and not acceptable. This contrasts very sharply with Peter Johnson’s and Holly Iglesias, which were the starting point of this chapter. In Knox’s poems here, she is completely relying on humour and refusing to write something heartfelt at all. This work of hers rejects the lyrical or the romantic.

Writing a poem in a memorable way, i.e. funny, dark, surreal, rather than a straight confessional ‘victimhood’ poem, can be a more effective way of addressing an issue for the reader rather than leaving them to feel preached at in a poem that is stating the obvious. We know rape is bad and murder is bad, and we can block out these awful things if we can. But in Knox and Minnis we are made to face it, they are luring us in with humour, craft, style, innovation, making us face it and explore it to make our own decisions. But making us think about it in new ways, ways we haven’t thought about it before. And instead of earnest stories of victimhood they are giving women the power. They, as poets, have the power to do that. Ambiguity puts responsibility back on the reader. The reader can take some responsibility, it’s not all down to them, and they do not wish to be didactic, instructive in the work. Virginia Woolf in her essay ‘The Leaning Tower’ (1940) called poetry that deals directly with politics as ‘oratory, not poetry’ (in Gupta and Johnson, 2005, p. 80) (Modernism can be seen as a movement in which the power of indirectness really established itself. The more conventional & traditional ways of writing not being powerful enough to communicate after the horrors of First World War and at such a time of uncertainty in the world.) Kathleen Rooney argues that irony is so often used by contemporary poets because their readership knows too much, so stating the obvious would not communicate, and it is a way of connecting with readers ‘emotionally and intellectually, without being sentimental’ (Rooney in Darcy, 2016, online).

In ‘I Cast the Shadow of a Sword over Sky and Sea’, the funny and surreal, yet slightly disturbing and transgressive, opening image is densely packed: ‘Police found a sixty-nine-year-old volunteer clown sodomizing a rare Siberian tiger in an earthquake ravaged apartment’ (p. 14). We can see Knox’s interest in the incongruity humour theory is at work and in play here. Knox refers to it in her 2012 article, ‘Send in the Crying on the Inside Kind of Clowns’: ‘[t]he Incongruity Theory says that it is the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations’ (Morreal, 2020). These components (volunteer clown, rare Siberian tiger, earthquake ravaged apartment) of the opening definitely don’t belong together, and again, we look at the failure of authority when we find out that ‘precinct reports show that ‘neighbours had complained of odd smells, sounds, light, music and colours coming from the apartment since the Civil War’ (Ibid). ‘Civil War’, although joking, emphasises just how long nothing has been done for. This in turn emphasises how people don’t tend to get involved or care about their environment or neighbours in cities. People keep themselves to themselves, and there is no sense of community. With this failure of authority to do what we trust them to do, failure of community and collective action to exist meaningfully. In that sense this work becomes a call to arms, to greater solidarity and collective consciousness and action.

Things move further into the surreal when ‘seventy albino bearded dragons are found under the man’s bed, with a pterodactyl’. All the animals, we are told, are wearing ‘lipstick and Hubba Hubba Heinies’. Staying surreal, ‘radioactive waste ha[s] leaked through its metal containment barrel. And burned a hole through all sixteen floors of the building, straight through to the centre of the earth and out the other side.’ The later part of the poem seems to be showing the incompetencies and stupidity of America, as the clown is barely able to speak or string a sentence together: ‘I are a peaceful man [...] We be conducting a full investigation into this matter’, he says, now representing the police. ‘We have the utmost respect for animals and lactating women and – for Italian-Americans, for mentally challenged and for the dead’, he says, showing the police prejudices and lack of sense. Knox is turning the police into clowns and representing the craziness in America, where a clown can be a police officer, and although this poem pre-dates Donald Trump’s time in office, it is impossible to not make a connection with this character and the now ex-president. In the end of the poem, the clown’s wife lets a Bundt cake do the talking. The American favourite, Bundt cake, popular at Fourth of July celebrations, is being representative of Americans too, and clearly more capable than the clown/policeman.

Knox inadvertently gives insight into her thoughts on American culture in her endorsement of *Bobcat Country*, a collection by her contemporary, poet Brandi Homan, describing her work as:

[T]he unholy love child of Lynda Barry and Ween. Fabulously honest, surprising, and hilarious, these poems are a TGIFriday's extravaganza of retarded American enthusiasm, deftly rendered. Homan loves the "Fuck yeaaaah!"s our culture hoots just before it drives its rental car off a cliff. Her details are so spot on, their mere presence relieves us of the need for contrived, "poetic" resolutions. That's what makes the poems true — there are no easy answers in them. They make me proud to be a woman, and yet, simultaneously, wanna sincerely rock out in a parking lot to rape rock.

This statement is very revealing about how Knox views the US and, in turn, of how her own poetry reflects this, for instance in the 'American enthusiasm'. She identifies one of the elements that 'makes the poems true', as the fact that there are 'no easy answers in them'. This also links with how I have positioned Knox's and Minnis's work in this chapter, the 'raucously messy nest of conflicting desires' that Glenum discusses in association with the Gurllesque. Americans are products of their environment, just as I, an English person, am a product of mine. Knox is saying that Holman is celebrating that American idiocy, whilst knowing that they are doomed because of it, exploiting the toxic, yet again, instead of allowing it to repress you.

Tying in with the Gurllesque and building on the above, is Knox's use of kitsch. She writes about Americans, of which she is one, and is the first to admit to her own nuances as part of that. As Gregory Pardlo says on the *Days of Shame and Failure* blurb: 'Knox knows how to draw human complexity out of absurdity and kitsch (and vice versa) without positioning herself above it'. Knox established herself with poems about chicken buckets, pot smoking, masturbation, to prostitutes, asses, butts, dicks and boners, using dialogue her subjects might use, poems with vocabulary which would not usually be found in poetry. She put forward an argument for all this and for humour in poetry in a series of articles for *Best American Poetry*, in which she declares that gravity should always be punctured by humour:

The funny poet questions the sanctity of our medium's most revered trope: gravity. The graver the poem, the more important. Does the just plain stupid, irrational, ashamed, or lazy have any place in a poem? Never ever? I feel those feelings all the time... In life, no tone is constant, the line of thought always interrupted—the crucial by mundane, shame by egocentrism, peace by chaos. One moment, you're sobbing in your living room, the next, remembering there's a sale at the Gap.

(Knox, 2012)

Revealing our 'bad' selves and not being afraid to show ourselves in a bad light we learn more about ourselves, and by showing what would be considered low culture, which doesn't always make it into the lofty heights of poetry, we also counteract elitism.

Comedy may well be frowned on or unexpected when it comes to poetry, but comedy came from poetry in the first place; from the comic poets in Ancient Greece, so perhaps funny poems should be taken more seriously as art. For instance, one early source of comedy is the poets Archilochus and Hipponax, who lived in 6th and 7th century BCE and whose poems contain 'crude and explicit sexual humour' (Cartwright, 2013, online). Going back even further, the hugely influential, Aristophanes c. 446 – c. 386 BC, known as the 'Father of Comedy' (Hall and Wrigley, 2007), was both comic poet and playwright.

Matthew Rohrer in his article, 'Serious Art That's Funny', argues that earnestness makes bad art, supporting the view that good art has more questions than answers, as well as pointing out although earnestness can be comforting, which we sometimes want and need, we also need to find ways of laughing and 'poking holes' (Rohrer, 2005, online) in self-righteousness and the various kinds of oppressions. On irony and satire he says:

Irony and satire are such a good antidote to oppression because oppression needs to be earnest (or at least look earnest) in order to be feared by those it seeks to cow. Oppression cannot work alongside irony because it believes in its own righteousness and a monolithic concept of truth that must be asserted to the oppressed with a straight face. Irony and satire are the tools by which the oppressed get to make fun of the oppressors without the oppressors getting it.

Rohrer, 2004

So comedy can be more powerful than people might think, and Holly Iglesias's criticism of comic poetry proves to be short-sighted. Women can be just as funny as men, and certain female poets, myself included, rely on it just as much as men, despite Peter Johnson's findings in *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*. Irony can be used as a weapon or form of defence and attack to great effect for women, as Knox and Minnis prove. Loving and gentle and nurturing are not the only things that women can be in their work, women don't have to have being a mother as part of their identity. Although some do. They can be funny as well as grotesque and horrific in their humour, and the humour can be more subtle even if the poetry is far from subtle, as I will show through the work of South Korean poet, Kim Hyesoon, to whom I now turn.

The UK and US cultures are arguably fairly close in their shared language and largely shared popular cultures, but how can we apply a similar lens to poets from cultures further removed, who write with recourse to similar techniques? The award-winning and widely translated South Korean poet Kim Hyesoon's work emerged in the 1980s under a dictatorship and oppressive military regime that lasted late into the decade, only to be followed by another one. South Korea's first civilian government was not until 1993. Kim Hyesoon started to gain critical acclaim in the 1990s, and was at the forefront of the wave of feminist poets coming through at the time. The description on the back of *Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry of Korean Women*, translated and edited by Don Mee Choi, says of the three poets in the anthology: 'In the context of Korea's highly structured culture, their poetry is defiant and revolutionary.' Kim Hyesoon has been described by *Modern Poetry in Translation* as using 'violent, often exaggerated expressions and images to protest death and injustice, revealing linguistic agility in the process' (MPT, online, n.d.). Her poetry is also considered 'surreal' and 'dagger-sharp' (Action Books, online, n.d.) (Please note that Kim Hyesoon's family name is Kim, so I shall now refer to her as this throughout this chapter.)

When Kim emerged in the 1980s, undoubtably 'one of the most politically harsh periods of contemporary Korean history (p. xv)' (note similarity with Kharms living in the most turbulent thirty-six years of Russian history) "'national literature" (*minjok munhak*) and "people's literature" (*minjung munhak*) dominated the literary scene' (ibid) in South Korea. Both were male dominated and demanded that social issues were addressed directly, in a way that would 'communicate and benefit society (p. xviii)'. It was frowned upon for her to express herself as an artist in the way she desired, and she faced much criticism.

In a 2001 interview with her translator, Don Mee Choi, also an acclaimed Korean-American poet, Kim comments on her indirect poetry and the contrast with *minjung* poetry, in which women write directly about women's social conditions: 'what I wrote about was cooking and my ingredient was death [...] I tried to turn the heaviness of oppression into something playful and light, so that what I ended up with was a type of poetry that didn't appear to be political.' (Kim in Don Mee Choi, 2006, p. xviii.)

In Korea, women are only approved of in three different roles, ones in which they are answerable to men, either as daughter, wife or grandmother answering to father, husband, then son. Women's poetry is called so. Female poets are called *yōryu siin* meaning female poet', whereas as, as Ruth Williams points out in *Guernica*, 'Male poets are simply called *siin* (poet)' (Williams, 2012, online). Women are expected to talk in a pretty, passive voice in poetry. In the mainstream, poets write lyrical poems about the tranquillity of nature. Kim, who writes indirectly about feminist issues was criticised for this saying she should be writing about things that would improve society,

but she has carried on regardless. She has always chosen not to write directly about any of the multiple oppressions women suffer there, but, much like the work of Russian absurdist Daniil Kharms, the violence in the poems speaks volumes.

In 'Black Brassiere' we start on a 'very very boring day / like a waterfowl with its lips buried in its chest' (Kim, 2014, p. 143). An inoffensive funny almost cute start. Expectations are subverted with the next couple of lines: 'I wanted to taste my own breasts / those eyes that stay open inside the black eye patches', plunging the reader into the grotesque. The metaphor of the eyes staying open inside the black eye patches, is cartoon-ish and hints towards the cute again, but 'I want to taste my own breasts', most definitely doesn't. The poem gets more surreal as the speaker muses on what they might taste like:

My breasts might taste like a lighthouse
On an island far away from the mainland
Or the island's prison, the taste of solitary confinement!
(ibid)

Perhaps this is a reference to the prison of being a woman, to women's sexuality and sexualisation, leading to this confinement, taking dark humour and the surreal as a defence mechanism to the next level and showing poetry as a response to the social environment. Writing about women's bodies is still taboo in Korea, so this is a political act in itself. But her work is playful, and therefore not obviously political.

The images that follow: 'Like the exploding waterfall tied up tight-tight / like the wavering sea, its wrapping paper ripped open' show repression wanting to explode like the waterfall, the waterfall having been 'tied up tight-tight', like breasts in a brassiere. The wavering sea's wrapping paper ripped open sounds violent and savage.

Halfway through, the poem shifts to:

I once saw a photograph of hundreds of mothers in a square waiting for their sons'
corpses.
I wanted to undo all the hooks on the backs of the mothers
The eyes on the breast sobbed sobered
Their crying echoed though the square
Please don't leave me behind

I'm your mummy.

Bralessness is historically a symbol of feminism, so this poem is undoubtedly heavily rooted in the feminist realm. This 'crying' seems to release the women from the pain of being a mother, of being a woman and the unavoidable emotions attached. The speaker wants to free those mothers of caring so much, relieve them of the pain of being a mother as the bond between mother and child is in some ways a curse, in the sense that it can be so painful. A mother's attachment to a child is almost an unbearable amount of feeling, the loss of a child beyond unbearable.

'The sound of the swollen eyes in the eye patches / hitting the prison wall bam bam' supports this theory and makes us think about the comparison of eyes crying and milk coming from breasts and how they are linked. In other words, the pain of being a mother.

This analogy of the bras being black eye-patches continues, comparing them also to black gloved hands clutching 'two chicks', which is again almost a cute image, and death and pain made cute, but also clearly represents death taking life. This harks back to the 'two baby waterfowls looking for feed' earlier in the poem. The two chicks and the two waterfowls also seem to represent the speakers two breasts.

'The fish caught in the net should repent, have you heard of such a thing.' Seems to invoke the guilt, shame and blame laid on women. 'My black bra straps are stretched out like two streams of tears' seems to represent incredible sadness for women, for death and womanhood.

But although there is much death and pain in this world, and everything is linked to everything and everything means sadness, the poems are funny too. In her interview 'Poetry or Letter to the Other of my Inside-Outside' Kim said 'Lately I think about living out the rest of my life laughing meaninglessly a rhythmical laugh' (2014, p. 152). Quoting and discussing this in a conversational review in the *Heavy Feather Review* in 2014, Meredith Blankinship says:

I felt like these poems were so saturated with sorrow that they had to laugh at themselves too, they are very self-aware that way and very subversive that way [...] maybe humor and laughter is a way to collapse or deflate not only the grimness of real trauma but also a way to throw out the systems that have made the horrors Kim deals with here possible.

(Blankinship, Wuehle & Colley, 2014)

Buttressing this, 'Black Brassiere' ends with a joyful refusal at the end of it, like the writing has freed Kim. It is an aside in brackets: '(Now I want to row to some deep place / Like someone rowing in the middle of the sea wearing an eyepatch.)'

Stranger surreal humour develops, still with plenty of darkness, in 'Cloud's Nostalgia' when things get 'smelly', strange, and visceral.

Rabbits Ears entered as the white wall laughed

I pulled that smelly thing

Rabbit-cloud mushroomed.

(Kim, p. 119)

More apparent nonsense continues when a buttock-cloud comes from the ceiling: 'Those buttocks belong to the wrestler at our neighbourhood gym', the speaker says, encompassing both the comic and absurd. But then things get darker when a noose comes down but is dispersed 'as soon as it hanged a neck'. The walls float in and bark, kind of cleansing the palette before 'The door opened to the room where the angels were tortured and cried. / My screams poured out like shit, so I opened an umbrella to receive them' (ibid).

Angels being tortured is a horrific image and idea, as is a hanging. There is so much pain and darkness here, but the almost funniness and oddness, such as the catching shit in an umbrella is distracting us, creating a distancing effect:

A thousand nipples protruded from my body

Every nipple needed to be milked white milk

My body overflowing with milk was swollen like a jar.

The jar smelt of white rabbit.

(ibid)

The white rabbit is the symbol of fertility in Korea. So this seems to symbolize the female body as a milk machine, and women as animal for breeding. But sometimes this poem feels as if it is about nothing at all, like Kharm's defiant 'commitment to chush', that sense of resistance: don't come to me for a reasoned and coherent protests against the powers that be, don't come to me for straightforward protest poetry about injustice. At these times it feels like Kim is just playing with her 'multiple imaginations' (Hyông-ch'ôlin, 2014, p. 150).

Maybe there is some reference to the ‘cloud mill’ Kim speaks of in her interview with Shin Hyông-ch’ôlin, where she talks of poetry and imagination as a cloud mill, and Hyông-ch’ôlin talks of Kim’s ‘fairy-tale like imagination, grotesque imagination, mythical imagination (ibid).’

The reoccurrence of milk in this and the previous poem bring attention to the fact that both are from a collection called *Sorrow Toothpaste Mirror Cream* (within *I’m OK I’m Pig!*). Perhaps the sorrow toothpaste is the breast milk, and the mirror cream represents the milk of the two breasts.

In any case, in the rest of the poem there is singing nostalgia for paper, cloths and plastic things. All white like the rabbit. Like the cloud. We learn that the speaker has black fur. And confesses that the cloud is their lover. And the poem ends as surreally as it began with:

Green-strawberry-summit-cloud
White-hair-cloud encircles god’s neck
Hook-cloud hooks my neck’s artery onto a cloud
Lens-cloud opens the lid of my house and peers into it.
(p. 119)

If we are to see the cloud as the speaker’s lover, perhaps this is the woman in love with poetry and poems, the rabbit representing fertility and the woman. The cloud, the lover, the creativity, the imagination. Here the imagination, the cloud mill, is looking into the speaker’s home, into being a woman to create something out of this, representing Korean women today. The poet Pam Brown said of Kim Hyesoon’s work in an endorsement for *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream*: ‘Her poems [...] are direct, deliberately grotesque, theatrical, unsettling, excessive, visceral and somatic. This is feminist surrealism loaded with shifting, playful linguistics that both defile and defy traditional roles for women (Action Books, n.d. online)’. This image of the lens-cloud peering into the speaker’s house tells us that these poems offer a rare glimpse into a woman’s life in a country where she is still underrepresented. This is a poetry that opens the lid on that country, through its powerful feminist surrealism.

The visceral, somatic grotesque continues in my ‘Kitty Ring’ sequence, a cycle of found poetry that is an exploration of Japanese cuteness and horror. It was written originally to participate in Aww-Struck, a conference of critical and creative responses to cuteness that welcomed submissions on counter aesthetics, such as the grotesque, which I was already working on for this study. I combined the text of Koji Suzuki’s horror novel *Ring*, and the *Hello Kitty Collected Storybook*, to create comic poems of great discomfort. I found it interesting that Japan was so good at the

two extremes—cuteness and horror—and knew the results of combining these two aesthetics would be fruitful. In a meeting of Oulipo and surrealist chance, I paired the eight Hello Kitty stories with the novel, which I had divided into eight, pairing them in order as they appeared in the books and then working with that text only.

By combining the language of cuteness and horror, the reader is subjected to an experience of great unease. But the incongruous surreal and absurd coupling makes it impossible not to laugh so that it is an emotionally confusing read, not unlike Minnis, with her play on the subject of rape.

Hello Kitty and her friends aren't real, but the often-cute childish language conjures children, so when mixed with an adult horror novel, it becomes unsettling. The results were, in a way, similar to the Gurlisque, with its 'perverse pleasures of horror (Greenburg and Glenum. p. 17), and violence of the cute and an apparent ambivalence to violence, particularly transgressive in the hands of a women. Like the Gurlisque poets the Kitty Rings make 'spectator complicit [...] with provocative humour and a great degree of pleasure' (p. 20), and as Lara Glenum points out, '[t]heir tactics are not without precedent. Their ambiguous relationship to violence for example draws on the energies of Dada and other avant-gardes' (ibid).

In 'Mama's Occult Boom' (Shirley, 2021, p. 19), a Hello Kitty story based on Hello Kitty making surprise cookies for Mama, was spliced with its matching chapter from *Ring*. The result was Mimmy and Hello Kitty follow an 'unimaginable horror recipe (ibid) and Hello Kitty prepares the blood vessels and muscle tissue, while Mimmy gets out 'the rotting flesh (ibid)'. 'Papa's Grief Wheels' (p.20), a story around playing baseball, opens with the enthusiastic and perky line; 'Hello Kitty loved autopsies!' (Exclamations were utilised frequently, for perkiness and ironic childish enthusiasm for the grotesque, for greater effect and comic contrast). In this poem, Hello Kitty, instead of hitting a ball, hits an 'utterly abhorrent face contorted with terror (ibid)' and Papa throws her eyelids, instead of a ball. At the end of the poem Hello Kitty shakes and enjoys 'sudden heart failure (ibid)', and the poem ends with 'What a wonderful way to spend the day! (ibid)' In 'Weekend at Grandma's' (p. 21) (a nod to 80s film *Weekend at Bernie's*), Grandma teaches Hello Kitty to mix 'sluggish red fluid with the sound of flesh being smashed' and they both put on 'silken nooses' for tea (ibid). In 'Monstrous Operations' (p. 22) Hello Kitty brightens up when she realises she knows so many sinister people she can ask them all what they think about 'incomprehensible cruel things' (ibid), and Grandpa tells her that there are 'porn actors wet and naked in the briefcase' (ibid). These poems are more interested in funny and shocking juxtapositions than a clear narrative, but a narrative of sorts still manages to run through. In 'Grudge Trip' (p.24) Hello Kitty 'enjoys executions!' and stabs a 'hideous fax machine' (ibid). In 'Bones in the Garden' (p. 26), Hello Kitty

knows 'it's time to start coating everything with hatred and yellow scabs' (ibid), and they grow 'piss plants on the front lawn' (ibid).

This sequence mixes extreme horribleness and cuteness. Showing that the world is all of this. It is not one thing or another. The world is both extremes. One person is having a cute experience with their baby, another person's baby is murdered. It is coming back to what Camus talks about in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, about the 'cruel mathematics' of life (p. 6). In terms of what happens to you, how lucky or fortunate you are, it's just a numbers game, or a Russian roulette. We have no control. This 'Kitty Ring' found poetry sequence is facing all the horror and all the cuteness, showing the most equal version of life, and the gallows humour that is needed to process it all.

Cuteness is almost non-existent in my poem 'ghosts' (Shirley, 2021, p. 9), which could definitely be described as an adults-only area. The ghosts in this poem are hedonistic and obscene. They are on drugs, 'e' (Ecstasy) (ibid) specifically. These ghosts are presented as wearing nothing 'but mankinis under their Victorian clothing' (ibid). A grotesque but ridiculous image, that appears to be disrespectful to the dead, but these ghosts are disrespectful to everything and everyone, including themselves. These ghosts whisper 'filthy lyrics to Prince songs to the prudish while they sleep' (ibid), and they are wholly inappropriate, prepared to travel back in time to 'watch other ghosts undress when they were regular humans' (ibid). They are perverted. They take pictures of other ghosts' genitals and post on 'ghost social networks' (ibid). These would be things that humans would be mortified about in life — horrifically exploitative—but because of how bad these things feel, this is why we laugh all the harder. It is a release, as all these type of things happen in real life in the real world, but the defamiliarisation allows us to laugh rather than cry. Time travel isn't real, ghosts don't exist, so we are permitted to enjoy this exorcism of sorts.

These ghosts are wretched creatures, filthy and out for kicks at others' expense. They are glamorous, dressed in sequins and leather 'snorting bonedust off the edge of a gravestone' (ibid). There is a moment of Gurlisque cuteness and 'horrible prettiness' with 'ghosts sucking on human limbs like lollipops whilst sporting bunches' (ibid). They are grotesque, playful, perverted, childish. Is death being glamourised here? Or am I showing a lack of fear of death, refusing to be intimidated by it, making these ghosts do what they are doing? There seems to be a disrespect of death, for sure. Am I purposely making death as horrible as possible, as if to say 'do your worst'. Or perhaps this is an attempt at reverse psychology, as a way of preventing myself being afraid of death. In any case, these ghosts are rotten to the core (like most humans), and all get what they deserve. But would we all be acting like this if condemned to being a ghost and there was nothing else to do? This poem asks all these questions.

These two poems have no morals or ethics or shame. It is liberating as a female poet to write in this way, subverting expectations of women. Women having sex is still judged. The lack of morals explored in the toxicity of the ghosts is also something explored in the Gurlisque. '[G]hosts cheating on other ghosts and boasting about it to cadavers', is a pornographic act, as is 'ghosts giving golden showers in laybys to ghost wearing ghost urine protective clothing', which hints towards the English sexual activity of dogging, even. These ghosts have weird syndromes like us, such as anger arousal, and they are willing to date-rape, slipping 'relaxers' into other ghosts' drinks.

This is a different form of grotesque slipped into the grotesque. The grotesque that humans, often men, do to other humans, often women. But a woman writing it takes back control. Like Minnis, I am choosing to present this in a way that I find entertaining and funny because I can, as a parody of cruelty, to gain power. I am mocking the cruelty itself, so that it can't hurt me. There is a lot of ambiguity again, in terms of ethics and morals and attitudes to violence, which nods to the Gurlisque's 'raucously messy nest of conflicting desires [and the] [d]isjunctions in identity not to be worked through or resolved but savoured and tapped for their cultural power.' It is satire, as Jonathan Swift called it, used in an attempt to 'mend the world' (Princeton, p. 1255). In the world created in the poem this cruelty doesn't scare us. The gruesome and grotesque are nothing but a malleable substance, such as plasticine, and we can make it do anything we want. We show that we are not scared by pushing it as far as we can, goading it. It is an exploitation of the things that can hurt us or that we are afraid of. By playing with the darkness, we are taking it to a new level. A ghost blackmailing a ghost for sexual favours by 'holding a copy of the film *Ghost* for ransom' is flippant and funny, as *Ghost* is arguably a silly film, but it is still a film with great tragedy in it. The poem is disrespectful of this also. Dark humour is 'the mortal enemy of sentimentality', remember. The sentimentality and tragedy in this film qualifies it for mocking and this mocking protects us from, once again, Breton's 'arrows of reality'.

Ending with the fun cliché of ghost moving through walls, here to the soundtrack of 'there's a ghost in my house' subverts the darkness to a kind of bickering, over which version of 'there's a ghost in my house', by R Dean Taylor, later covered by The Fall, is best. In amongst all these debauched antics, there is an argument about music trivia, or a refusal to argue as they are all agreed that both these versions of the song are 'pretty good', which is in many ways is as important as anything else in the poem, therefore raising the status of the everyday. The ghosts are music geeks as well as perverts, which seems to say something, perhaps a side issue here, about art bringing everyone together, the morally good and bad.

In summary, it is as absurd to say that women's strengths are in lyrical heartfelt poems as it is to say women can't be funny. All the examples here subvert expectations, not only of poetry written by women, but of women in general. Minnis facing and even playing with sexual assault, refusing women's positioning as victim, is both transgressive and a repositioning of power; a refusal to be threatened or intimidated. Jennifer Knox's surreal take on a problematic American society, with its rape culture and gun culture, zooming in on everything from the dumb and useless police force, the favourable treatment of celebrity and wealth and power, and the lack of community in America, turns the ugliness of it all into this into surreal, crazy fun, with the darkest of undertones, exercising the right to a joyful refusal of writing about social issues. Ultimately it is not up to the writers to solve these issues, and what we do privately to improve the conditions of our community is maybe of secondary relevance; our decision is how to write about them. Kim Hyesoon refuses to write in a pretty passive voice, or to write either directly political or lyrical poems about nature, and myself, exploring horror and cuteness, the human psyche, and the world we live in by serving it all—guts and candy in equal measure—on the same plate. There is proof here that women write and will continue to write whatever type of poetry they wish and there are women who will continue to refuse be dominated by men or society or be pigeonholed in their work or elsewhere and take pleasure in this refusal.

In the next chapter, I continue to build on refusals by poets to write what is expected of them, or what is expected of poetry in general. In this final chapter, the defence of the comic is deepened and strengthened and surreal storytelling, in the form of the surreal narrative in poetry, is explored extensively.

Chapter 3

Emotional Punchlines and Turning the Tables in the Surreal Narrative

This chapter delves into the Surreal Narrative within contemporary poetry and argues in defence of comic poetry by looking at variations of the Surreal Narrative, and at what this form can communicate. It considers ennui, sadness, and disappointment as key elements of darkness and meditates on the different ways dark-surreal humour protects us from Breton's 'arrows of reality'. Three poets will facilitate this investigation. We'll look at faux-naivety and confused emotions in Tom Jenks' *A Long And Hard Night Troubled by Visions*; sadness and the absurd in the work of the master of the surreal narrative poem, James Tate; and erudite darker silliness – plus comparisons with UK dark-comic television – in the inventive work of Luke Kennard. I also contemplate what I term 'layered darkness', and how this relates to the human psyche, in the mock-fable poems of my own. I return to Donald Hall's 'serious humor', with a focus on serious issues that often lurk below the surface in a comic guise in surreal narratives. With this I show how comic poetry that gets dismissed as light, disposable or lacking seriousness or depth, is often in fact sombre, melancholy and even profound in its reflections. Analysis of these poems, almost entirely written in the 'pseudo-I', will uncover what creating an unreliable narrator in these narratives can reveal. Finally, I will investigate the comic potential of irony and faux-sincerity, and how a light, breezy tone can be deceptive and deliver a dark and disturbing story in an upbeat way, so that inattentive readers could miss the darkness entirely.

'Noodles' by Tom Jenks starts with an absurd punishment and drops us straight into an absurd and surreal situation we know nothing about. In the opening line we have the sense of the speaker addressing the reader as if they know what is going on, a characteristic of the surreal narrative poem. 'Unhappy with how I swirled honey in her porridge, she condemned me to stand on the drive, stare into a puddle and think about what I'd done' (Jenks, 2008, p. 17), tells us this off-stage, unseen, unknown female is pernickety, strict, and in charge. As readers, we laugh at the meek man in this situation, being punished for something so trivial. The image is vivid, but delivered deadpan, with a faux-sadness and despair which somehow communicates as actual sadness despite being ridiculous. This is perhaps because actual sadness is channelled into it. Even to be ironically sad, you must know sadness, otherwise it won't feel real.

The poem continues: 'I wondered why I had gone to such pains to rescue her from the haunted wood, carried her for three days and nights over treacherous marshland rife with spectres and nursed her back to health with creams, balms and the sound of the flute.' This unexpected and fabulist backstory adds to the faux-mistreated man's absurd tragedy. How could she treat him

like this after all he has done? The reader would ask, if it were true. Of course, we know this isn't true, haunted woods do not exist and the idea of him carrying her for three days and three nights over treacherous marshland rife with spectres is scarcely believable, but we do know the feeling of helping someone and getting nothing in return, as is being let down by someone you love, so it is familiar. Laughing at this, gives us some release. Although just recognition on its own might not be enough to give us any release at all, so it's specifically through using the details of a fairy-tale fable that Jenks achieves this.

In the end section of the poem, the narrator hopes this unnamed female will 'relent before the rain arrives' (ibid). He is praying for mercy and fantasises, or reminisces, about calmer times: 'We would sit by the fire and eat thin green soup with noodles in it. We would watch *Frozen* on DVD and I would cry in all the wrong places' (ibid). Suggesting this is something they do often shows how their dysfunctional relationship works. The man is sensitive and emotional, emotionally confused like a child. The specificity of the thin green soup makes it sensory and tangible, and the familiarity of *Frozen* places the scene in the 21st century, despite the enchanted wood. This kind of juxtaposition Jenks does so well: it always feels familiar, like our world, however bizarre the situation.

In Holly Iglesias' *Boxing inside the Box* is a book which strongly criticises the male-led neo-surrealist genre, which shows men as the victim, 'hurt at the hands of icy mothers, hounding wives, provocative stepdaughters, suffocating mothers' (Iglesias, 2004, p. 23). Iglesias attacks any male neo-surrealist who depicts a weak man and strong women with her 'bruised boy' archetype, framing it as misogynistic. I will go on to pull apart that argument later in this chapter, but in the meantime, I will say that I could easily write a poem depicting the same in reverse, for instance, it is common for heterosexual poets to have the opposite sex in the poems, and this is just an individual funny scenario. Jenks doesn't have this power balance frequently throughout the work. The women in his poems aren't weak, they are smart and often know more than him, and from a feminist perspective, this certainly is not a problem.

Even though Jenks' poem is ridiculous, and funny, as already stated, it evokes genuine sadness, and a sense of purity and innocence in this faux-naivety. Crying 'in all the wrong places', communicates well, as emotions are confusing and overwhelming. As doing lots for someone, for nothing in return is recognisable, so is loving someone unconditionally and just wanting to be with them however absurd that may be. As readers, we are laughing at being human, and we are feeling real sadness through the faux-sadness and tragedy. The situations presented are extreme and crazy, but they are designed to create *emotions* which are familiar, maybe even universal (powerlessness, frustration, any one of a multitude of complex social conflicts, hurts, let-downs).

We find more sadness in James Tate's 'The Cowboy', although on the surface it seems like a poem about a ridiculous lie, and that is exactly what it is built around. A rumour spread by an infamous joker called 'Roger Lawson' (p. 242). 'Someone had spread an elaborate rumour about me, that I was in possession of an extra-terrestrial being, and I thought I knew who it was. It was Roger Lawson. Roger was a practical joker of the worst sort, and up till now I hadn't been one of his victims, so I kind of knew my time had come' (ibid). The fact that someone called Roger Lawson is in a poem, plays with the expectations of poetry itself. It is about as unpoetic as a name gets, as is the plain conversational use of language. There is also a pettiness, not often encountered in poetry, to it. Having a prankster called Roger Lawson in a poem shows some irreverence to poetry itself, which is commonly thought to be about huge, epic subjects like love and nature. This ties in with Breton's 'reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path.' A definition he came up with after meeting his friend Jacques Vaché for the first time, who seem to encapsulate dark humour in his attitude and personality.

Written in the pseudo-I, as many of the poems in this chapter are, the narrator runs us through the story. Things soon get out of hand. People are parking outside the house, he is bombarded with questions. Until it gets to a point where he has to say that the alien has died to get rid of them: 'The little fellow died in his sleep at 11.02 last night.' It is delivered with such tenderness and gentleness, a faux-sincerity, that ramps up the humour, as it is about an alien that doesn't exist! The vigil that continues after most of the cars are gone demonstrates how far these poems as lies or tall stories work, and how little details that build on the last, also build and intensify the hilarity. We are talking about a vigil for an alien who doesn't exist, and it is part of a rumour spread by a prankster called Roger Lawson.

The narrative takes an interesting turn when the narrator goes back inside, after the fake-death announcement, to find an actual alien in his house. (The way this narrative moves, with its rhetorical switchbacks, something that was a joke then rendered a reality happens quite frequently in the absurd and surreal prose poem. It is quite typical of the genre, see Tate and Edson in *Chater One* and in my own work). The alien asks why the narrator told them he was dead. The narrator is surprised the alien can speak English and is informed that this is because the alien watched television and listened to the radio. They soon get onto cowboys, which the alien loves. The alien wants the narrator to take him to see a real cowboy. The narrator is trying not to think of 'the cosmic meaning of all this' and decides to treat him 'like a smart kid' p. 243). It is this rationality and logic in such an absurd situation that makes it so funny.

Things take a sad turn when narrator and alien are set to go on a road trip to 'Wyoming or Montana', but the narrator finds out the alien is going to die that night, he has had word from

home. The narrator is sad about that, experiencing, in fact, ‘an unbearable sadness.’ The alien doesn’t mind and is happy, but the image the reader is left with is that of the alien doing a ‘kind of sad ballet’ (ibid). As ridiculous as this all is, as with the Jenks, the reader is left sad as well as amused. ‘Let’s pretend you are my cowboy’, are the last words we hear from the alien, the narrator has become a father of sorts, and it is heartbreaking.

In the introduction to Tate’s interview in *The Paris Review*, it was pointed out that: ‘Tate’s poems have been described as tragic, comic, absurdist, ironic, hopeful, haunting, lonely, and surreal (Gleaves, 2015)’. On this mix of emotions in his poetry he said, in the same interview: ‘There is nothing better than [to move the reader deeply]. I love my funny poems, but I’d rather break your heart. And if I can do both in the same poem, that’s the best. If you laughed earlier in the poem, and I bring you close to tears in the end, that’s the best’ (ibid). Tate is not the sort of poet to write autobiographically about his own suffering, but it is nonetheless the case that he lost his own father very young; it is inevitable that our own intense and personal experiences of grief inform our psyches, our imaginations and therefore our art. So maybe there is a link, with the sadnesses depicted. Although, there is plenty to feel sad about just being human, of course, if we consider dark humour as gallows humour (we are all going to die), and Camus’ ‘cruel mathematics’ of life, the randomness of the universe, the luck we are dealt. Once again, humour as a coping mechanism presents itself, proving to be key, as it has been throughout this thesis.

Although it is important not to fall into autobiographical fallacy, Tate’s and Jenks’ backgrounds make a point in arguing in support of it and against Holly Iglesias’s ‘bruised boy’, misogynistic argument. Just to clarify, her argument is based on how, in Edson, Tate and other so-called ‘one-of-the-guys surrealism’ poets, it’s often a domestic setting where a male character is annoyed by the crazy actions of a female character. Both Jenks and Tate avoid this dynamic. Their poetry feels more interesting and powerful than just writing a more obvious sincere elegiac poem. It creates more of a distance but also invites the reader into something more universal. This also shows how Holly Iglesias is misguided to make massive assumptions about male surreal-absurd writers with her ‘bruised boy’ attack. For instance, she may not have known about James Tate having to defend his mother against violent partners and ending up having to do so with a gun on one occasion. Or, in relation to Tom Jenks’s woman calling the shots, may not have taken into consideration issues relating to losing his mother at a young age (known from conversation with the author), so her argument is a massive generalisation. Furthermore, it is insulting to put women, such as myself, Knox, Kim or Minnis (see chapter two) in a category of heartfelt and emotional verse, when some women feel compelled to write funny poetry. In fact, Iglesias’s description, a criticism of the male neo-surrealists, describes my own poetry exactly: ‘the focus is inward, cerebral,

singular, ephemeral, anxious [...] – a talking head, disembodied, laughing skittishly in isolation [with] wit characterized by a distancing irony' (Iglesias, p. 14). Like Tate, I don't wish to write directly about my life, and prefer to divert from my own personal issues, and explore or reveal serious issues indirectly. To write direct emotional poems about reality would be a form of torture to me.

Luke Kennard's 'The Scarecrow' goes into a darker realm, reminiscent of the UK dark comedy *The League of Gentlemen* in its almost folk horror-com feel. Opening with the line 'I kissed the scarecrow' (Kennard, 2010, p. 28), immediately places the poem some distance beyond the rational. Faux-naivety, or more accurately here, faux-idiocy, is not untypical with the surreal or absurd narrative and often materialises and accumulates to great effect in the voice, convictions, and actions of an unreliable narrator. We have no idea why the narrator has kissed the scarecrow. The speaker seems surprised that the Scarecrow is 'cold, inert and tasted of sawdust' (ibid). 'It was damn silly,' he says, insulting and belittling the scarecrow in a flippant remark, the idiocy of the speaker coming through again. Why would the scarecrow be anything else but silly? It's a scarecrow. What was he expecting? So, by calling the scarecrow silly the narrator is revealing themselves to be very silly indeed. Which is very funny. Or if it is the situation, rather than the scarecrow he is calling silly, this is funny too, as the situation turns out to be anything but silly later. Again, there is a naivety, just as with Jenks, being used as a comic technique.

More absurd information is revealed as the poem continues and is casually delivered as if it's the most normal thing in the world: 'Abelard took the photographs and advised me as to how to kiss the scarecrow — with a hand on its shoulder for instance.' The identity of Abelard is unknown here, as is what is going on generally. Again, the sudden introduction of names or people, with no advance context, is used as a destabiliser and comic technique. It is as if the reader is already party to information they are not. Dropping the reader in the world of the poem defamiliarizes them immediately, signalling the absurdity, simultaneously keeping them off balance, as well as letting them in on the joke.

The next paragraph opens with 'after the shoot', so it appears to have been a photo-shoot of some description. The significance of an avian guide that the speaker picks up at a stall just after is also mysterious. It is a particular coin that turns up in the speaker's pocket that alerts us that something bad might happen. It is when the narrator is sat by the river trying to work out what it means that things become clear, as he is 'seized and bound and carried into town'. 'Like Scarecrows, do you?', a 'grubby-faced man' asks him rhetorically and menacingly, as he is taken away.

It is at this point in the poem that the reader starts to realise that it is kissing the scarecrow that has got him into this strife and that this is the serious trouble serious that the coin foretold. We cut then to a brief court scene, the trial, in which the judges microphone cuts out: 'FoulUnnatural ... Halcyon.... Porous', which shows rather than tells what is going on and the seriousness of this crime. Kennard uses the power of implication and lets the reader fill in the story here, and though this inventive delivery makes it funnier than if it had been the actual dialogue, there is an irreverence here, a distorting of the judicial process, with a technical issue. How many times have we seen a deadly serious courtroom drama? But this comic twist is reminiscent of the comedian, Norman Collier, with the broken microphone, from 1980s television, which seems apt for the absurd situation, and it seems as much like a sketch from *The Fast Show* as a poem.

We are then presented with an ending no-one could have foreseen. The narrator is attached to a post in a cornfield and left for dead. He is gently but menacingly threatened by a crow who points out that crows are not scared of scarecrows. This ending, a tiny bit reminiscent of Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, in its chilling hilarity, hints towards folk horror. This strand of horror tends to centre around an outsider coming to a small tight-knit community and not understanding their ways and (in horror, anyway) ultimately exposing or beginning to expose their occult practices before being violently destroyed by them. Assuming the occult element tends to be pure invention, the poem could be read as a comment on tight-knit communities per se; on their small-mindedness, received wisdom, arbitrary but passionately defended customs, uneasiness around outsiders, and is exactly the sort of thing Absurdism aims to attack: kissing a scarecrow could be seen as a stand-in, or metaphor, for any alternative sexuality.

Coercion and exploitation are what is being hinted at here and they are being subverted by surrealism. By playing with serious issues that might offend, a way of laughing at these issues is provided, and can be enjoyed as a type of therapy. We are gifted permission to laugh at something we would normally try and hide from, and this release adds to the experience and makes it funny. We are facing our fears rather than hiding from them, but we are protecting ourselves in the process.

As well as having similarities with *The League of Gentlemen*, a storyline where a man has been tied to a post and dressed as a scarecrow as revenge for sleeping with the farmer's wife, this poem also brings to mind an episode of *Black Books*. The character Manny is 'exploited' by a photographer, due to events leading on from an argument with his alcoholic, cantankerous boss in the bookshop where he works, and which makes him 'leave home'. The episode is very funny, as Manny is a balding middle-aged man, rather than a defenceless young woman, being asked to show flesh and strike a pose. This is what happens, as Bergson explains in *Laughter: An Essay on the*

Meaning of the Comic, when the language of one situation is transferred and applied to another, one of his 'general rules' in the book. As we have looked at in relation to Michaux and Edson: 'A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the nature expression of an idea into another key' (p. 64). Bergson also notes how: 'Comic absurdity is the same nature of that of dreams' (p. 92), reminding us why humour and surrealism go together so well.

More serious issues are explored again through absurdity in my poem 'Executioner' (Shirley, 2021, p. 7). (This poem was written and titled before I was aware of the poem of the very similar name by Michaux!) Having obvious, surface and casual darkness, and black comedy that runs through it in a kind of *American Psycho* way, along with the level of nonchalance towards the killing, it also shows the brutality and destructiveness of love and lust, whilst exploring the psyche and human nature. The poem demonstrates the lengths people will go to for desire and to get what they want, but in an exaggerated way for comic effect. It explores obsession, being sexually driven and the harm that can come to people who get in the way. It is there in a physical sense, but the reader is invited to interpret it in a metaphorical sense too.

Firstly, the 'woman' in the poem, referred to only as 'a woman', creating emotional distance from the outset, makes a decision that she wants 'sex with an executioner'. This is, in itself, very odd. And perhaps initially amusing due to its perversity. Why would anyone want to have sex specifically with someone who kills people for a living? This maybe says something about strange taste and kinks, using furtherance to take it to an extreme. Then the woman goes about obtaining what she wants, coolly and methodically, putting her plan into action. She reads up on executioners, so that if she meets one she can 'seem knowledgeable'. This method previously has proved successful 'with a dog groomer and a blacksmith', so she knows what she is doing. She is approaching this with intelligence and skill. 'She's really put the hours in', the reader is told in the next paragraph, in which she, unflinchingly, as part of the process, watches actual executions online, as well as any films featuring executions, and in the paragraph after that, things go further still. She wants to really 'get a feel for it', so decides to perform a few executions: 'a few colleagues, a couple of Deliveroo guys... and some adulterers looking for discreet friendships'.

This poem is meta-fictional in the sense that it is an emotionally distanced piece about emotionally distancing. About having the ability to turn off emotions, if they stand between a person getting what they want. It is about the rejection of morals. The end joke of the poem, or punchline, concerns the woman having to go to one of the states in America which still carry out the death penalty to 'score herself a hotty', so in that sense this poem is also about the darkness and brutality of the death penalty, and becomes political, revealing the absurdity of systems and processes which are accepted as 'normal'. This is often the political dimension in Absurdism. The

system is set up to serve evil. If the system can kill, then we might as well kill. In the ‘absurdity equated with nihilism’ (Cornwell, 2006, p. 4) sense, the world is without meaning anyway, so what difference does it make. This ties in with Kafka’s dehumanized world, illustrating that ‘we have grown accustomed [...] to ‘systematic terror’ (Filreis, 2017, online). The lack of emotion in the woman, surely just mirrors the lack of compassion in the system. Building on the last chapter, to see a woman in this emotionless role, is also refreshing.

Dark themes come to the surface in Tom Jenks’ ‘Trees’. The speaker doesn’t trust the trees that grow in a clump ‘beside the dried-up brook’ (p. 65). He senses ‘terrible things’ (ibid) that have happened there and ‘imagines a peasant hanged from a twisted bough’. Arguably the bleakest image in the book, the narrative soon turns surreal and doesn’t linger on the darkness for long, and we learn that when the moon is full, the trees pull up their roots and inch closer to the house, hoping no one will notice, a personification which gives the poem a cartoonish feel, like *Looney Tunes* or *Merry Melodies*. So much so, you can almost hear the score behind it. But this switch to cartoon, an extreme surreal, is as if to undermine the darkness that has come before. It is no coincidence that from here we go back into a child-like mode, as if in retreat. The child-like and the surreal combine when the narrator draws a ‘magical protective line in crayon’. Topaz, who this sequence is named after, tells him his fears are ‘irrational,’ like his feelings about ‘polystyrene balls and putty’. These odd fears gesture towards the narrator’s eccentricities, but also the weirdness of human nature and phobias. ‘Gothic fantasies’ he reflects in relation to the trees, ‘are something most people grow out of, like falling in love...’, this last line adds a tone of defeatism and pessimism more typical of the book overall. This ‘reveal’ draws a parallel between the absurdity of the poem’s reference, points and the skewed events and absurdity of things we generally take to be normal or expected. Turning the tables with these kinds of emotional ‘punchlines’ adds depth and weight to the poetry.

Such seemingly throwaway, flippant lines, throwaway profundities, if you will, happen frequently throughout the book, and many comic moments reveal the speaker’s ennui, boredom, and disappointment, as when he lies listlessly on the bed, wasting time ‘Googling himself and transcribing Kittens Make You Laugh Out Loud’ (p. 14), for instance. Or when, after ‘waiting years to be objectified’, bees finally put him in their experimental film, ‘it is boring, like poetry is boring’ (p. 63). The speaker is world-weary, establishing sadness as a way of life: ‘Perhaps the sadness will suddenly lift, like the mist above the fields’ (p. 76), he ponders in AGM. Also, there is the acceptance of the everyday tragic, things being ruined by the trivial. It is the silly, insignificant, little things that have the power. The universe is being ruled by chance or bad luck: such as being a pivotal character getting written out of a soap opera for tampering with the soap dispenser, or the duel that doesn’t take place because of paperwork that’s been mislaid. There is much longing

and yearning running through, alongside absurd ambitions, 'I could work the Waltzers in a seaside town' (19), the speaker fantasises in one poem, the modesty of the aspiration mocking ambition itself. Pointlessness is symbolised with comments getting 'lost on the wind' (p.35), nostalgia and longing for the North, as he is 'pained by dreams' in 'chickens' (p. 14).

Jenks gives us some sense of a real person with specific desires (a nostalgia for the North even if he's suspicious of that nostalgia); he's very present in the work, however wild and fanciful the tangents are; and the surrealism is very rooted in the mundane: flat-shares, annoying friends, sudden minor misfortunes. But even in this bizarre world where you can wake up and find yourself unexpectedly in Fleetwood Mac, the situation is still disappointing and a bit rubbish and you long to escape from it and from yourself; it's an impressive tight-rope act between the whimsical and the serious.

Shame and regret are tackled in Tate's 'Memories of Fish' and the mocking of oneself turns into mocking others, in this case fish, which is absurd and funny rather than disturbing, although it's the disturbing connotations that make it so funny. Stanley takes the day off from the office to 'talk' to the fish (p. 161). Except it's not talking, it's taunting and insulting: To 'the little catfish' (ibid), he says: 'Vacuum that scum boy. Suck it up, that's your job', to the pencil fish: 'Scribble scribble scribble. Write me a novel, needle-nose.' This reaches its climax when Stanley deliberately eats his lunch—a tuna fish sandwich—in front of the fish.

The joke here is that it's only a horrifying gesture in Stanley's own head because the fish are, naturally, oblivious to his actions and intentions. The irony of Stanley eating the tuna sandwich in front of the fish, we're told, does not escape him, 'oh no, he wallows in it savouring every single bite', He knows what he is doing in this sick act of cruelty, more in line with Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, than a seemingly light-hearted comic poem. He then resumes with the abusive remarks 'long into the night'. The shame of Stanley is explored when he is horribly embarrassed the next day and apologises several times, but the fish 'never forgive him for mocking their very fishiness'. What the poem hints at is grotesque and disturbing but delivered in James Tate's trademark breezy tone. There's something of an emotional transaction here in the fish refusing to ever forgive him despite his contrition. In a way, what's remarkable is that Tate draws an emotional reaction from us *at all* through such a strange anti-fable.

This breeziness features in so many of his other poems. In 'How Happy We Were' (Tate, 2012, p. 9), after initially 'squealing like a pig', at the mercy of a spy's 'sophisticated devices', the speaker develops an addiction to torture; a long-haired bleeding man carries a cross across town in 'The Coolest Thing' (p. 204); cancer and death feature in 'Distance from Loved Ones' (p. 5); murder, following orders, occurs in "'Burn Down the Town, No Survivors'" (p. 11); and there is

the kidnapping of a small boy in 'I Never Meant to Harm Him' (p. 187), executioners grocery shop and run errands in 'Capital Punishment' (p. 154) (. In 'Bewitched' (p. 6), fearful that a colleague can read his thoughts, and embarrassed that his previous thoughts about a crate of oranges from Florida and a soloist he once heard in Venezuela were unconnected, the speaker tells the colleague that she reminds him of a murder victim he's seen a snapshot of recently and that she should be careful, to cover and distract. This excess of behaviour, in a way, is a meditation on neuroses, which we all have, but here they are exaggerated to the point of implausibility. In 'Family Sorrow' (p. 115) the speaker gets a note that his brother has been paralysed due to falling off his horse, which 'strikes [him] as funny, as '1. [He] has no brother and 2. [He] has no horse'. Nonetheless the speaker gets changed into his 'tragic suit' and goes to the hospital, where his brother 'looks awful' but is exceedingly happy to see him'. In 'Making the Best of the Holidays' (Tate, 2005, p. 13), suicide is the subject of a light-hearted, jovial poem. Justine rings up the narrator on Christmas Day to say she is thinking about killing herself, just as he and his family are opening presents and he asks if she can call back later.

Work like this, in the wrong hands, could just feel plain crass and offensive, making light of the most devastating things that can happen in a human life. Yet, Tate manages to avoid this (again, that sense of a tightrope act) and makes it funny and poignant. In an interview with *The Paris Review* he talks about having 'fun with the horror', horror being something Tate was no stranger to. After the death of his father, the grandparents he and his mother lived with both died of grief, then following on from a relatively happy period living with his mother's parents, his mother remarried 'a handsome man who looked like his father, but who turned out to be a dangerous lunatic who shot holes in their house with a .45 automatic' (Simic, *New York Review*, 2017). Following on from this, she married a traveling salesman who sold shock absorbers. Charles Simic explains in *The New York Review*: 'He [the salesman] was gone all week and on weekends he used to beat his wife black and blue with her son watching. Eventually Tate, who was sixteen by then, stuck a gun to the man's head and that ended that marriage (ibid).'

Tate is fully aware of the injustice in the world and the balance you have to negotiate to survive. Again, in *The Paris Review*:

We could spend a night with friends, laughing and drinking and toasting and saying how wonderful life is. Simultaneously, we all know that we're enshrouded in tragedy, lies, and all kinds of evil. Torture, for God's sake! And heaps of evil beyond what we can contemplate, and yet life is wonderful for those of us who haven't been directly affected. So we walk around balancing the two all the time. I, for one, am

not giving in. I am not going to walk around in tears all day long. I still want to have a good day if I can. In my poems, I try—God knows, probably unsuccessfully—to bring that home.

(ibid)

There is this a refusal, a protest against sadness, against allowing yourself to be bogged down in the misery of the world. Adding to the above, and in relation to Jenks' being-at-the-mercy-of-the-universe administration errors, and Camus's 'cruel mathematics' of life (p. 6). Tate says:

There's a poem in my last book, "A Clean Hit," where suddenly a bomb falls out of the sky and blows up this person's house. And all of the neighbours come running down and they're saying, "What the hell happened?" The guy whose house got bombed says, "Well, I voted for this president. They shouldn't be targeting me." They're all trying to figure out what they did and what they didn't do that could have caused this bomb to drop. Some of them think it's a mistake. They say, "It happens all the time. Those reports pass through so many hands, by the time they reach the top somebody has gotten the address wrong.

(ibid)

Tate's poem illustrates that it is pointless to worry, as this is what life is. It is unfair, it is cruel, so if you are in a position to, you'd better laugh while you can. It is showing the Russian roulette of life. Tragedy can strike at any time. Life is fleeting. We are dodging death every day and, if we are alive, we are winning. It also shows how life can be both happy and sad, and we have to accept it as both. Like the faux-sadness discussed in relation to Jenks, the theory that you have to experienced sadness to write faux-sadness. The same goes for dark humour, you have to know darkness to write it, and you have to earn the right to joke about it, as Tate certainly has.

Darkness delivered in a breezy tone continues with Luke Kennard in 'The Murderer' sequence. Written in the voice of someone who has been allocated a murderer, in a professional capacity, this what-would-be grim situation of sorts takes on a more jovial feel, but if it were a true situation, it would be disturbing on so many levels. This absurd person thinks its fine and funny to make fun of the murderer all the time. In '1. The Murderer', he takes the murderer for coffee and jokes to him 'Hey Murderer, make sure you don't *murder* your coffee!' (Kennard, 2010, p. 17). The way he calls the murderer a murderer, dismissively reducing them to their role, as someone might with a profession, is appalling in one sense, but also incredibly stupid, as, of course, the

reader is also thinking, this murderer could murder you. What an earth are you doing?! The lack of self-awareness, this faux-naivety is one of the things that makes it so funny. The narrator is so sure of himself, '[he] likes my jokes' (ibid) he says, about the murderer. It's all just one big hilarious form of entertainment to him.

He swings a plank in the murderer's face, 'to stop the murderer enjoying himself', which is 'part of the rehabilitation process' he says. the murderer's mouth trickles with blood, but this doesn't stop the narrator being perky and upbeat. Thoroughly impressed and delighted in himself, "Hey Murderer he shouts, Murdered anyone recently?" The relentless absurd activities that the speaker keeps engaging in adds to the hilarity: badminton, dancing, picnics, all extremely wholesome activities. When he is dancing with the murderer, he 'teases': 'just be careful not to murder me'. Use of the word 'teases' here is highly amusing, 'teases' would be appropriate in relation to someone having a crush on someone or flirting. The murderer stays silent throughout, which is also funny, as there is a whole other level of darkness that is there but not explored with the murderer. Who did he murder and why? How did he murder them? The reader is left to imagine.

At one point in the sequence, the speaker takes the murderer to get 'spruced up' (p. 19), buying him a little 'sailor suit with "Murderer" embroidered on the collar.' As well as this working with Bergson's 'degradation' theory (Bergson, (p. 64), picturing the murderer dressed in a sailor's outfit, belittles evil and finds a way, perhaps unconsciously, of laughing at evil. It could also be read as laughing at stupidity, prison and rehabilitation, and arguably mocking everything, like all good absurdity. The absurdity and darkness are used as another form of protest here, a very common one in work of this nature, a protest against received wisdom. This could be against supposedly self-evident truths, whether that's to do with love and nostalgia, cruelty and suffering, morality, death itself, or indeed the criminal justice system. It's perhaps a protest against the more ordinary ways of talking about those things.

In this sequence annoyingness is brought into the conversation. The narrator is highly annoying towards the murderer, with his persistent questions and stupidity, and this seems to be something worth mentioning briefly at this point, if only to acknowledge it, as annoyingness is not a common aesthetic in poetry, nor so prominent elsewhere in this study. In Kennard's 2016 collection, *Cain*, he has a poem called 'On Being very Annoying', in which the speaker talks of having an 'anti-talent' for all sports and being picked on in school. To occupy himself and get through school he spends his time 'being annoying'. I will only briefly touch on this here, as I have with Jenks, but given that *Cain* is at points autobiographical, and that the annoyingness here, and in other work of Kennard's, comes through so strongly, it seems that there would be plenty to

investigate around biographical and intentional fallacy, on how our environment shapes the poetry we write.

In my sequence of mini-narratives ‘Corpses’ (Shirley, 2020), I present 30 different ‘scenes’ in which the corpses appear. Corpses are played with throughout, in all manner of ways. Taking death as its playground, as the ultimate defence against darkness. The idea that if you laugh at something first it cannot hurt you. Coming back to Breton’s idea that dark humour will protect you from ‘the arrows of reality’, seems pertinent here, as bodies pile high in these scenarios.

Stacks of corpses put couples off their flirting in ‘2’; corpses provide a soundtrack in ‘4’, as the rhythm created by their rolling around in the back of the van, ‘Little Pete’, whoever that is, finds ‘infectious as hell.’ Roger’s corpse was as cumbersome and disruptive in death as he was in person’, Patrice thinks in ‘8’, as they *finally* transfer his body to the morgue. Disrupting the idea of people being elevated to sacred status in death, this narrative shows the reality of irritation and mundanity. A child plays with a corpse in ‘12’, coating the body with yogurt, adding marmalade, and sprinkling with fish food, inserting birthday candles into ‘the cold and hardening flesh’. The child hopes their mother will help blow the candles out at the party.

Things hint toward necrophilia in number ‘13’, when a woman sneaks into the funeral parlour, enticed by the ‘once limp now finally stiff morsel’, presumably attached to a man. An apparent joke at corpses not being able to speak occurs in ‘16’, as an unnamed woman compliments her corpse-cum-therapist’s listening skills. The awkwardness of death, and the horrific thought of dead friends, is explored in ‘18’ and ‘19’. A failed attempt to get a sing-a-long started happens in ‘18’, when survivors have to use the corpses of their friends as blankets, and then it’s a party joke gone wrong in ‘19’. with “DICKHEAD” written in what was thought to be a sleeping friend’s forehead “in permanent marker.” In ‘25’, ‘Corpse world!’ is presented. An exciting slogan inviting people to lay with the greats, as if inviting people to visit an amusement or theme park.

In some ways it is the lack of information (in detective fiction theory they call these ‘inference gaps’) in these scenes that give them the power. For instance, in ‘20’, the scene with the pool attendant, we know nothing about the story, just that the Grim Reaper is emotionally attached to this particular corpse, for some reason, and has to be peeled from her body. There is a subplot to this 10-line poem, as Death’s assistant is female and much better at the job, but nothing is told about the back story. At the same time, enough is given. The withheld narrative only enhances the actual narrative. The power of implication is everything in this world.

What can be gained from surreal narratives that appear to be nothing more than ridiculous untruths, set in dark, but often breezy worlds? A lot of what the poetry we have explored in this

thesis could scan like nonsense, total absurdity. But let's look at the feelings and emotions that have been exposed: cruelty, harassment, guilt, shame, regret. What dark humour and the surreal allow us, as readers and writers, to do, is examine the darkest subjects from a safe distance, and when dark humour and the surreal are combined, they act as a double protection and flip it. Instead of crying or feeling pain that these things exist, they allow a joyful release.

In *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905, Freud talks about 'defence processes [being] the physical correlative of the flight reflex' (Freud, 2013, p. 343) saying that they 'perform the task of preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources' (ibid), instead finding 'a means of withdrawing the energy from the release of unpleasure that is already in preparation and transforming it into pleasure.' (Freud, p.347) Perhaps there is something in common here, in terms of what is happening, with Lacan's *jouissance*: a *need* rather than desire to laugh, a kind of negative pleasure. But either way, we are laughing, or we are allowing ourselves to laugh in these surreal scenarios, as they obviously aren't true. In a way, this could be considered an example of Freud's displacement theory. Engaging with a fictional text involves the suspension of disbelief. In a way, it's not that we're thrown *out* of the fictional world, relieved that it isn't real; but that we're still *in* there, but it's a world with different rules, where we *can* laugh at these things. And in the process, you are releasing those horrible feelings created, when you, for instance, read about something unpleasant that *is* true, in the paper. After all, as Ngai and Berlant point out in 'Comedy Has Issues': 'Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety' (Ngai and Berlant, online, 2017).

As said, comedic poetry can be dismissed and not thought of as 'serious' poetry. For instance in a review in *The Poetry Review* (Vol 110, No 2, Summer 2020) of two collections, the critic Marek Sullivan, disliked and dismissed the poetry of the poet Crispin Best for being 'quirky, ironically melancholy, melancholically ironic and [...] a bit twee', whilst praising Rainee Oet for her earnestness, for being 'sad, mostly unironic, rawly intimate and haunting', thus demonstrating that funny poetry is often criticised and rejected. Jennifer L. Knox says that part of this problem is the misconception that '[t]he graver the poem, the more important', putting forward the case for the underrepresented 'stupid, irrational, ashamed, or lazy' in poetry. However, what often gets missed is that sometimes funny poetry comes from the depths of a darker place, somewhere poets who claim to write serious poetry could only dream of or have nightmares about. Despite Tate and Jenks losing a parent at a young age, Kennard getting picked on in school, myself losing my mother when she was only 52, and at the time of writing *Corpses*, my marriage was breaking down, all of us are choosing not to write about those things. There is a joyful rejection of the idea that we have a 'duty' to represent our reality, present our autobiographies for inspection. Similar to Kharms commitment to 'chush' in the bleakest of times.

Directly mining our traumas for our art isn't necessarily edifying for the writer or the reader; it can even be presumptuous demanding a reader to actively empathise or suffer along with the narrator above any level of artifice or creativity. As writers, and as people, we are allowed to dance instead of wallowing, if that's what we need to do to survive. That response to the pain of the world is just as valid. And as for the value of 'truth' in poetry, it's only ever one opinion and view that we are experiencing, how the author *wants* us to see them. All of these surreal narratives contain Donald Hall's 'serious humor'. The comical absurd can help us process the world we live in and the way it makes us feel, but it can also, somehow, in its joyful refusal to engage with issues directly, grants the pleasure of making us feel like we're winning and on top, even if, technically, we're not.

Conclusion

The poetry analysed and dissected in this study has shown that dark humour and the surreal, when used together, can work as a highly effective double protection. The emotional, or ironic, distancing grants admission to upsetting, disturbing or taboo subjects from a safe distance, allowing us to immerse ourselves into subjects that we normally wouldn't be able to. When laughter is a response to this it gives a release from the tension of all the unpleasant or disturbing things in the world read about or seen in the media. The surreal and or absurd situations presented in the work under scrutiny give us permission to laugh, as it is clearly not real.

Time and time again I have come back to Breton's 'superior revolt of the mind' and its use as a defence from the 'the arrows of reality', all outlined in his *Anthology of Black Humour*. This text has been crucial here, perhaps the most key and this study is a follow-on of sorts from Breton's book, as no anthology of black humour has been published (by a surrealist or otherwise) since that one in 1940. I hope the book this thesis becomes will be seen as a related text.

The case for dark humour as a defence mechanism, as an armour, is strong, but writers, such as Henri Michaux and Chelsey Minnis take it one step further than defence and adopt a stance of attack in their work. I have shown how this position, via the use of the sardonic, can empower, particularly when a writer is speaking from the margins in one way or another (and in this sense the marginalisation of humour within poetry as a form could be seen as a necessity).

The inner politics of Michaux, the release from inner torment, has been examined, as has how humour dispels anxiety, or in relation to Knox, how writing dark humoured and surreal work can save us from, in her case, being 'in jail, or dead' (Matis, 2021, online). The therapeutic benefits of this play in the darkness, when either reading *or* writing this poetry, is key, and the work that appears morally and ethically ambiguous often poses the most interesting questions.

The benefits of this 'sudden glory' of laughter' (Cornwell, p. 15) works strongly against Katherine Raine's argument, which we looked at in the introduction, that this humour is ethically and morally wrong, in line with Nazi humour and atrocities. French-Jewish poet Max Jacob, who came close to being in this study died in a concentration camp, would argue with that. In his poem 'The Yellow Star Again', a passer-by complains of a Jew who has fallen in the snow, who is being eaten by a dog in the street, initially thought to be 'beets', and asks why the Jew couldn't 'find some other place to faint'. This demonstrates further just how essential laughter can be, psychologically, in the darkest of times, and as a way of dealing with the horror.

One argument that I put forward in my first 'Commitment to Chush' column, which I will discuss presently, is that we all have the right to gallows humour as we are all destined for death.

Whatever our other privileges and differences, we are united in our own mortality, and have every right to protest that.

Holly Iglesias' argument about men writing funny, meaningless poems, and women writing earnest heartfelt poems was thrown out in this study by the poetry of Knox, Minnis and Kim, who refuse the victimhood of women, and rise above finding new ways of responding as women, mocking the attacker, mocking society, as all good absurdism does. As they free themselves of the earnest confessional and what is expected of them as women, they disprove the gender dichotomy Iglesias suggests. I see this permission as key in the development of future poets and critics. Exploiting toxicity, with her sardonic, sarcastic, baby-girl prom-queen, passive aggression, Minnis creates a force to be reckoned with, a 'militant' level of irony, and satire that is so strong it at times seems to invite assault. The complexity of the morals of her work shows how indirectness can be more powerful and effective than the confessional and how moral ambiguity about violence is more likely to make the reader think broadly and intrinsically, rather than simply agreeing or disagreeing.

Intentional and biographical fallacies have proved to be both true and untrue. Undeniable factors, such as Kharm's Leningrad at the time of the Stalin's Great terror, Kim's oppressive South Korea, Knox and Minnis's rape-culture America, all exist in the poetry, of course, but there is also an argument for the right to play and to not engage and to carry on regardless. The power of denying the outside in. The joyful refusal. In reference to my own work—with corpses and perverse ghosts, noses getting snipped off at ticket counters, women who want sex with executioners and so forth—as discussed in my final chapter, who knows how much my own mother's death, or the breakdown of my marriage, or watching horror movies too young as a kid, or having a bad time at school influenced me. Luke Kennard's 'annoyingness' in his poem in *Cain*, Tate's and Jenks's sadness and so on similar. But we have all opted for the joyful refusal. Kim Hyesoon, could be said to address pain more directly than others, but even then she is still 'turning the heaviness of oppression into something playful and light', to an extent as a displacement, to not write anything 'obviously political' (p. xviii).

Faux-naivety, faux-seriousness, faux-poignancy have all been examined, and faux anything seems to be a common currency here. James Tate took faux-seriousness to the point of ridiculous lie, with aliens and a prankster called Roger Lawson, in his surreal narrative masterpiece, 'The Cowboy'. However, there is a strong argument that to make fake sadness you have to know real sadness, otherwise it won't communicate. Things that appear goofy are often more complex than they seem and dismissed by those with the idea that serious art should be earnest. This strikes me as a misdirection of literary history, which incorporates a variety of techniques, from the sublime

to the ridiculous. Earnest polemic, or stating the obvious, could even be said to insult the reader. Darcy points out that irony is often the only way to communicate with an audience, a contemporary readership, who 'knows too much' (2016), who are more likely to switch off to the obvious earnest responses. Using pseudo-emotions is an excellent way of mocking ourselves as humans, with all our complexities and failings. And the 'pseudo-I' an effective way of representing or feeding reality into absurd situations and processing the same feelings as we do in real life, allowing us to laugh as it's not real, giving us that well needed release. Pioneered by Max Jacob and Benjamin Péret, writing in the pseudo-I, exercised by Tate, myself, and many more here, gives great relief and hilarity, as a practitioner, too. To wear the pseudo-I is to dress up as whatever and whoever you want to wear. To build on a ridiculous lie, to make it more and more ridiculous, is also very freeing.

Donald Hall's 'serious humor' was studied significantly. Humour that carries with it 'great discomfort' has been played out here on these pages in Edson, who the quote was originally about, in Minnis' work, my own and most of the writers' in this thesis. Tate manages to deliver darkness in such an up-beat breezy tone that a non-attentive reader could almost miss it. The same could be said of Kennard. Most of Jenks' darkness is around pointlessness, '[a] building block [...] of both nonsense and the absurd' (Cornwell, p. 22), and boredom and ennui, but the serious humour is still present. Knox engages in the big joyful refusal, mocking to the point of piss-taking, and the menace of Minnis', kitsch prom-queen-beating-rapists, dream-like toxicity, poison pink, wouldn't be described as jet-black in tone, either. I guess here, it is the realm of the grotesque, in which Edson (ape, blood and whiskers), Michaux (crushing skulls, executions) Kim (cutting off breasts, nooses), myself (Kitty Ring blood and guts, snipping off facial features) have the most grotesque jet-black nightmarish quality to them. Kharms is more violent with an element of slapstick, such as women falling out of windows and carpenters falling down and cutting their chins.

However, there is a dream-like quality in all things surreal, so in all the work considered here the surreal juxtapositions are much like things getting muddled in dreams, the 'topsyturvydom' that Bergson talks of that creates humour. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud talks of this dream logic, that we can associate with surrealism, absurdism and Bergson's humour theory:

The dream shows how recollections of one's everyday life can be worked into a structure where one person can be substituted for another, where unacknowledged feelings like envy and guilt can find expression, where ideas can be linked by verbal similarities, and where the laws of logic can be suspended.

Freud, *The Interpretations of Dreams*

This is also similar to how in these surreal poems, feelings of ‘envy and guilt’ can find expression, how ‘laws of logic’ can be abandoned in absurdism. So we are back to Edson’s ‘dreaming awake ... on the page’.

Surreal poems are like dreams, where ambiguous feelings and morals are also addressed:

The dream has a very striking way of dealing with the category of opposites and contradictions. This is simply disregarded. To the dream 'No' does not seem to exist. In particular, it prefers to draw opposites together into a unity or to represent them as one. Indeed, it also takes the liberty of representing some random element by its wished-for opposite, so that at first one cannot tell which of the possible poles is meant positively or negatively in the dream-thoughts.

—Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

This sounds uncannily like the uncensored thoughts unearthed in *The Magnetic Fields* experiments, which were ‘exempted from all moral concern’, and it is often the incongruity, this ‘topsyturveydom’, which makes it so funny. This also demonstrates the strong links between the surrealists and Freud, and how important Freud was to the movement. Although I have mostly drawn on Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, it is certainly worth acknowledging the importance of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in relation to the original surrealist movement. Much of the work we have looked at is more distanced from that movement, being mainly contemporary, but it is still relevant:

Connecting with Freud’s belief that dreams could reveal hidden meanings about our innermost desires, which were often erotic or sexualised, the Surrealists discovered and pioneered a wide range of techniques, unleashing the wondrously complex, unconscious world of dreams into their art.

(Lesso, 2020)

Moving to the political aspect of this work, satire was something that emerged strongly with Chelsey Minnis, although relevant to all the writers here. The idea of the ‘militant’ satire, of the satirist seeming to like what they are actually opposing, particularly applicable to her.

But it is Menippean satire in particular that seems applicable to all these writers and their writings. Much like Freud’s theories on dreams could easily be interpreted as someone speaking about

absurd poems, much of Bakhtin's basic characteristic of Menippean satire (in *The Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*) could also be talking about the poems examined in this study.

In Menippean satire there is always a comic element, as all poems here have. Comic is not always a given in satire but in Menippean it is essential. It freely operates in the realm of the fantastic, which is self-explanatory when we are talking about the surreal and could also cross over with 'the realm of the artificial imagery', Adorno's description of the kitsch. 'Fantastic and mystical elements are combined with a crude naturalism; it never avoids the degenerate or grotesque side of earthly existence [...] worldly evil, depravity baseness and vulgarity in their most extreme expression' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 115). Murder, violence, the perverse, all of these are at the core of these poems. 'Everywhere there is the stripped down *pro et contra* of life's ultimate questions' (ibid). This could be seen as tying in again with the seemingly ambiguous morals and the satire of Minnis. Rape is wrong, or violence is wrong, but presented as funny in some way, it's down to the reader to face life's ultimate questions. 'Moral psychological experimentation' and probing of psychopathological states, plus 'split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, weird dreams, extreme passions, suicides' (p. 116) are also relevant. My poem 'The Executioner' is a particularly good example of the psychopathological state of mind; the female in the poem is an unsettling character with an extreme passion, being so set on having sex with an executioner. Not only that, but being willing to execute people herself, simply to improve her chances and get on the same wavelength. Minnis's speaker in 'Uncut' could be seen as having a split personality (known as Dissociative Identity Disorder these days), with the contradictions shown. Then there is bestiality and murder in Edson and Knox, suicide in Tate and Kim, hangings in Jenks. Edson's poems *are* weird dreams. 'Breaches of conventional behaviour and disruptions to the customary course of events' (p. 117), well not many of these poems contain conventional content, or even behave like poems with Tate using unpoetic names like Roger Lawson, and the poem being a ridiculous lie rather than a poem. The 'sharp contrasts, abrupt transitions, oxymoronic combinations, counterintuitive comparisons and unexpected meeting between things' (p. 118), are what surrealism is all about, you only have to go back to Lautreamont's 'the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella' to know that.

To move deeper into the political, though, as this study draws to an end, one of the quotes looked at, at the end of Chapter 2, is how satire and humour is a weapon against those in power, who rely on earnestness to control. But the joyful refusal can go beyond satire. In my introduction to this research project, I mention my 'Commitment to Chush' columns, written for the magazine *Firmament*. In my very first column, during lockdown with Trump in office, I wrote about my refusal to even include the likes of Trump in my poetry, despite people thinking that, as a poet,

you should, and that 'you must have lots to write about' in challenging times. To which my response was and still is: 'I'm not sitting around waiting for someone evil and stupid with ridiculous hair to show up and give me a topic. I have my own agenda'. Kharms also refused politics entry. Granted his life would have been threatened if he had said anything insulting, or mocked Stalin, but also he was writing absurd work before Stalin was in power and he simply wished to continue, His joyful refusal. His not stopping doing what he is doing, whether that be reciting poetry on top of a wardrobe Kharms, decorated with phrases such as 'Art is a cupboard!' (Kharms, 2007, p. 24), just prior to the Great Terror, or writing mock-plays about people vomiting on stage during the Great Terror. The violence is there in his stories, in the vomiting, in the carpenter falling down and busting his chin and the old women falling out the window and shattering to pieces. But with these stories he is also refusing being dictated to, and this is a political act in itself.

Ultimately then, over everything, it is the joyful refusal, the play in the darkness, that is at the core of all of this. James Tate in his *Paris Review* interview talks of us being aware of the horror in the world, but yet always trying to have a good day. He experienced violence in the home, and the death of his father, but yet he chose to write funny poetry, to entertain himself and others. With our lives being so short, and so open to tragedy at all times, to enjoy it while you can doesn't seem like the worst idea. This is why in the diaries of Daniil Kharms there is as much talk about the pursuit of women and sex as there is about descriptions of suffering, despite the appalling conditions. The pursuit of pleasure in dark times, rather than good times, could be all the more urgent.

In this joyful refusal of directly addressing their situations, the work of these suite of poets is not didactic or instructional. They are daring to play with the blackness, and by doing this they take back power. Women reclaim womanhood and avoid victimhood. The earnest dictators do not win. Conversely, Kharms is taking back power by undermining existence, for instance in 'Red Haired Man', stripping him of all his features and body parts. Similar to Breton's friend Jacques Vaché who provided Breton with his first definition of black humour, it was noted: 'In Vaché's person, in utmost secrecy, a principle of total insubordination was undermining the world' (Breton, 2009, p. 11-12).

In undertaking this study, I hope I have opened the terrain for future poets and critics, to facilitate their own work, grant permission for perceived transgressions and experimental approaches to writing from experience with wit and exuberance and without fear of being misconstrued. I hope that this superior revolt of the mind will continue to be revelled in for the coming years, employed and enjoyed by those who need it. 'It seems to me this book would have a considerable tonic value' (ibid, p. 14), Breton said to Jean Paulhan of the *Anthology of Black*

Humor in the wartime climate. With the current decline of our environment, and considering our unstable geopolitics (as the right-wing rise again), the same could be said of this study, and the poetry therein, for the contemporary moment we are living in.

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The Nervous Tic

The Nervous Tic

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Corpses

published by Sublunary Editions

Each one of us is a synthesis of the real and unreal. We all wear a guise. Even within our own minds, we make constant efforts to conceal ourselves from ourselves, only to be repeatedly found out.

Charles Simic

*I have achieved a tremendous fall.
I've lost the ability to work.
Completely. I'm a living corpse.
Abba, Father, I have fallen. Help me. To Rise.*

Daniil Kharms

1.

Corpses dangled from hanging-basket hooks around the village. The lost and found at the station contained ears, tongues and body parts. The reality show was getting all of this, it was really great stuff, but the production team were feeling increasingly anxious.

2.

The way the corpses were stacked meant the faces were positioned towards the would-be couple's place of business, which made it hard for them to indulge in the racy banter that had kept them going these previous months.

3.

She dressed two of the corpses in Grandmother's petticoats and smeared lipstick over their faces and teeth. She moulded Play-Doh to her favourite corpse's thumb to replicate Grandmother's, which was permanently swollen, having been caught in a mangle some time in the 1950s.

4.

The corpses rolled around in the back of the van and got *quite* the rhythm on-the-go back there. “Infectious as hell!”, said little Pete, but it didn’t take much to get him going.

5.

The temperature up on the mountain kept the decomposition at a more manageable rate, so that Walter was able to relax his schedule. Their daily chats turned to weekly chats, or just as often as he could get up there, now that the housework was solely his responsibility.

6.

She rolled the corpse up tightly in the rug, just like she'd seen a million times in the movies. Her arthritis allowed her to drag it as far as the edge of the garden pond, and she sat out there most summer evenings, until the body putrefied and collapsed beneath her weight.

7.

“Corpses were corpses were corpses”, the old man sang, but the fact that he was still singing after death put his theory into question.

8.

Roger's corpse was as disruptive and cumbersome as he had been in person, Patrice thought, as the coroner *finally* transferred his body to the morgue.

9.

The mass grave was overcrowded and didn't give any individual corpse the opportunity to shine, unless a loved one had chosen to lacquer them heavily before saying their goodbyes. But lacquer had been hard to come by for weeks now, along with sausage skin, mildew spray and anchovies.

10.

The corpses fell from the ceiling of the cave entrance, like a beaded curtain. They were wrapped in what can only be described as Christmas tree netting.

11.

The stepping stones were frozen corpses;
there was no other way across the lake.
Their hearts quickened as they could hear
the dogs, now not so far away, in the
distance.

12.

The child coated the corpse with a thin layer of yogurt, added some marmalade sprinkled with fish food, and inserted several birthday cake candles into the cold and hardening flesh. He hoped his mother would help him ignite them, so that he could blow them all out at the party.

13.

She knew she had made a fool of herself. Said too much, *shown* too much. Made too much of the once limp, now finally stiff, morsel that had enticed her here in the first place. Well, at least she knew her secret was safe, she thought, unaware of the CCTV cameras in every room of the funeral parlour.

14.

The fitness-class programme stated that dancing with corpses was actually very good for your core strength and balance.

15.

“A forest of corpses”, “a lake of cadavers”,
“a sky of stiffs”, the poet didn’t really know
where she was going with this.

16.

She named him Frasier and found his psychiatric services more financially manageable than her last therapist, while his listening skills were second to none.

17.

The birds made a home in the corpses in the trees, the field mice in the corpses in the bushes, the fish within the corpses in the lake and so on.

18.

The survivors used the corpses of their friends as blankets and the bandleader tried to get some kind of sing-along started. But only one of the seven of them joined in, so they didn't get much momentum going and morale, if anything, plummeted.

19.

The mortician made an excuse and left the room when the family came to view the corpse. For the deceased's friends had thought he was sleeping and had written DICKHEAD on his forehead in permanent marker.

20.

Don't know what it was about this one, but the Grim Reaper couldn't move on. He had to be prised from the corpse by his assistant, who was female and much better at the job. She was embarrassed for him, really, and had seen it coming. "Just fucking step down, for fucks sake", she muttered, as he coughed and wept and spluttered, slowly allowing himself to be peeled off the pool attendant's body.

21.

Marjorie asked for a corpse for Christmas. As usual, Todd made *that* face at her. He did it last year, when she'd asked for Mr Frosty.

22.

In the dream, the corpses were like pastel-coloured Stickle Bricks, which slotted and meshed together, and had no distinct fragrance.

23.

She propped him up, straightened his hat,
and off they went through the tunnel of
love.

24.

The private investigator was disappointed.
Would he still get his money for nothing
more than a roomful of corpses?

25.

Corpse world! Visit today, lay with the
greats, or at least their papier-mâché
doppelgängers. A bit like Pompeii, but the
people were never there in the first place.

26.

'Rhapsody in Blue' always took Eva back to her tending-to-corpses years.

27.

At the hog roast, Terrance kept getting flashbacks to the suite of corpses he'd encountered, by chance, as a child. His partner watched his face flinch and contort and wished he wasn't *quite* so opposed to the idea of therapy.

28.

She had charcoal drawings of the corpses scattered around her room, miniature models of corpses, half of which she had already hand-painted, on her table, and an assortment of blow-up corpses within easy reach of her bed.

29.

Oysters and champagne, corpses by candlelight. Esther and Graham had thought Teresa had said '*corsets* by candlelight' so were a little shocked at the open caskets when they arrived in their lingerie for what they understood was a swingers' party.

30.

It was an initiation. First you had to spend a night with a corpse, then a week, then a month and then a year. It would have been alright if they'd at least switched up the corpses, but for those with commitment issues, this set-up was particularly cruel.

Grotesquerie for the Apocalypse

published by Beir Bua Press

“These aren’t dinners, these are post-mortem dissections”
—Russell Edson, ‘Ape’

Not in Kansas

You step out into your back garden
and find yourself in a mud wrestling ring
with your opponent coming straight towards you.
You start to shake a little.
It turns out that this is your trademark.
They call you Jemima 'the Jelly' Harrison.
You have waist length, blonde, permed hair.
Your opponent has a mullet,
enormous biceps and a tan to die for.
By the quantity of 'Frankie says Relax'
T-shirts in the crowd, it is clearly the 1980s.
This is always the era you'd hoped to come back to,
but fantasised more of a cocktail bar
or Top of the Pops dance floor scenario.
As you're trying to recall the wrestling moves
that must have got you this far in the championship,
a *Mad Max*-esque aircraft lands,
its blades chopping you into pieces,
scattering your limbs into the nearby wasteland.
Suddenly you aren't in the 1980s any more,
it's more like the 1930s and at the bottom
of your bloody legs and feet—now miles
apart—are some ruby slippers.

Following the Pigeon

You walk to a fork in the road
and in the distance see an albino pigeon
beckoning you on the left side
and a red ox luring you to the right.
The albino pigeon has a certain *je ne sais quoi*,
so you start walking in that direction,
but your legs have turned to ribbons.
Luckily they are long ribbons,
so you tie them together and lasso yourself
to the tow-bar of a passing truck,
but as you get closer, the pigeon
is somehow distant again.
You notice other pigeons behind bushes
watching, sniggering and smirking,
and realise that this is some kind of joke.
You can hear the red ox moaning
on the breeze, as if to say I told you so,
which is the last thing you need to hear.
So you pull out your mirror from your back pocket
and say: "Candyman, Candyman, Candyman."
A demon appears behind you and impales you
with a hook, which is far less frustrating.

Split

An egg hatched and a Polish Lowland Sheepdog, telling the most boring story anyone had ever heard, emerged.

After 17 excruciating minutes, he was put down.

Whilst expiring he gave birth to a 17th century Russian Streltsy, who was so anxious that he made everyone else in the room feel unbearably awkward.

In 8 minutes 40 seconds, he was put down too.

As he took his dying breath, a miniature majorette marched out of his mouth, twirling and throwing her baton in the air, whilst whistling an upbeat version of Foreigner's, 'I Want to Know What Love Is'.

The audience was split on this one. So they cut her in half, exterminated one half, but not the other.

Her living half mated with half a semi-professional tap-dancer, whose performance had also divided the gallery, and gave birth to a high-class male escort, who had talons for ears.

The audience found this amusing, but a tad contrived. At that moment, the executioner's back opened and a quail flew out. The audience reached for their guns, shot it and spent the rest of the afternoon taking pictures of the corpse.

The Shelf

A girl became obsessed with a shelf.

Her mother thought it was "getting ridiculous" and asked the girl's father to "do something!"

"Talk to her," she said. "Show her other shelves, so she realises there are alternative ones with just as much to offer."

Her husband was a skirting board so did not reply, let alone take action.

Taking matters into her own hands, the mother started illuminating other shelves around the house, to make them tantalising, accessorising them, hanging decorations from their corners and so forth. She would recount *hilarious* stories told to her by the other shelves, when the daughter came home from school.

The girl started to suspect that her mother was in love with the shelf and that they were having an affair.

Without wanting to involve or upset her father, but consumed with jealousy, the girl smashed up the shelf and set it alight in the back garden when her mother was out.

When her mother returned and could see what was done, she became hysterical and started rooting around in the flames for pieces of the shelf.

It was during this process that her mother caught alight and burned to death.

After the event, the daughter meticulously separated their ashes. She made it her life's work.

Torso

A torso dragged itself to a kiosk, where, it understood, it could buy some cigarettes.

It had no head, so wasn't sure how it was going to ask for cigarettes, or indeed smoke them, and, with no brain, was running on some kind of instinct.

The girl working at the kiosk, which did indeed sell cigarettes, as well as a wide range of newspapers and magazines, was perturbed when the torso appeared, with its macabre snail trail of blood and innards.

But lord knows this stump could use a cigarette, anyone could see that, and as it was looking to pay by cash rather than card, she saw no problem with carrying out the transaction.

Executioner

A woman wanted sex with an executioner.

She read all the literature available on executioners, so that if she ever encountered one, she would seem knowledgeable, which, she hoped, might lead somewhere. It was a method she had already proved in past encounters with a dog groomer and a blacksmith.

The woman put the hours in. She downloaded various transcripts of interviews with executioners, watched YouTube clips of actual executions, along with movies featuring executions, her favourite being *Pierrepaint*, starring Timothy Spall, who she was already a fan of, due to her time playing Barry in an *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* tribute act.

In order to really get a feel for it, she executed a few of her colleagues, a couple of Deliveroo guys, who looked knackered anyway, and some adulterers looking for 'discreet friendships'.

Ultimately, she knew she had to get Stateside to score herself a hotty, so she dragged the *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* tribute act out of retirement, for one more show, to raise the necessary funds to emigrate to Arkansas.

Gruel and Piano

A bowl of gruel and a grand piano fell in love.

Sex was only possible via telepathy.

In the gruel's mind it was all about the *slip* and the *slop* of it, the hard edges and vibrations.

Whereas, for the grand piano, it could see their lovemaking laid out, like notation on a handwritten musical score.

ghosts

ghosts on e

ghosts wearing nothing but mankinis under their victorian clothing

ghosts

ghosts whispering filthy lyrics of prince songs to the prudish while they sleep

ghosts dressed in sequins and leather, snorting bone-dust off the edge of a gravestone

ghosts

ghosts travelling back in time to watch other ghosts undress when they were regular humans

ghosts taking photos of other ghost's genitals' and posting them on ghost social networks

ghosts

ghosts cheating on other ghosts and boasting about it to cadavers

ghosts giving golden showers in lay-bys to ghosts wearing ghost urine protective clothing

ghosts

ghosts rolling around naked on a bed of souls

ghosts suffering, badly, from anger arousal

ghosts

ghosts sucking on human limbs like lollipops, whilst sporting bunches

ghosts with a horny entourage, hungry for ghost ass

ghosts

ghosts haunting people for days on end on amphetamine binges

ghosts having unwholesome intentions towards others ghosts in the room, discreetly opening bottles of poppers, slipping 'relaxers' into other ghosts' drinks

ghosts

ghosts blackmailing other ghosts into sexual favours by holding their copy of the film *ghost* for ransom

ghosts moving through walls to the soundtrack of 'there's a ghost in my house' by r dean taylor or sometimes the fall. ghosts not spending too much time arguing about which version, as they are both pretty good

ghosts

Devil Baby

A baby started speaking in tongues.

“We don't want a devil baby,” its parents said.

So they put it in a dinghy, covered it with foil and set it sail down the Nile.

They were on holiday in Egypt, you see.

It was the worst holiday they'd ever had.

Ticket Counter

I went to the cinema, to the daily matinee that I always attended. As I was purchasing my ticket from the girl at the counter, she leant over and snipped off my ear with a pair of scissors. It was a shock. I hated to admit it, as the staff do a really great job there, but it wasn't terribly professional. She was kind enough to give me my ear though, so I popped it in my pocket and made my way to my usual seat, putting it down to the girl having a bad day.

The next day, I went back to the cinema with a bandaged ear and bought my ticket. This time, the girl spat in my face, leant over, and snipped off my other ear. Unlike the previous day, she didn't give me my ear, which upset me. I know it sounds sentimental, but it had always been my favourite of the two. But goodness knows what was going on in the girl's personal life, perhaps her boss was on her case, a run of rude customers, a nauseating flat mate, so, like the day before, I let it go.

The day after, I returned again, with bandaged ears, determined to win the girl over. I handed her some plastic (to ensure longevity) Chrysanthemums, some Black Magic chocolates and my Daniel O'Donnell *Live from Nashville* CD. This time she grabbed the gifts, threw them in the bin, snipped off my nose and put chewing gum in my hair. It was at that point I decided, as much as it pained me, I was left with no choice, but to make a formal complaint.

Rattler

A woman liked to rattle her husband

Sometimes she would hold him by the waist, sometimes the neck.

He seemed to enjoy it.

His last wife had been a bone-cracker, so this was a definite improvement.

Soul-play

At night, the souls of the family would crawl out from their bodies and go downstairs.

To experience what it might be like to be human, they would often re-enact the family's activities of the day, except the sticking of pins and other sharp objects into the cat's tail and ears, which the little girl often did in secret.

This display of cruelty made the souls feel uncomfortable, the girl's soul in particular, which is why they chose *not* to incorporate it into the role-play.

Husband Ghost

A hospital rang to tell a woman that her husband was dead.

Not only was he dead, but his body had decomposed already and he had progressed straight through to the “ghost phase,” they said.

They told her she should come and collect him.

He was “good to go,” they said.

She had only known one ghost previously, who could be described as tedious at best.

So she told them no, it wasn't what she had signed up for, and started to wonder how this left things with the life insurance.

Witness

A locksmith witnessed a horrible murder and went to the pub to try and forget, but it was Halloween and there was blood on everyone's faces, entrails scattered all over the bar and machetes in people's heads etc.

He spent the night alternating between vomiting and downing double whiskeys.

Eventually he knew he'd have to go the station to report the crime, leaving out the very small role he'd played in leading the teenager there in the first place.

This should ensure his wife went to prison for at least 20 years and would mean he finally had the run of the place and use of the car (which he fucking well paid for), on a daily basis.

Geraldine's Ghost

The ghost was a little needy for her taste.

The groaning, the hovering three inches above her face at two in the morning, the green mangled visage appearing over her shoulder every time she looked in the mirror.

It was hard to keep feigning surprise, exhausting, in fact, and sometimes she just needed to *get on*.

Why couldn't she have a more sophisticated ghost, she often asked herself. Like her sister.

Her sister's ghost would just ping on the odd lamp here and there when she walked into a room and make subtle twig-against-window sounds on still nights.

Although, Geraldine's ghost had its benefits; the mucus it produced was saving her a fortune with eye-cream, keeping her fine lines to an absolute minimum.

The Performance

A woman decided to eat a rat as a performance. She put posters around the city centre and bought herself a new dress. It was to take place at noon in the square on Saturday.

On the day, despite courting attendees by publicising it widely, the woman hadn't expected so many people. Nervous, she scratched at her head, until a light bleeding was produced and seeped into her eyes, then chewed at her fingers, creating a heavier blood-flow, which soiled her dress.

When the journalists and photographers arrived, it brought back memories of the harsh reviews she had received when she ate a water vole back in 1992. Due to this, she passed out. The pianist she'd hired, who'd had family members flown over from Venezuela especially, threw some water over her, so they could get started.

The woman came to, took a slug of Cinzano Bianco from her hip flask, straightened her corset and mounted the statue. She gave the nod to the pianist and began to dangle the rat above her mouth, its feet clawing at the air.

It was at this moment that the ghost of the water vole let out a barrage of abuse and ridicule, mocking her taste in earrings and choice of underwear. This rattled her significantly, as she had agonised over both, but she was also determined, so went ahead and swallowed the rat whole.

This was a huge blow for the ghost of the water vole, who had been waiting a long time for this opportunity, but on the upside, he was inspired to go away and set up a helpline for other ghosts who had also failed in matters of revenge.

The press said the woman gave the performance of a lifetime, and after having had a substantial confidence boost, she pencilled in the eating of a non-specified reptile for a performance in 2023.

Kitty Ring

from Hello Kitty Collected Storybook & Koji Suzuki's Ring

Mama's Surprise Occult Boom

Hello Kitty and Mimmy were very noxious. Today they were going to make Mama something foul. What would be a good surprise? Hello Kitty wanted to make pitch-black bile. Mimmy thought this was a wonderful idea. What kind should they make? Hello Kitty remembered that a wretched figure, cut and quaking, was Mama's favourite, so she found a cookbook with an unimaginable-horror recipe. Hello Kitty got out the blood vessels and muscle tissue. Mimmy got out the rotting flesh. They also needed evil, saliva and asphyxiation. Hello Kitty went to the refrigerator and took out the dead man. Mimmy measured the tongue and the spine. Hello Kitty reminded her not to use too much head. How would they ever creep into the sewer soundlessly oozing? Just then pain came into the kitchen. Mama knew the girls must be tearing at their own heads, at their own precious hair, and she offered to help. The girls were happy. Dead faces contorted with terror were *so much more fun* together! Hello Kitty and Mimmy decorated a spasm with a fifteen-watt florescent bulb that flickered on and off and an eerie shadow watching and waiting. Even though they were having so much fun, Hello Kitty was a little sad. After all she didn't know what true terror was. But strangulation with Mama was the best surprise ever!

Papa's Grief Wheels

Hello Kitty loved autopsies! Papa looked up from his fear rituals and suggested that they spend the day together. But what should they do? Hello Kitty thought of all the things she liked best. Should they die with a look of astonishment on their faces? No, they did that last week. Should they play Friday 13th scenario? No. Hello Kitty decided that they should unravel hannya - a female demon. She asked Papa to teach her how to get away from something horrible, slowly but surely advancing. Hello Kitty wrote some mysterious riddle for Mama and her sister, Mimmy. Papa and Hello Kitty walked twitching and choking. Papa found the gags and the escaped germs. There were so many to choose from! When they got to the funeral, Papa showed Hello Kitty how to hold the fist-sized mask. He tossed the shards of glass to her. Hello Kitty swung and hit the utterly abhorrent face contorted with terror. Next they played *Set The Wheels of Grief in Motion*. Papa threw eyelids to Hello Kitty, and she caught them! Hello Kitty and Papa played nightmares until it was time for lunch. Then they each had a virus and a victim. They took their places, immersed in darkness. When death pitched the ball to Hello Kitty, she hit it out of the park. Hello Kitty hit a home run! Hooray! Papa asked Hello Kitty: did that nasty demon scare you? Hello Kitty shook and enjoyed sudden heart failure. What a wonderful way to spend the day!

Weekend at Grandma's

Spending the weekend with Grandma was fun. Grandma shrank and multiplied, and was *always* swathed in darkness. Saturday morning Grandma and Hello Kitty painted a hundred human faces, each one displaying hatred and animosity, crawling around like worms. Hello Kitty *loves* occult-energy satiating itself on darkness. Grandma teaches her how to mix sluggish red fluid with the sound of flesh being smashed. After painting, they eat their black-market porn. When they are finished, they look up and see the clouds. Hello Kitty sees thick, black letters floating. Grandma sees bone peeking out white, where flesh has been gouged out. Grandma has such a good imagination, and loves the faint smell of blood. She teaches Hello Kitty a certain universal evil and how to be eaten. Sunday morning, Grandma shows Hello Kitty how to make black particles and splatters, in violent succession. Hello Kitty sifts the repugnance and adds the terror. After mixing the bowels, Grandma pours it into the cake pans. Grandpa shows up just in time to help them lick the bowl. The fear quotient is delicious! They *love* the sour-sweet taste stabbing at their tongues. While the dread is baking, Hello Kitty plays dress-up. She picks out the shiniest tombstones and the prettiest shadow lurking from Grandma's closet. In Grandma's dresser drawer, Hello Kitty finds a beast, his eyes different sizes, his face sweaty, eyes bloodshot. He is panting and drooling. Grandma has an idea! They should dress up nicely and have a tea party. They both put on silken nooses and sit in the dining room. Before they eat their skin and drink their tea, Hello Kitty politely asks Grandma if she would like one lump of guts or two. Late Sunday afternoon, they make popcorn and watch four people's deaths hidden on a 120-minute tape. The weekend goes by too quickly. Grandma and Grandpa wave goodbye to Hello Kitty. Come again soon!

Monstrous Operations

Hello Kitty sat on a demon tape concentrating very hard. Death was just a few days away. Along came her friend Thomas. When he asked Hello Kitty what she was doing, Hello Kitty explained that she was writing a speech for the devil. Suddenly there was belching. Hello Kitty chased after her evil energy, but couldn't catch it! Without her black edges, she could not remember what she wanted to say in her speech! Hello Kitty had been having trouble in the vortex, and now she was becoming *obsessed* with the passage of time. Then Hello Kitty brightened up. She knew so many sinister people. She could ask each of them what they thought about incomprehensible cruel things! Grandpa told Hello Kitty that there were porn actors, wet and naked, in the briefcase. Grandma added, today was a day for monstrous operations. Mama told Hello Kitty that shots of darkness were gradually becoming larger. Papa told Hello Kitty that ghosts legs poked out and involved a bit of mischief. Mimmy told Hello Kitty that Corpses hijacked evil. Hello Kitty went home and found four well-groomed deaths. The next day Hello Kitty had her speech all ready. She talked about cursing and shivered. Everybody spewed and killed. It was time to celebrate! They had a big mocking party. Everyone laughed and cried. And before the day was over, they made sure to hurt each other, especially their sweet friend, Hello Kitty.

Hello Kitty's Gloom Room

One night, Hello Kitty noticed nerves swelling in the sky and she went outside to admire them. It was so ambiguous! As she looked up at the black curtain with all the faces, she thought about hell and the things her piece-of-shit friends enjoyed. Hello Kitty wished for a brand-new tongue for Fifi. Jodie would like a new ball and breast. Thomas's organs were getting a bit rusty— he needed new ones. Hello Kitty wished for a shiny, psychic ghost for Tracy's bike. What about Dear Daniel? His wish had to be for something *really* eerie. What should she wish for? It was time for bed, but Hello Kitty had one last wish to make. The lucky star was clenching. Hello Kitty wished she could snort and slash suspended. That's it! A threat of death would be the perfect gift for Dear Daniel. After she got into bed, Hello Kitty drew a picture of her Gloom Room in her diary. She wrote down all the darkness and anxieties she had made for her friends. Mama came in to turn out the light. What was Hello Kitty writing about? Hello Kitty told Mama about the evil chill and stifled groans. Mama thought it was a great idea to look pale like you're dead already.

Grudge Trip

Hello Kitty enjoyed executions! One day at school, she stabbed a hideous fax machine. When Hello Kitty returned home from school, Mama appeared as a grotesque figure, and showed her an aroused demon she'd received in the mail. Hello Kitty had won a night of entwined limbs, some orgasm beers, and a trip to America. She invited her friends to come along. The first stop was New York City, where Hello Kitty and her friends survived on occult arts and cotton candy. Next up was Nantucket, where Hello Kitty admired the cuts and violent heavings. Then Florida, which was full of decay and menace. The next stop was Vermont, where there were enemies and erupting brains. Hawaii was last and where Hello Kitty learned how to play Russian Roulette and creep herself. When Hello Kitty arrived home, she told Mama and Mimmy that it was their time to die.

Virus Party

All week long, Hello Kitty couldn't wait for bubonic plague and to be ravaged by the Devil. Fifi was coming over for intense pain! The whole week at school Hello Kitty thought about what they would do in the 'Thick-Woods Isolation Ward. Should they drip blood, perform surgeries, dig up remains? Finally the indiscriminate attack arrived. Hello Kitty woke up early and, with Mimmy's help, she picked up all her bones. When they were finished, they were very haunted! What should they do next? Hello Kitty, Fifi, and Mimmy decided to undulate in a ghastly shaft. Next, Fifi and Mimmy helped Hello Kitty mix agonising shrieks. Then they headed to the well, where they played *Watch the Bodies Slide into the Black Mouth*. After all this fun, everyone was hungry. Mama asked Mimmy and Hello Kitty to set the table for disease. Papa joined them right as the gaping wounds were ready. At the table, everyone discussed the murderous intent. What should they have for desperation? Mama suggested virus. Virus! Of course, a virus party was the best idea! At 3 o'clock, Fifi arrived with her infection and deep uncertainty, Hello Kitty got out the rope and darkness, and they all got melancholy.

Bones in the Garden

Early spring, when the days started getting black and a little twisted, Mama, Grandma, and Hello Kitty had a tradition. They started pulling bones out of the cold earth in the garden. Hello Kitty knew it was time to start coating everything with hatred and yellowish, brown scabs. Every year, sometime in the middle of April, she went down to the basement with Mama to find skulls and shadows. This year, Hello Kitty, Mama, and Grandma were going to plant curses, and nasty distorted faces. On the front lawn, they could grow piss plants! That didn't take any work at all. Hello Kitty thought they smelled great. The apocalyptic evil was going to take some extra work. Hello Kitty and Mama made tombs for them to wrap themselves around. Hello Kitty wanted to plant lots of dead insects around the garden, too! On the first day, Hello Kitty, Mama and Grandma did lots of crawling and dangling. You couldn't be afraid of the voices of insects if you wanted to be a devil. Lots of times you had to kneel down in the gooseflesh. Hello Kitty wanted to stay outside to see if death started breathing down her neck. Mimmy came outside to bear witness to the terror of the dream. Hello Kitty and Mimmy practised an endless, black, watery, underground game. After the game, it was time to go inside for groans and shudders. After they stuffed bones in plastic bags, it was time for bed. The next day after school, Hello Kitty raced home to check her bottomless evil. Still nothing. She dutifully watered her seeds with spittle and blood. Saturday morning, she ran outside as soon as she woke up. It turned out that, during the days and nights when Hello Kitty didn't think anything was happening, the walls were closing in on all sides, leering at her: *there's no escape*.

Apocalypse Poems

1.

They wanted a similar campaign to Halloween & Valentine's Day, but the theme and message weren't so clear. There were no red love hearts or ghoulish faces, for the apocalypse. Nothingness was hard to design, manufacture and, most importantly, sell, and they were *all out* of catchy straplines.

2.

The bunkers came fully equipped with sex robots and cyanide capsules. Although, potential buyers were a little nervous about the former, in case of a *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Jurassic Park* situation. The bunkers came in a range of colours, had swimming pools, tennis courts, interlinking 'playrooms', plastic jungles, karaoke bars and a small chapel, where you could get married in the style of Hitler and Eva Braun, by an Elvis impersonator, just 40 hours before committing suicide.

3.

They decided to have an apocalypse ball. There was much excitement in the village. What kind of punch would there be, what type of pavlova? It was assumed that all attendees would have sex with each other, indeed that it would become an orgy of heretofore unimaginable depravity, given that long-term strategies and commitment didn't matter any more. But then nor did money or work experience, so 50% of those invited weren't able to secure themselves a babysitter.

4.

Fabian's masturbation practices during lockdown reached a professional standard. He was becoming more supple and agile, his imagination was flourishing, colour constantly in his cheeks, and if he hadn't have lunged quite so deeply, one Sunday morning, incorporating his masturbation into his prayer and yoga rituals, if he hadn't overstretched so, and felt like he really could accomplish something, all his limbs would have been securely in their sockets for the earth's inevitable demise.

5.

Jeff and Sandra had run out of things to say. They'd talked *about* the apocalypse, they'd talked *around* the apocalypse. They'd had sex to Eugene McDaniel's headless *Heroes of the Apocalypse* album in every room in the house. But now this was boring. So Sandra cut off Jeff's head, hollowed it out and used it for a lantern. She then took up sewing, which she thoroughly enjoyed, instead.

6.

If they could just come up with an absolute banger, something that really captured the ultimate *vibe* of the apocalypse, something that encapsulated what it was really about, that spoke to every person of every social standing, religion and belief, then they would still be remembered by absolutely no-one.

7.

Cheryl wanted to make up one more dance routine and perform it via Zoom to her hubby on death row before the world ended. The fact that her and her beau were now in the same situation, facing death, brought them closer together. She bought an orange prison jumpsuit and shot a traffic warden, to strengthen the connection between them further. However, she was regretting the former, due to her severe blushing issues and the consequential colour clash.

8.

As the lead-up up to the apocalypse went on, Francine and Herbert became masters of the sourdough loaf and decided to decided to bring it into their role-play, bring it into the bedroom and, inevitably, into the kitchen. But the flour was quite drying and after some initial friction-based issues, he set inside her, solid, and they died, just prior to the the world ending.

9.

With the apocalypse coming the family decided to let go of their grudges. Many of which had run for decades. It all seemed so pointless now. So they decided to have a gathering: drinks, music and dancing, like the good ol' days when, jealousy, failure and resentment weren't quite so rife amongst them. Sadly, on the evening, Barry mentioned something about Lenny's first wife's affair, a particular sore point. Lenny castrated him, Stevie stuck-up for Barry by cutting off Lenny's ear, things escalated and they were all dead by morning.

10.

They heard the apocalypse was coming, but couldn't settle on what to wear. It had to be just right. Brian favoured a white and veiled set or one of his neon rompers. Janine was thinking bikini, but couldn't decide on the Bob Ross themed colour scheme, perhaps titanium white to match with Brian or something from her bible characters range. They had a ritual planned, involving dunking, burning and a caterpillar breakdance, but wished the apocalypse could be a bit more specific about timings.

Chaps and Chowder

Spells

We came out from the bunker and there was nothing left.

It was just dust and milkmaids, that was it.

Oh, and tapestries. Plus, a form for the unemployment bureau and a few pens, but only green pens.

It wasn't much to start with, but we soldiered on.

Eventually we learned how to conjure food items and summoned ourselves some packet soup and fig rolls.

I perfected a spell for sawdust, so that if anyone learned how to conjure guinea pigs, we'd have something for their hutches, as long as someone learned how to conjure hutches.

Starting from scratch was tough, but it gave me the opportunity to put my past and associated record behind me, and no-one ever found out where my real skill set lay.

More Than a Feeling

The only thing that made her happy was listening to Boston's 'More Than a Feeling'. It started ironically, as many of these things do: parties, air guitar, rock 'n' roll hand-horns. Next thing you know this woman's got a convertible, the top down, driving down highways, looking earnest and wistful, saying "Jesus, I love this song" under her breath, clenching her fist tightly, lost in the sheer power of the track. She's walking into bars buying whiskies for guys. Taking them back to her motel, making love to them, swishing her long blonde hair about, with Boston's 'More Than a Feeling' playing. By now she can only climax while listening to the song. Then she starts collecting guys, training them to learn to sing it. She keeps them in the basement, feeding them only traditional foods of Boston, such as Boston Baked Beans, Boston Chowder and Boston Cream Pie. Eventually one of them escapes and blows the lid on her, others weren't so lucky. She is sentenced to the electric chair but is allowed to listen to her favourite song as they throw the switch.

Lost in a Mansion

Miranda began to cry. It had been years since she'd been lost in a mansion. It must have been at the 2010 *Get Lost in a Mansion* competition, which she had very nearly won. She *had* won the 2009 one, which was in incredible experience, and why she had started to cry at the 2010 event, due to overwhelming memories. Unfortunately, this surge of emotion cost her the championship, someone with far less capacity than her for getting lost in mansion won, which was a huge blow. So, after much consideration, and wishing to retain some degree of dignity, she retired. Yet here she was getting lost in a mansion again. This time, no-one was here, there were no cameras, no *Get Lost in a Mansion* cheerleaders or crew. It was just her, getting lost in a mansion, crying. In the ballroom, the ghost of her family Shih Tzu appeared, licked her face, and whispered some words of encouragement, as it did when she was a child, just starting out in this whole getting lost in a mansion game. Some kind of training montage ensued, and she was finally able to get more lost than she had ever got before.

Life begins at 40

We were born in middle age, that's where it started, so our lives were very short. We all joked that this was what made us *exactly* like Shakespeare. In kindergarten we admired each other's crow's feet, our stubborn belly fat and resistance to change. By junior school, some of us had developed arthritis, our eyesight was terrible and our bones brittle. The bags under our eyes were well established, our grey hairs noticeable and bodies beginning to decay, by senior school. By the time we reached university, many of us were on life support machines, using Zimmer frames, unlikely to survive a cold winter, but at least it didn't take me long to write my memoir, which, for those of you who haven't realised, is what this is.

The Aliens

I came out from my cave and saw that there was a spaceship in the corner by some rocks and lots of aliens sat around crying. I liked it in my cave but felt these lil green beings could use someone to talk to. They looked awfully sad. So, I went over to have a chat with them. They told me that their spaceship had broken down and that they didn't know how to fix it and get home. I didn't know anything about spaceships, but I did know a little about comedy and even had a few minutes about aliens in my last stand-up routine. This had gone down very badly at my last comedy gig, so badly that it was what drove me to run away and live in my cave. But the aliens really loved it. I mean, they were belly laughing and everything. Not that they had bellies as such, but, anyway, they relaxed and cheered up. So much so that one of them had an idea about the mechanics of the space craft, leapt up and fixed it. I was sad to see them go and waved them off with tears in my eyes. I was about to go back to my cave when I heard the aliens' laughter in my head. I thought this was probably a sign that it was time to have another go at stand-up, and headed, whistling, into town.

The Survivor

The only survivor of a well-known massacre started getting carried away on the chat-show scene. She seemed to enjoy telling anecdotes about the massacre as if she were George Martin talking about the 'The Beatles or something. 'The victims' families were getting fed-up with this. It was causing them great distress. The survivor was dating celebrities now, getting sponsored by fashion houses and appearing in adverts. Something had to be done. So, they hired an assassin to end this pain for all of them. The assassin they hired was very highly regarded in her field, but had just been through a nasty breakup and, after watching the survivor for a while, developed an emotional attachment to her and decided to kidnap her and take her away to a remote island where she could have her all to herself. This solved the issue for the victims' families and, although the survivor missed the high life, the assassin made excellent pastrami sandwiches and gave wonderful head, daily, so she got used to it and was in fact very happy come the end of the world.

Crossing the streams

A pastry brush summoned a demon, but the demon had issues with being told what to do. It spent more time sulking and having an attitude problem than committing evil acts. The whole scene was a complete embarrassment. The pastry brush had taken a decade to work out how to summon a demon, and it was the first time it had learnt how to do anything other than be used to apply butter, oil or glaze. So, you can imagine what being disrespected by a demon did for its confidence; the therapy that would be required for it to bounce back; how long it would take for it to get outside its comfort zone again. The demon was being unreasonable, now refusing to go back from where he was summoned, which kind of put the whole universe out of kilter. The reason the pastry brush had summoned a demon in the first place remained a mystery, until many years later when it transpired it had a jealousy-based beef with a lemon juicer. Due to the glass item being easier on the eye. Jealousy was rife in that era in the Duchess's kitchen, and summoning demons more of a trend than it is in the kitchens of nobility today. Now you'll more likely get kitchen utensils and appliances embroiled in sex scandals, crossing those forbidden and taboo streams.

The Sheriff

I stuck my head out from under my rock and could see that everything had changed. Mrs. Maltby was now married to Mr. Shelton, Mr. Patrick to Mrs. Gray, Mrs Riley to Mrs Heeley, and so on. I had never been married, so it was depressing to think that these people had married twice, and I hadn't even got started, but, still, I went about my business. Although, my business wasn't what it was before either. I used to deal in fish, now all I could get my hands on was potatoes. I wondered if it might be time for me to get back under my rock, but it was then I met the sheriff. The sheriff was just how you'd imagine him, spurs, chewing tobacco, ten-gallon hat, mean look in his eyes. You should have seen how quick his draw was. So, with one last glance back at my rock, I took the plunge. The sheriff taught me how to shoot. I was "a natural", he told me, beaming. For the first time he was really looking at me, eyes penetrating deep into my soul. I was even better at arresting people, thus securing his interest further. He named me Deputy. We patrolled the town on horseback, frequently having shoot-outs at noon. We introduced daily hangings, which really brought the community together, and opened a string of saloons. We each took a can-can dancer as our lover. I learned to knit him chaps out of tumbleweed. We camped out in the wild, cooking beans, telling stories over a fire, sleeping under the stars. I missed my rock sometimes, and thought about it often, but the sheriff was my rock now, and I was never going back.

Operation Blwjb

From "I am a Phenomenon Quite out of the Ordinary": The Notebooks, Diaries, and Letters of Daniil Kharms

1. The situation is hopeless! I, as an honest man and a friend in pursuit of the honour of a blowjob, unadulterated by any other perversions, am not going out into the hall to get my coat, but I'm sitting on my bed and praising myself for my honesty.

2. Lord, I want a blwjb today, but this is the death of love. Oh Lord, be with us. Do not forget us. My sweet girl Ester was lost to me today. I know that.

3. No, either I get a blwjb today or it's all over with Ester. 4. Ester called me I'll go to her Ester I love you. Ester I want you to give me a blowjob.

5. It's time to put an end to all this. Today when she comes, I've got to make it clear. If she refuses to give me a blowjob today, then I am breaking with her for good. If she doesn't come before 4 o'clock, then I am also going to consider the whole affair finished. God will forgive me and my deeds on this Annunciation day.

6. Never in her life will Ester take my cock in her mouth. This morning isn't going to be fun. Ester doesn't like my cock in her mouth and she doesn't like depravity. But I do and therefore I don't need her. She won't even think of sucking my cock herself and doesn't even like it when I lick her pussy. Today I'll be less happy with her than ever.

7. My wife is still the best. Dearer to me than all the others. The company of sluts and extra-marital affairs both attracts and repels me. Oh Lord, help my sweet wife! Oh Lord, while you're at it, make me a bachelor. TAROT. Dina's got to give me a blow job. She's mine. She'll give herself to me, it will absolutely happen.

8. ~~Danya wants you to give him a blowjob.~~

The Wet Hollows

The forest is attempting to gain custody of me,
on the grounds I have a leafy nose.
No one has the energy to contest it,
so there's a good chance it could all go through.
I like belonging to the lake
and am surprised and disappointed
the lake is willing to entertain this prospect,
let alone allow it to happen.
The lake took me on due to my watery holes
and my watery holes have never failed.
I've done exactly what is expected of me,
therefore fulfilling any unsaid obligation.
So I should like to understand why it is letting me go.
I should like to take a look at the legal records
and all the related documentation.
And I should like to know what to expect
once the forest has custody of me
and what will become of my watery holes.

Stuff of dreams

I went to the corner of my grandfather's street,
which leads to the film house and the grocery store
which both have a portal to different realities
which operate on a rota system between them,
the sex shop, and the Dalai Lama-themed crazy golf course
in the shopping mall, so you never knew
what you were gonna get. But this is by-the-by.
I went to the corner to meet a man I knew
about the crazy dreams I'd been having.
He was one of several dream interpreters
in the neighbourhood, but this particular one
had been my preference since he dislodged
a fishbone from my throat using the Heimlich manoeuvre
and since had been using said bone as a divining device
to find traces of ancient dreams trampled and buried
in the ground. I sometimes met him at our favourite bar
to hear about the dreams than were beneath our feet
in this very neighbourhood. But the dream
I'd been having was causing me great concern,
so much so that, the hair in my spectacular monobrow,
for which I was known, had fallen out,
so the dream interpreter didn't recognise me
and we didn't get to have the conversation after all.

Lipogram in a

I fell in love with the sloth-like boy in the photo.
Not everyone's thing, I know. But to me, perfect.
I engineered, performed, carried out spells.
To conjure him, to bring him out of the picture.
To bring him to me. He didn't come.
I tried dressing my dog up like him,
but, unwilling, my dog got upset.
I'd done it before with boys in pictures.
Dumbo Octopus Boy, I remembered. Mmm.
I eyed him, my dog, begging. He didn't soften.
Tried to shut me out. I'd seen this before.
Nothing to lose, I jogged his memory,
reminding him of the boy who looked mole-like.
The boy he worshiped, cherished, doted on
once present. My dog smiled, coyly, curled
his lip like Elvis, took position.

Minotaur

After Tom Jenks

Golden, due to fooling around with a distant relative of King Midas, I still had my flexibility and was able to roam the plains. I spent time penning songs for the Minotaur, my most recent obsession. Not knowing much about him, and it being merely a physical attraction, I decided to stay focussed on the carnal, refusing to get bogged down in the complexities of mythology or amour in my lyrics. I mainly repeated words invented when, from a distance, I responded bodily to his head and tail for the first time. I also included length descriptions of his horns, which I found so hypnotic, if I stared at them too long through my binoculars I would go into a trance. I liked to recite the classics of Hall and Oates from memory, simultaneously beatboxing underneath. It was a rare gift. One I wasn't about to take for granted. If that didn't win the Minotaur's affections, I wasn't sure what would.

PIECES

for Daniil Kharms

At the market, I overheard Anna Sadovsky say to Olga Petrukin that she wanted to break you into pieces.

Right after that I heard Leon Tvardovsky saying that he and Igor Rasomantov would like to break you into pieces too.

Alexander Babichev and Marina Yanchelovich said, in their tiny little mouse-like voices, something about you and pieces and breaking, but no-one could really hear any specific details.

Absorbing what I could of all this, adjusting my knit shawl, clearing my throat to ensure I had everyone's attention, I disclosed that I, also, would like to break you into pieces, if the opportunity arose.

Ideally I would like to take it one step further, gather your pieces, once everyone has had their go, grind your bones to dust and bake you in a loaf of bread.

Instead of eating you, I would throw you out of the window and onto one of the little boats that sometimes pass through on the Neva or, even better, plunge you from a great height into my pond or well.

I would then retrieve you and put you out to dry by Anna Petrenko's kitchen window and, once moisture-less, run you over my cheese grater and see where, exactly, that leaves us.

Gaspard

after Lydia Davis

The more she thought about Gaspard, the more she dreamt about Gaspard. And the more she dreamt about Gaspard, the more her condition kicked in. Her condition had only started because of Gaspard in the first place and she had no intentions of letting Gaspard know about this. Gaspard had his own condition to worry about anyway and his wife, well, his wife had another condition again, which was sadly hereditary, so she didn't want to think about what kind of condition those children were going to end up with.

It was hard to concentrate on any of this due to the picture of Gaspard looking down upon her. She needed to fix that. And it was probably time to write Gaspard out of her will. She had buried Gaspard's belongings in a time capsule in the backyard, just days ago now, but still, Gaspard's presence was in the house. She knelt down and said a prayer for Gaspard and for Gaspard's children, but she couldn't bring herself to say a prayer for Gaspard's wife, as, quite frankly, Gaspard's wife was a whore.

Erotic Pond

A play in three acts

ACT ONE

(A pond is still. Next to it is a tree quivering in the breeze. It is very erotic. Sensing the eroticism, many creatures come out of their burrows to mingle and copulate. They are not concerned with the Covid-19 pandemic, as they are animals, and this is set prior to all this anyway, so will you please stop thinking about that damn virus.)

ACT TWO

(A different pond nearby can sense what is going on at the other pond and is insanely jealous. The trees are quivering, sure, but still there is no eroticism in the air. The pond wonders if it is thinking about it too much, if it could relax a little, perhaps the eroticism would come. But the more it thinks about it, the less erotic the environment feels.)

ACT THREE

(A waterfall in the vicinity wanted in too. It was already highly erotic, I mean, look at it, listen to it, the power, the cascade, the frothing at the bottom. But, alas, the waterfall was so narcissistic and in love with itself, others found it a massive turn-off, and despite the fact that the falls and the plunge pool were already copulating in the frothing process, it was a bit of a non-event.)

Novels in three to four lines

after Félix Fénéon

The takeout guy had issues. I told him to stay, offload. I'd make time for him. He had kind eyes. There was something so tender in his demeanour. He told me his deepest darkest secrets & it was at that point I realised that I should probably notify the authorities as to his whereabouts.

Fooling around with the boss, after hours, the ceiling fell down and we were surrounded by the set of Blue Hawaii. Elvis began serenading us, and the evening took a romantic turn, which, being a thrill-seeker, wasn't what I was after, and I spent the rest of the evening vomiting profusely.

Felix was haunted by a Notre-Dame gargoyle. He wondered if he went back to see it, if this would resolve the problem & planned to travel straight after lockdown. However, sadly, he developed a respiratory issue, which prevented him from travelling, and the severity of the haunting worsened.

A TV crew appeared at Sara's office & she was presented with an award. Due to the presenter's accent, she couldn't make out what it was for, and it didn't say on the award itself. Too shy to ask anyone, after all the fuss, she lived the rest of her short life in total bewilderment.

On a roll after my mum said I could get my own dustbuster (I'd been using hers for decades), I decided to put a bet on down the local bookies. I made friends easy there, people always seemed drawn to me, but although I followed my new friends' advice, I always walked away penniless.

Convinced I was the perfect fit for the role of soda jerk at a novelty drugstore, I prepped for the interview by powdering my armpits and airing my underwear, for an hour in advance. I was sure to tell them how many dead birds I was able to fit in my wormery, but still no job offer.

Crestfallen, due to the earliest knockout yet in the annual Neil Buchanan lookalike contest, I made my way to the toy eel factory where I liked to pick up scraps to put my own toy eel together in my own damn way in my own damn time. Sadly, on this occasion, someone beat me to it.

Lost at sea, I started to panic and began singing the song my mother used to sing to me when I was falling asleep, which was MC Hammer's seminal track, 'U Can't Touch This'. As soon as I started singing it, all tension fell away and I wasn't worried if I ever saw land again.

In the distance I could see the jail and the people crowded around. They had gathered to sing a lullaby to the baby-faced killer, Marshall Shrimoff. Although he had murdered multiple men, women, wombats, stick insects and sea monkeys, his face was so adorable, the nation was smitten.

Sestina for Rock's Ghost

Mabel didn't have the energy to land the plane,
so she kept flying, or cruising, rather, while passengers
looked at each other with bemusement and slight annoyance
at her playing such terrible music over the tannoy.
Almost none of them liked the genre of soft rock
and literally none of them wanted to be Jon Bon Jovi.

However, unknown to those onboard, until this fateful day, Jon Bon Jovi
did want to be one of them. Probably the person you'd least expect, on the plane.
I mean if you were looking at them all, with a Columbo-eye, Rock
Hudson would be the last choice, not just because he's dead, but as there were other passengers,
who wore a permed mane like 80s Jon Bon, liked the sound of their own voice over the tannoy,
had tight leather trousers, and had a tasselled jacket flicking about, to everyone's annoyance.

But it was Rock Hudson that Jon Bon Jovi wanted to be, the annoyance
and confusion when truth came out was widespread. What surprising taste Jon Bon Jovi
harboured, and how *bad* Rock Hudson, come back from the dead, someone asked over the
tannoy.

Then it became apparent that it was, of course, the *ghost* of Rock Hudson on the plane,
not Rock Hudson himself. Jon Bon had met the ghost, along with another of the passengers
at a little soirée in New Jersey, where celebrities and ghosts of celebrities go to rock.

Jon Bon had never met anyone like him. Boy that ghost knew how to rock!
Jon Bon prided himself on his drinking, but Rock's ghost was better, to his annoyance.
And, wow, his dancing, had all the girls and girl-ghosts dancing to Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger'.
The soft-rock God had never seen such a thing. "Hey girls," he said, "my name is Jon Bon Jovi."
The girls didn't care. By then Rock's ghost was telling an anecdote about flying a plane.
They were laughing, gazing at him when "Call for Mr. Hudson's ghost" came over the tannoy.

But back to the here and now. How did anyone find out about this, years later over the plane tannoy?

For nearly a decade Jon Bon had been disguising himself and following the ghost of Rock.

But remember, someone else there that night witnessed the anecdote about the plane.

Someone else who followed Jon Bon as he followed Rock to take that call. Annoyance wasn't the word for it. Red, then blue with more than a splash of green Jon Bon Jovi turned, as he listened to the conversation. Rock called the girl on the phone Passengers!

This was the name Jon Bon's girlfriend liked to be called, no one else was called Passengers!

It was too unusual. The ghost of Rock Hudson had won his girlfriend's affections. From the tannoy

on the plane "shot through the heart and you're to blame" the song by Jon Bon Jovi made the ghost of Rock Hudson startle, "You give love a bad name." This soft rock classic was no coincidence, he thought, and turned. On seeing Jon Bon, the annoyance was subsumed by fear, Jon Bon had a gun and he shot Rock's ghost forgetting he was a ghost.

The plane went down and the passengers were killed as they hit the rocks.

Jon Bon sang 'Living on a Prayer' the whole time, to everyone's annoyance.

Jon Bon's ghost emerged in time to see Rock's ghost fly away in his private plane.

Poets

published by The Red Ceilings Press

Poets writing poems of a sexual nature
about other poets.

Poets hell-bent on the pursuit
of pleasure in dark times.

Poets feeding on other poets and their
hot and tasty poems.

Poets checking out other poets on all the social medias and available video clips on YouTube.

Poets getting addicted to other poets,
on a personal basis, such is their
obsession with their work.

Poets falling in love with poets on the
strength of their last collection.

Poets yearning until they puke.

Poets getting confused with the
fantasy and reality of a romantic or,
more than likely, non-romantic,
situation.

Poets agreeing that this is better than
nothing.

Poets' hearts being insanely crushable.

Poets being undeniably fuckable.

Poets seriously considering having sex with other poets based on their excellent word choices.

Poets being turned on by the physical appearance of a poet, but immediately turned off, once they realise they write traditional verse.

Poets breaking out in hives at the mere
mention of traditional verse.

Poets getting seduced by the sheer size
of other poets' oeuvres.

Unmarried poets having inappropriate
feelings for married poets and vice
versa.

Poets living for the fact that they
might be getting inappropriate feelings
back.

Poets alternately crying and masturbating, so that both activities are engaged in some kind of a tag team.

Poets wishing that their high-quality sexual techniques could somehow be translated to the page.

Poets wishing their high-quality sexual techniques could be enjoyed by anyone other than themselves during a pandemic.

Poets wishing their high-quality sexual techniques could somehow improve their actual poetry and save them from a never-ending edit on a piece they've been working on non-stop for two weeks now, so they can finally take a shower.

Poets wishing their high-quality sexual techniques amounted to more than what they have seen performed by their neighbour's dog on the legs of their neighbour's relations at Christmas every year other than 2020.

Poets dying their pubic hair
aquamarine.

Poets finding ancient artefacts inside
their vaginas due to the lack of action
in 2020.

Poets being ostracised for having too large a penis, other poets being insanely jealous.

Poets making inappropriate
comments at an online hoe-down.

Poets getting blacklisted from
weddings for reciting poetry
constructed from readers' sex stories
in porn mags.

Poets

Kazoos on Mondays

The Candy Floss

Pink candyfloss began forming like mould around the kitchen. I'd wipe it away, treating myself to a mouthful here and there, as it seemed a shame to waste it, but it would only reform again. It was so pointless to try clearing it, I decided to start a stall out front. I'd been out of work a while now, so it was a godsend, really. The candyfloss was of an exceptionally high quality, and there was plenty of it, so it wasn't long before wholesalers and distributors got in contact and I had several propositions on the table. I hired an agent, as I was feeling a little out of my depth, and tried to avoid speaking to reporters in too much detail, while I was still working it all out. A few months in, life was pretty good, things were up and running and my produce was gaining *quite* the reputation. Then one morning I woke up and the candyfloss had vanished. For a couple of days I tried to ride it out, kept taking meetings and processing purchase ledger invoices, until it became clear to my clients that I was unable to fulfil a single order. I went back to my previous life the best I could, but if I saw the colour pink I would burst into tears. I had to invent a pair of glasses which eliminated pink from my vision, and it was this very invention that finally brought me the success for which I'd always yearned.

The Swimming Pool

Sandra had been dreaming of this pool ever since she walked out on her husband and daughter, specifically to model herself on Juliette Binoche's character, Julie, in *Three Colours Blue*. Julie loses her husband and daughter in a fatal car accident - Sandra thought walking out on her family, rather than recreating the accident, was kinder. Now she would swim like Julie every morning and wait for her dead/ex-husband's music to startle her profoundly, as she got in and out of the pool. Unfortunately, as her ex wrote copyright-free music for line-dancing classes, when it came, the effect wasn't as dramatic as Julie's husband's classical compositions. So not all aspects of the plan were coming together as she'd hoped. However, she was able to take a loft apartment in Paris like Julie's, as she had started blackmailing an old schoolteacher, Mr XXX, for a minor indiscretion. He was from old money, and had a chequered past that he was starting to get quite edgy about, in the current climate, so things were certainly working out well in that respect.

The Toll Booth

Cars are rocked by ghouls. Kids in vehicles get possessed. Sometimes cars of entire families disappear. Lightning strikes the booth continually, which means the electronic equipment is unreliable. This can be distracting for the poor sod cashing up at the end of the day, who's already sure to be out-of-sorts, being terrorised by ghosts walking through the walls of the booth and so forth. Then there's the stress of demons and the undead taking passive aggressive to a *whole* new level and the issue of packed lunches turning to black dust on entry. No food can be eaten throughout the day, it's a nightmare. The staff have taken to stopping at McDonalds on the way to work to stock up on calories, but cholesterol levels are getting worrying. Two toll assistants lost to heart attacks this year already! Well, I say lost, they're now based at the booth more so than before, but in a different form. Me? I'm more of a foreman here, really, overseeing the project. This has been my land since 1582.

The French Kissers

The French Kissers worked their way around the house party. First the sofa, then the kitchen, then outside the toilet. Party goers were getting tired of this and had a word with the host and got them chucked out. They never stopped throughout the whole process and were out on the drive French kissing for the rest of the party. When people left, some stragglers thought it would be funny to chuck them in the back of Brad's pick-up truck and dump them somewhere, maybe in the town fountain. Such is the way with these things, it all got out of hand and they ended up dropping them into the quarry. Regretting it the next morning, sober, they went back to get them out. When they arrived, the couple were still French kissing, but, it was too late, they had turned to stone.

The Caveman

In his younger days, he'd studied prehistoric man and cave art and rock formations and had written a book on insects that live underground. He'd gone potholing, given tours of underwater caverns and talks on darkness. He was very well versed in darkness. He'd written a collection of poems based on the underworld, was a specialist on the Greek myths and Orpheus and Eurydice and had given a paper on the echo at the Leeds International Echo Conference 2017, which was very well received, and had written his second book of poems, all varying responses to Christina Rossetti's 'Echo', off the back of that. In more recent times, he'd stopped writing and had given up his clothes and possessions, everything other than an authentic animal-skin smock he'd bought at a Prehistoric Man convention in Stroud, back in 1995, and a couple of Neolithic bones. He now spent most of his time drawing on the walls of his London flat, hunting foxes by night, cooking them over small managed fires in his living room, devouring them keenly, without the aid of utensils. He knew his ways were unconventional, sure, but he wouldn't have minded an invite to the *occasional* party.

The Brain

It had once belonged to someone of great importance, the owner of the hotel said, no-one whose name Jackie and Danny recognised. They found this impressive though, and quite splendid how it was mounted on the wall. Although, they didn't like the way it actively morphed, thus suggesting it was still alive. This *was* their honeymoon, after all, and it didn't feel terribly romantic *or* sexy. They were discussing whether to ask the manager to remove it, or at least move *them* to a different room, when the brain started crying, begging them to stay, and for them to stay, too. The brain was quite charming in its misery and desperation, so after a lovely evening, just the three of them, Jackie and Danny decided to take it home, possibly with a view to adopt, if the manager agreed, that is. Not as innocent as it sounds though. Jackie and Danny had a highly competitive nature when it came to pub quizzes, and there was a year's worth of Toby Carvery vouchers up for grabs at the upcoming quiz on Monday.

The Best Friend

When I met her, I knew my problems were over. No longer would I be hitting the dive bars solo on Mondays, playing kazoo to patrons for attention; consuming several roast chickens alone by moonlight on Tuesdays (lunar phase and weather depending); crying myself to slumber on a Wednesday, after watching the entire *Prisoner Cell Block H* box set again, alone in my custom-made blue uniform; chewing batteries for kicks on Thursdays; organising my extensive walk-in muumuu, slacks, bum bag, chaps and wax jacket wardrobe on Fridays, and spending whatever weekends I could afford at Butlins Minehead, collecting the autographs of all the hosts and compères that didn't have restraining orders on me yet. In the past, at home, sometimes I had dined with a blow-up doll at the table in my window, laughing and throwing back my hair, making sure that no-one would know how lonely I was. But now, having a buddy, well, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I keep driving by her house at night, watching and waiting for her to realise that I'm the best thing that's ever happened to her, too.

