

A Life in Lines

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# A Life in Lines: Katherine Mansfield and New Forms of Biography

Anna Jackson

‘She would write long, passionate texts to her high-school crush, / then screw up her eyes and ask me to press “send” / quickly before she changed her mind’.<sup>1</sup> This is not a scene you would find in a conventional biography of Katherine Mansfield. But these lines from Nina Powles’s poem ‘If Katherine Mansfield were my best friend’ offer an approach to biography that can be found not only in her work but in Helen Rickerby’s poetry collection *My Iron Spine*, and in Sarah Laing’s graphic memoir, *Mansfield and Me*, as in verse biographies more generally.<sup>2</sup> ‘Verse biography’, or poetry collections that present biographical accounts of historical people, has been recognised as a genre only recently. The 2016 essay collection *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, edited by Helen Rickerby, Angelina Sbrroma and myself, is the first scholarly work in the field.<sup>3</sup> Yet the last two decades have seen a tremendous number of verse biographies published. Ruth Padel’s 2009 *Darwin: A life in poems* has received considerable critical attention, not only as a collection of poetry but, as Richard Holmes puts it in a *Guardian* review: ‘a complete miniature biography of the great man’. With its ‘unique sense of drama, speed and poetic intensity’, Holmes suggests, this collection might represent ‘a new species of biography’.<sup>4</sup> If it is a new species, however, it is a new species with a sizeable population, including Jane Holland’s *Boudicca* (2006), Robert Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), Jordie Albiston’s *The Book of Ethel* (2013), Chris Tse’s *How to be Dead in a Year of*

*Snakes* (2014) and Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* (2015), among many others.<sup>5</sup> The intersection of the lyric and the biographical – two very different impulses – leads to a number of recurring and resonant effects, as poets reinvent biography in terms of intimacy and affection, centring narratives around interiority, silence, absence and transcendence, but also around mirroring and movement, and imagery of freezing and burning, imprisonment and escape.<sup>6</sup> We find poets bringing themselves into the picture, and bringing their subjects into the present day. Many verse biographers find themselves capturing – and captured by – the life of more than one subject. Nina Powles is a young New Zealand poet who has also lived in China and is now living in London, whose second collection of poetry, *Luminescent* (2017), brings together five different chapbooks, enclosed in a beautiful slip-cover, each chapbook about the life of one historical woman. One of the five chapbooks, 'Sunflowers', is made up of twelve poems about Katherine Mansfield. The collection includes several poems written in the first person, describing herself responding to Mansfield's writing, visiting the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace on Tinakori Road, visiting the National Library, remembering the Katherine Mansfield Park and her earliest encounter with Katherine Mansfield's name. Others are written in the third person, recounting moments in Mansfield's life, and sometimes, too, she uses the second person – 'there you are in your bright dress' she writes about the Anne Estelle Rice portrait of Mansfield – 'Your eyes', she writes, 'blaze towards a point in the distance, past everything in the room around you, past me standing here in the half-moon circle of your ruby luminescence'.<sup>7</sup>

This shifting perspective, the intimacy of address, the personal involvement, the interest both in regarding the facts of Mansfield's life, and in regarding the regard of Mansfield herself, the looking both ways, is something we find again and again in verse biography, when poets write about the lives of others. Perhaps more surprising is how characteristic, too, is the imagery of burning and luminescence. 'Firelight', the first poem in the series

brings together burning and erasure, another common image in verse biography, as Powles writes about Mansfield burning her papers:

**FIRELIGHT**

London, 1911

I see a girl with firelit eyes and flushed cheeks.  
She plucks a letter from the pile,  
flings it into the flames,  
watches it curl and crumple up inside itself.  
Just then a single moth  
flutters through the open window,  
dives straight into the heat,  
leaves nothing behind but burnt dust.  
How easy that would be,  
she thinks, steadily watching  
the ink being swallowed by the blue heat.  
Some words take longer than others to disappear.  
'Some words,' she writes, 'take longer than others to  
disappear'.<sup>8</sup>

The concern with lost papers of course is very much a biographer's concern, the impossibility of not hoping, for instance, that one of those Sylvia Plath journals Ted Hughes 'lost' might turn up, the wish that Mansfield had not burnt the 'huge complaining diaries' of her adolescence.<sup>9</sup> But an interest in loss, absence, silence, and empty space is central to lyric poetry and as such takes on a particular resonance in poetry. Alice Oswald suggests space is as important to poetry as the words themselves: 'One of the differences between poetry and prose is that poetry is beyond words. Poetry is only there to frame the silence. There is silence between each verse and silence at the end'.<sup>10</sup> In verse biography, the particular silences of the biographical record, the absence of the biographical subject, and the gap between the

biographical subject and the biographer, are brought into productive play with the silences that poetry frames, the space beyond words.

One of the poems in the 'Sunflowers' chapbook, 'Lucid Dream', is an erasure poem in which Powles takes a page from Mansfield's journal and masks most of the words so you cannot quite see them. Or, to put it the other way round, as Paula Green puts it in her description of this and the other erasure poems in *Luminescent*, 'blocks of ghostly grey enable certain words to shine out as a poem'. Green writes that she 'pictured the whole journal translated into grey-veil poems', finding the journal entry of 'Lucid Dream' particularly suited to this form which adds, she suggests, 'to the dream-like state of shiver and float'.<sup>11</sup> Powles actually used sellotape to mask the words that appear as shadowy forms in the erasure texts, but to me it gives the appearance of looking through glass, or time, and, indeed, one of the lines in this poem reads 'Time [...] was shaken out of me'.<sup>12</sup> This sense of time as something that has come loose, allowing a connection between the biographer-reader and the writer-subject that is, however, fragmentary, contingent, and piecemeal recurs again and again in Powles's writing and in verse biography more generally. Often it is connected with the sense of erasure, of 'ghosting', as when Chris Orsman brings all these concepts together in his verse biography *South* through his use of the term in the photographic sense: 'I'd like to say / that when they'd gone // the plates developed / no faces, // only ghosting'.<sup>13</sup>

The burning scene that represents erasure in 'Firelight' however connects as much with other scenes of burning, brightness, flames and brilliance across Powles's verse biographies not only of Mansfield but also of the other subjects in the *Luminescent* collection, most obviously in the chapbook *Her and the Flames* about a young dancer who sustained fatal burns in a fire on stage during a performance but also in poems about Beatrice Tinsley, the astronomer, and Betty Guard, a whaler's wife, whom Powles imagines fascinated by bioluminescence, and lit up by the

candles and oil-lamps running on whale tallow.<sup>14</sup> Again and again, burning appears in these poems as a vividness – the ‘bright flickering pictures’ Powles remembers from reading Mansfield’s stories; the brilliant colours of the Van Gogh exhibition experienced by Mansfield as a ‘shaking free’; the dream lighting of Mansfield’s pear tree dream in the poem ‘Silver dream’; the Anne Estelle Rice portrait ‘a flare of red’:

**THE PORTRAIT**

Anne Estelle Rice’s Portrait of Katherine Mansfield, 1918

A flare of red and there you are in your bright dress  
the colour of pōhutukawa flowers.  
Huge blooms burst out of the frame  
into the air that separates us, their petals like gasps of  
light.  
Your eyes blaze towards a point in the distance,  
past everything in the room around you,  
past me standing here in the half-moon circle  
of your ruby luminescence,  
as if you have just seen straight down  
into the core of the dark pink light,  
pulling the colour apart,  
splitting it open.<sup>15</sup>

Vividness also characterises the Katherine Mansfield presented in Helen Rickerby’s 2008 collection *My Iron Spine*, which is the subject of the next section of this essay. Rickerby is one of New Zealand’s leading poets who began publishing her work in the 1990s and whose most recent work is *Cinema*, published by Mākarō Press in 2014. She is also an editor of the poetry press Seraph Press, and was the designer, editor and publisher of Powles’s *Luminescent*. Rickerby has had a long fascination with Mansfield, one of several biographical figures, nearly all women, she writes about in *My Iron Spine*. The collection also includes one of the few poems she has written from a male perspective, a poem

in the voice of John Middleton Murry, which captures his cowardice and sentimentality, but also his yearning for what he lost in not loving Mansfield better. Called ‘Married to Genius’, the poem begins ‘To be honest / I didn’t want / to marry her / at all’.<sup>16</sup> The section I will quote from towards the end of this three-page poem draws on the same imagery of burning we find in Powles’s writing, and makes explicit the connection with inspiration that perhaps is behind all these instances of the imagery in verse biographies that are as concerned, after all, with the necessary inspiration of the writer-biographer as with the inspiration that drove their subjects on:

On bad days I thought  
our fire had only ever been  
the delusional sizzle  
of a trick candle  
But the fire  
burning in her chest  
was constant, drove her on  
She wrote faster  
and faster, she  
glowed with it<sup>17</sup>

In this poem, as in many verse biographies, Helen Rickerby writes in the first person voice as the biographical subject. In an interview with Tim Jones about the collection, Rickerby explains:

I’m really interested in people’s lives, and in biography, which isn’t quite the same thing as someone’s actual life – it’s an attempt to turn someone’s life into a coherent narrative. I guess a biography is to a person what a map is to place. I suppose these poems are like that too.<sup>18</sup>

Yet if these poems are, necessarily, maps rather than complete representations, they are subtle and complex maps, in which Rickerby’s interest in ‘imagining the character, how they might sound’ is combined with her interest in how, as an author, she

might 'interpret them, highlight aspects of their story or personality'.<sup>19</sup> 'Married to Genius' circles around Murry's own failures as a husband to Mansfield, offering a rich psychological portrait open to a range of interpretations – is it a sympathetic portrait or a damning portrait? – but ends with him imagining things could have been different:

I dream now  
that I didn't turn away  
but instead gasped her in  
as her body burned  
her mind flamed<sup>20</sup>

Many of Rickerby's poems show the same sharp insight she shows here into the psychology of her subjects, and many, too, show a similar interest in dream, in delusion, in what drives writers, in burning, again, and, often, in erasure. But she is interested, too, in partying, and the present. The poem which ends the collection, 'Partying with Katherine Mansfield', brings Rickerby herself and Katherine Mansfield together, Mansfield, she writes: 'pulling me up by my arm / to the dance floor'.<sup>21</sup> It is a vivid and funny portrayal of Mansfield and her contemporaries, Mansfield's purple stockings on display, D. H. Lawrence finding an ironing board they can use as a slide, the cool night air coming in through the open window. The poem ends with "It's a new world," she says / "We mustn't live as if it isn't", which is also the work of verse biography, to make new and to bring to life those people whose lives somehow do essential work for our own imaginations.<sup>22</sup>

The introduction to Sarah Laing's graphic memoir/biography, *Mansfield and Me*, might suggest that there is something a little adolescent about such idolisation.<sup>23</sup> A drawing of herself standing next to Katherine Mansfield, both of them with arms folded, eyeing each other up a little balefully, is placed opposite a page of drawing representing other such 'crushes' in Laing's life, from her nine-year-old passion for gymnast Olga Korbut, to her adolescent passions for, in turn, Madonna, Morrissey and Frida Kahlo:

people, she writes, 'I might become if I obsessed about them enough'.<sup>24</sup> Idolisation is, for the adolescent, very much connected to identity and the work of 'becoming'. Yet Laing's passionate engagement with both the writing and the life of Katherine Mansfield has produced a graphic memoir that looks back to childhood and adolescence in order to understand her place in the world and her ambitions as a writer, now, as an adult, a partner, a mother of three, the author of several extraordinary works of literary fiction and an artist whose diary comics constantly move between observation and self-reflection.

*Mansfield and Me* intersperses beautifully rendered stories from Mansfield's own life, with stories from Sarah's own life, in relation to readings of Mansfield's stories 'At the Bay', 'Prelude', 'Her First Ball', 'An Indiscreet Journey', 'The Fly', and 'The Doll's House'. This is a different kind of a life in lines, yet with its own take not only on biography but on the lyric, and it has been interesting to see how many of the same impulses we find in verse biography can also be found in Sarah's graphic memoir. 'The Doll's House' is the final story illustrated by Laing in this memoir, and it is followed by three concluding pages of memoir that return us to Laing's own life in the present day as she hurries in her jeans and sweater to the primary school where she will pick up her children. Thinking about the story and Else's delight in seeing the little lamp, and thinking about Mansfield's career as a writer alongside her own ambitions, she writes, 'I don't need to be famous [...]'. But I would like someone to really see me'.<sup>25</sup> Her children, of course, are happy to see her, but what they want to do is show her what they themselves have made. And then, looking into the tiny houses her son, another artist, has made out of sticks and leaves, she sees the tiny figure of Katherine Mansfield, once again lighting the little lamp [see figure 1]. If to be 'really seen' and to 'really see' is always the impulse of the lyric poem generally, and verse biography particularly, it makes sense for a writer and artist like Sarah to find in the graphic memoir the perfect form for this work.

The memoir as a whole is organised around the chronology of Laing's own life, and the resonances she finds between her life, Mansfield's life, and the selected Mansfield stories she illustrates. She uses colour for the illustrations of her own life, while most of the biographical scenes of Mansfield's life are rendered in black and white. Scenes of her own childhood, visiting her grandparents in York Bay just around the corner from Mansfield's Days Bay, and scenes of Mansfield's childhood playing in the sand with her brother Leslie, vividly evoke the intense imaginative life of a child, drawing on details from Mansfield's stories and journals but also adding her own sympathetic reconstruction and observation of childhood emotion and imagination. The first transition from autobiographical memoir to biographical account of Mansfield's life is presented as a kind of magical time-slip, in which the swimming child-self of Laing, drifting on the surface of the sea, transforms into the black bathing-suited Kathleen, Mansfield's child-self, drifting on the same sea that, as she swims deeper, loses its colour and becomes the black and white wash of the biography illustrations that follow. This section begins with a survey of the Beauchamp family on the sand, the sturdy Pa-man deciding how far out he will swim, the languid Annie reading her book and closed off from the family around her, the children each with their name drawn above them on the page like an annotated family photograph. As we move closer in, Leslie approaches Kathleen to ask what she was doing. The conventional castle-building she seems to have been engaged in is revealed to be the creation of a palace for the enchanted Scheherazade in her protection. A close-up of the Scheherazade figure, a few sketched lines, shows her to be a piece of driftwood – yet the enchanted figure can be recognised even in those few lines. In representing the work of the child as the making and breaking of enchantments, Laing nicely connects the way in which her own childhood memories might resonate with Mansfield's and how their adult work as writers might continue the work of childhood.

As Laing has said in an interview about the book with Cheri Lucas Rowlands: 'I find it interesting how you can find intersections with the most extraordinary lives – as humans, we are always looking for ways to connect'.<sup>26</sup> This idea of an intersection between the writer and the biographical subject is central to the genre of verse biography, and often highlighted in the way verse biographies are structured, as in Rickerby's *My Iron Spine*, in which a more autobiographical first section is followed by the verse biographies of the second section, then, in the third section, poems like 'Partying with Katherine Mansfield' bring together the writer and the subjects of her biographical obsessions in scenes that are imagined, yet informed by factual details and psychological insights; or as in *Luminescent*, with its multiple perspectives, personal commentaries, and the shifting pronouns of poems written in the first person of the poet herself, poems adopting the first person of the biographical subject, poems in the second and third persons, and poems erasing or drawing on the biographical subject's own writing. As Australian poet Jordie Albiston has written about her own biographical works: 'Jean Lee is about me. Botany Bay Document is about me. These people whom I write about are my way of disguising the "I" [...]. It's a conceit I think all poets employ'.<sup>27</sup> Of course, conventional prose biographers also often identify with their subjects, or find writing biography inevitably involves thinking through the self; as biographer John Ritchie has written: a 'biography is always apt to become more than an exploration of one's subject; it becomes, at every step, an exploration of the author's self, making it a journey of self-discovery in the company of one's subject'.<sup>28</sup> But, as Jessica L. Wilkinson writes:

More so than other forms of biographical writing, biographical poetry brings the relationship of the author and subject to the foreground, not only in the way the poet negotiates, arranges and presents factual details, but

also in the way that the poet's personal style constitutes part of the 'vehicle' conveying the narrative.<sup>29</sup>

This is true to a striking extent of Laing's graphic memoir, in which the factual details of Mansfield's life are negotiated and arranged in relation to the concerns and history of Laing's own life, and in which Laing's style of ink-wash drawings always involves, as in Rickerby's poetry, the interpretation and highlighting of details and the expression of emotion not only through the expressions and gestures of the characters she draws but in the emotion conveyed through the movement of lines on the page, the sweep of a brushstroke, the particularity of a close-up, the contrast between sketched out backgrounds and precisely attended to details. In a comic presented on her blog *Let Me Be Frank* – a kind of graphic diary – she foregrounds this sense of the 'intersection' between her life and Mansfield by inventing a fictional scenario like those in poems by Powles and Rickerby, imagining Mansfield peering over her shoulder as she plays with her new i-phone, and castigating her for wasting time when she should be getting on with the graphic memoir. In this scene, Laing presents herself as unapologetic, taking a selfie with Mansfield to Mansfield's frowning disapproval. But, as Laing herself writes in a commentary on the comic, the Mansfield she draws is really 'my inner critic manifested'.<sup>30</sup> Towards the end of *Mansfield and Me*, she allows a similar manifestation of a fictionalised Mansfield into the present tense of the memoir, drawing Mansfield in colour now, talking to Sarah about the publication of her first book of fiction: 'Well, there were moments of brilliance. But really, I think you over-egged it. And there were stories you should have just left out. But still, you have time...'.<sup>31</sup>

In another comic about Mansfield, published in *Five Dials*, Laing explores Mansfield's own anxieties about 'all those clever literary people', happy to invite her to their parties, to let her entertain them, but not taking her seriously as a writer. She draws Mansfield stepping into the bath, then with her hair swirling

around her, becoming a mass of black snakes, as Mansfield worries: 'I haven't even written anything decent yet [...]. When will I be a proper writer?'<sup>32</sup> These, of course, we know from the memoir, are Laing's worries too, even after she begins to publish her fiction. Yet even when Mansfield appears explicitly as a fictionalised speaker for Laing's own anxieties, as in the scene when she judges Laing has 'over-egged' some of her stories, her characterisation draws equally on Laing's knowledge of, and understanding of, Mansfield's own personal writing in her letters and journals. The consolation she leaves Laing with – 'But still, you have time...' – is a consolation she herself could not share.

Lyric poetry is defined by its interiority, and interiority is one of the most important characteristics distinguishing verse biography from prose biography. Biographers necessarily focus on external events that have been recorded and while they can quote from their subject's own writings, they can only speculate about their thoughts and feelings, acknowledging their limitations with phrases like 'may have felt', 'may well have recalled', and so on. Too many such phrases and the biographer may be felt to overstep their authority. This necessarily external perspective distances the reader in a way that is very different from the intimacy offered by lyric poetry. As Anne Williams writes: 'The lyric perspective is one from which we all experience "reality"; the peculiarity of the lyric poem is that it allows us to assume the perspective of another individual consciousness'.<sup>33</sup> In *Mansfield and Me*, Laing shows that drawing offers another powerful medium for assuming another perspective, and for illustrating the interiority of another person. Literally, of course, drawing involves perspective, and I've already touched on the ways Laing uses perspective to suggest Mansfield's priorities of attention, her view of the world, its vistas and its close-up details. But drawing allows, too, the illustration of things not in the material world, the illustration of the metaphorical writing and imaginative thinking she finds in Mansfield's letters and journals. She draws, for instance, Mansfield as a fly, with a fly body and Mansfield's face and haircut, dripping milk into a milk

puddle – ‘I feel like a fly who has been dropped into the milk jug’ – or as a duck’s reflection, the duck itself sailing pensively on the surface of the water, the reflection showing the duck’s body headed up with Mansfield’s own pensive face (while another duck nearby quacks with a much more thoughtless, while outspoken, expression).<sup>34</sup>

Amongst the more unsettling, and moving, illustrations are those of Mansfield preparing for the wedding with John Middleton Murry, after ‘she came back to me / a coughing skeleton’ as Rickerby’s Murry recalls this time in ‘Married to Genius’. Both Rickerby and Laing include the detail of Murry wiping his lips on a handkerchief after the wedding kiss. But in Laing’s illustrations, Mansfield is already picturing herself as the skeletal bride Murry feared before that moment. She draws her getting dressed, looking at her face from one angle then another as she adjusts her veil, one moment looking drawn and anxious, the next large-eyed and wary, then pensive and almost demure, and then as a skull, looking out from under the veil as she draws her stockings over her feet. Biography, of course, is always a somewhat uncanny genre, whether or not it is seen as ‘bringing to life’ or ‘calling up the dead’ (‘Like any form of seance, this can be a dodgy business’, comments biographer Hilary Spurling)<sup>35</sup> or as the replacement of the historical reality with a fictionalised construct: as Russell Coldicutt unnervingly describes biography: ‘The body [...] insofar as it is the stuff of blood, bones and ligaments, is the raw material acted on by fictions [...] produced in language’.<sup>36</sup> In verse biography, this sense of unease about the uncanny work of biography is often made apparent through the recurrent metaphors of burning and erasure that are found in Nina Powles’s *Luminescent* chapbooks. Common across verse biography as a genre, too, are metaphors of haunting, and imprisonment.

But of course, as the verse novelist (and verse biographer) Dorothy Porter has observed, all writing can be said to share this uncanny quality of calling up the dead:

There is something very unsettling about a book. Uncanny. A book written by a dead author – and most are (indeed there will come a time when I'm a dead author myself) – is nothing less than a haunted house, which lures the reader into a conversation with a loquacious, enchanting ghost. We forget how mysterious, verging on the supernatural, reading is.<sup>37</sup>

Dorothy Porter's take on this uncanny effect brings us back, however, to the word enchantment, and brings it into relation with the equally important idea of conversation. All of these texts – Sarah Laing's *Mansfield and Me*, Helen Rickerby's *My Iron Spine*, and Nina Powles' *Luminescent* – bring the writer into conversation with a Katherine Mansfield both fictionalised and based on factual detail, both enchanting and uncanny, belonging to a watercoloured past yet re-imagined in the present. While she drew on 'vigorous research', Laing says, 'I wanted my graphic novel to be different from a conventional biography, which is chronological and includes lots of detail, [so] I had to figure out how to linger in the moments and be more cinematic'.<sup>38</sup> Laing describes this 'linger[ing] in the moments' as cinematic, an obviously appropriate analogy for a graphic artist but true, too, of the way Rickerby and Powles both present scenes from Mansfield's life, whether factual or imaginary. At the same time, to linger in moments could describe, too, how lyric poetry works and how poetry, like the cinema, moves beyond the chronological approach of conventional biography. The poem, Sharon Cameron suggests, 'must push its way into the dimensions of the moment, pry apart its walls and reveal the discovered space there to be as complex as the long corridors of historical and narrative time'.<sup>39</sup> The discovered spaces of all three of the texts discussed in this article open up the dimensions of the moment, luring the reader into conversations with the past, with the writers, and with Mansfield's words, stories, and life history. The ending of Laing's *Mansfield and Me* offers the perfect image for this concept of lyric

time, with the tiny constructed interior space of Laing's son's model house expanded through a gaze sympathetic enough, enchanted and enchanting enough, to make room for the imagined figure of Mansfield herself to once again, in the timeless present tense of the artwork, light the lamp.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nina Mingya Powles, *Sunflowers: Katherine Mansfield 1888–1923*, a chapbook included as one of five chapbooks in a boxed set, *Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017), p. 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Helen Rickerby, *My Iron Spine* (Wellington: HeadworX, 2008); Sarah Laing, *Mansfield and Me* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbruma, eds., *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Ruth Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009); Richard Holmes, 'Giving to a Blind Man Eyes', *Guardian*, 14 March 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/14/darwin-life-poems-ruth-padel>> [accessed 16 November 2018].
- <sup>5</sup> Jane Holland, *Boudicca* (Cromer: Salt, 2006); Robert Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002); Jordie Albiston, *The Book of Ethel* (Glebe, NSW: Puncher and Wattman, 2013); Chris Tse, *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014); Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015). Indeed, even the species made up of verse biographies of Charles Darwin has several members of the population, with Emily Ballou's *The Darwin Poems* (University of Western Australia Publishing) and Kelley Swain's *Darwin's Microscope* (Flambard) both published, like Padel's *Darwin*, in 2009, and Claire Orchard's 2016 collection *Cold Water Cure* (Wellington: Victoria University Press) likewise – and quite

independently – constructed around a series of poems taking Darwin’s life and writings as a starting point. Other verse biographies include Amy Brown’s *Odour of Sanctity* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013), Dorothy Porter’s *Akhenaten* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2008), Edward Sanders’ *Chekhov* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1995) and *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), Craig Raine’s *History: The Home Movie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), Airini Beautrais’s *Dear Neil Roberts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014), and Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver: A Life in Poems* (Asheville, NC: Front Street, 2001), amongst others.

- 6 Much of this imagery intersects, such as the imagery of freezing and imprisonment: Amy Brown, inhabiting the voice of Christina Rossetti in her collection *Odour of Sanctity*, suggests, ‘On my frozen face, / shallow breath and blank mind / thoughts might alight’. For Jennifer Maiden, as she describes the project of biographical poetry in the title poem of *Liquid Nitrogen*, ‘the poem provides the frozen dream / in which the two can talk again, inspirer / and inspired’. Chris Orsman variously figures the work of *South* as an act of dubbing, ventriloquism, selection, repetition, a stealthy transgression, a religious homage, a covenant, a meeting, but a meeting without understanding, emotions frozen on the faces. The ‘many ways of being held prisoner’ described in Anne Carson’s ‘The Glass Essay’ include the poet’s identification with Emily Bronte, in the landscape of the moors, frozen ‘like a jailed face’. See my ‘Introduction’, in Jackson, Rickerby and Sbroma, eds, p. 25.
- 7 Powles, *Sunflowers*, p. 7.
- 8 Powles, *Sunflowers*, p. 5.
- 9 Ted Hughes describes a notebook of Plath’s as having ‘disappeared’, in his Foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Ballantine, 1982), xv; the reference to the ‘huge, complaining diaries’ is to *Notebooks 2*, p. 58.
- 10 Alice Oswald, ‘Into the Woods’. Interview by Kate Kellaway, *Guardian*, 9 June 2005.

- 11 Paula Green, 'Poetry Shelf reviews Nina Powles's *Luminescent* – Every poem is a jewel of a thing', *Poetry Shelf*, 30 September 2017 <<https://nzpoetryshelf.com/2017/09/30/poetry-shelf-reviews-nina-powles-luminescent-every-poem-is-a-jewel-of-a-thing/>> [accessed 16 November 2018].
- 12 Powles, *Sunflowers*, p. 10.
- 13 Chris Orsman, *South* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996), p. 65.
- 14 Powles, 'Her and the Flames: Phyllis Porter, 1904–1923', 'The Glowing Space Between the Stars: Beatrice Tinsley, 1941–1981' and 'Whale Fall: Betty Guard, 1814–1870', in *Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017).
- 15 Powles, *Sunflowers*, p. 7.
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