

ANIMATING POETRY: WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?

CREATION & CRITIQUE OF SHARED LANGUAGE IN POETRY ANIMATION

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed analysis of an example of personal practice in the creation of collaborative contemporary *poetry animation* as an example of *Ecstatic Truth*. It cites a rationale for translation, transcription and remodeling of poems into new animated visual and sonic experiences. This investigation into creation and critique of shared language between poetry and animation includes critical commentary and some historical context, as well as supplying comparative exemplars from poets, animators and collaborators. It suggests that *poetry animation* is an emergent genre in its own right, and that this has expanding potential for engaging specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Keywords: *poetry-animation, poet, animator, animation history, poetic-language, image-text, sound-scape*

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I am an animator who creates poetry films from historical and contemporary poetic sources. My interest is not in the literal representation of the poem, but in developing a balanced, interpretative, temporal audiovisual language that connects the viewer to the poet and the poem. In this way, the content and context of the written poem is translated, transcribed, or remodeled into a new visual and sonic experience. In order to achieve this, I first undertake detailed analysis of potential meaning and impact through close reading of the poem, as well as studying artefacts and documents relating to the poem, the poet and the subject. This immersive reading might involve the study of timing, rhythm, language construction, emotive juxtaposition, simile and metaphor, as well as consideration of cultural, geographic and historic contexts. Such detailed documentary research gives informed context to development of visual imagination. This paper will explore some aspects of my own animation practice including material from conversations with collaborators, as well as a more general investigation into creation and critique of shared language between poetry and animation. I think it is time that *poetry animation* should be considered as a genre or artform in its own right with the potential for communicating *Ecstatic Truth*. In this paper I am offering a very detailed analysis of a commissioned collaboration with the New Zealand poet Bill Manhire which we undertook in 2016 for 1418NOW, animating poetry written about the First World War, with an introductory examination of historical and contemporary examples of what may be referred to as *poetry animation*.

Poetry Animation

Poets draw upon a historical medium with all the weight of thousands of years of form, structure, sonic and visual description, using metaphor, compressed narratives and rhythm in the service of spectacle and emotion. Animation and sound design are comparatively recent disciplines but they share many of these *poetic* qualities. There is an established history of international practice combining animation and sound to interpret poetry in a range of audio-visual artifacts including

commercial and independent collaborations. Since their inception, TV adverts have regularly featured the rhyming slogan, jingle and animated gag in a highly compressed form of 'poetry and animation'. Examples include Rowntree Murray Mints "*too good to hurry mints*" (Rowntree, 1955), and the Toshiba TV commercial "*Hello Tosh, Gotta Toshiba?*" (Toshiba, 1985). Even in this limited temporal form, the use of strong graphic design, appropriate voice acting and memorable phrasing could embed these commercial micro-animations into the minds of a generation of TV viewers.

Simply-constructed rhyming verse, innovative design and exemplary voice casting are also apparent in Tim Burton's 1982 animated short stop-motion horror film *Vincent*. (Vincent, 1982) Burton's poem, inspired by Dr Seuss's rhyming couplets and Edgar Allan Poe's classic Gothic poem *The Raven*, was voiced by Vincent Price. The use of black and white silhouette and exaggerated perspective led to comparisons with the 1920 German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, but Burton is quoted as saying "it just happens to be shot in black and white, and there's a Vincent Price/Gothic kind of thing that makes it feel that way. I grew up loving Dr Seuss. The rhythm of his stuff spoke to me very clearly." (Salisbury, 2000:19)

Although Burton makes light of the Gothic influence here, this style became a signature aesthetic. The poem and the animated action move back and forth between scenes depicting the eponymous character's murderous imagination and the portrayal of his 'actual' boyhood experiences. A jerky narrative is enhanced by changes in lighting and the use of amorphous puppetry; continuity is aided by Price's smooth vocal delivery and a visually undemanding monochrome palette. The film was an instant success with adult and child audiences across the world and became a cult phenomenon. Artistically speaking, it was a testing ground for elements used in Burton's future stop-motion and live action productions.

Burton's early film provides an unusual example of the *animator as poet*. More recently, in 2012, animator and filmmaker Oliver Harrison created an award-winning animated typographical poem *Apocalypse Rhyme*, taking on the role of poet, animator and sound designer. His voiceless, monochrome, letter by letter exploration of a modern apocalypse bears a powerful message. In an interview with Lucy Feibusch, Harrison notes that, "the simplicity of a rhyme lures the listener in and makes serious content more palatable, yet, not any less thought provoking. A rhyme is a verbal Trojan Horse." (Feibusch, 2014) Feibusch describes the piece thus: "The short film is a kinetic typographical poem, a medium which boasts exciting potential for the development of literature in this technological era." (Feibusch, 2014)

In both Burton and Harrison's examples of animator turned poet, a very simple form of poetry is imbued with powerful narrative impact through the animator's skills in innovative screen design, style, rhythm and timing. Burton employs caricature, music and voice to create a tiny horror film, and Harrison uses masterful animated calligraphy to convey genuine contemporary fear in an unsettling sonic world. Like other successful poetry animation they leave space for the audience to make their own aural, visual and cerebral connections during the temporal experience.

At the other end of the spectrum of *poetry animation* practice, YouTube yields a massive appropriation of poetry as a basis for popular 'outsider art' animation. For instance, a google search for "Sylvia Plath animation" will bring up 600 results in half a second, and by removing the quote marks that number increases to 1,450,000. *Poetry animation* is created by poetry fans and by poets themselves, as well as by commercial and independent animators and through interdisciplinary collaborations.

The lion's share of *poetry films* that are currently celebrated on poetry film blogs, and which dominate poetry film festivals,

are written and filmed by living poets. Experimentation with visual form is often evidenced, including animation created and voiced by the *poet as animator*. American poet Martha McCollough, for example, employs mixed-media including collage, rotoscoped sequences, and uncomplicated 2D animation elements. As with animators who write their own simple forms of poetry, some of the poets' animation practice tends towards use of relatively basic approaches, including repetitive looping. (McCollough, 2019)

The American website *motionpoems.org* was started in Minneapolis in 2008 by animator and producer Angella Kassube and poet Todd Boss. The company sets up partnerships between poets and video artists as well as working with publishers, film companies, and literary organisations. Their monthly selection of motion poems is curated by juries at public screenings and although live action productions dominate the site, motion typography and 2D animated films are well represented. Stacey Lynn Brown's poem *Undersong* animated by Matt Smithson of Man vs Magnet is such an example, the lullaby of the voice being accompanied by rotoscoped graphics and synchronous screen text. (*motionpoems*, 2016) The Washington Post sponsored ten micro poetry animations for National Poetry Month in 2016. These were all created as motion graphics using animated typography and simple morphing illustrations.¹ Judging by the number of plays and likes this style of short form *poetry animation* is very popular with a broad audience of online viewers. Legible text and literal pictorial content gives these films the capacity to be watched on a small device, and to be understood with or without sound.

Two examples of highly successful award-winning independent poetry animations include Jonathan Hodgson's interpretation of Charles Bukowski's 1992 poem, *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes*, (Hodgson, 1999) and Ruth Lingford's ideographic visualisation of Larkin's lines read by Bob Geldof in her animation *The Old Fools*. (Lingford, 2002) Both of these

1 Reviewed at <http://discussion.movingpoems.com/2016/04/the-washington-post-sponsors-ten-poetry-animations-for-national-poetry-month/>

films extend poetic metaphor into a sophisticated temporal visual and sonic language, using layers of interpretation that are clearly communicated in the passing moment. The films bear testament to the animators' familiarity with poetry and film language, their ability to illustrate and translate the poem through establishing a clear methodology. These animations have been selected for many international film festivals, shown on broadcast television, and have featured in specialist poetry film festivals. Lingford describes her view on creating poetry animation here:

I think poetry and animation have a really interesting relationship to each other, they're both very compressed forms, very metaphoric and they have this way of colliding familiar elements in order to get new thoughts, new ideas. It seems to me that there's some basic parallel between morphing one thing into another and placing words together to create new meaning. I think the conjunction of poetry and animation is a very useful one because they both seem to have got caught in various corners culturally; poetry's in the 'serious' corner even when it's funny, while animation's in the 'funny' corner even when it's serious. I think having a mix of the two is kind of useful, it helps to flow a bit of air around our expectations of both forms. (Lingford, 2011)

In her introduction to the *Textures of Reality Symposium* 2005, the animator Joan Ashworth proposed that:

Animation can make a unique contribution to the exploration and expression of states of mind, unconscious impulses, sexuality and sensory experience. Unrestricted by the dictates of photographic realism and traditional narrative, animation can make such experience palpable via visual imagination, metaphor, metamorphosis and highly creative use of sound. (Ashworth, 2005)

Lingford's description points to the qualities that animation can bring to poetry: a shift in register, a formal reshaping, a new language. Ashworth's focus on the freedom that animators bring to both visual and sonic elements, and her reference to their creation of a 'palpable' experience could as well be used to describe poetry itself. As a comparison, the writer Italo Calvino refers to animation thus:

It is a metaphorical and metonymic art at one and the same time; it is the art of metamorphosis... and of anthropomorphism... (Calvino, 1987, p. 80)

Calvino's point is that animation transforms the human experience into 'stranger' forms – away from firsthand experience literally bringing life to imagined possibilities.

Through my own experience of animating poetry I would make the observation that animation, like poetry, is a generous artform; it uses minute momentary shape-shifting to convey complex changes to emotional narratives. This extraordinary temporal quality allows for the expression of infinitely expansive ideas through establishing a particular sensory logic. Calvino's observation of the potential of animation is transferable to poetry; the poet's creation of metaphoric and mutable form is intrinsic to their art.

Description and deconstruction of animation is commonly treated as a minor subject within film theory. The practice is often narrowly defined by its traditional forms, although animation encompasses motion graphics, special effects, puppetry, manipulated film and installation, crossing the disciplines of fine art, film and graphic design. Esther Leslie compares the early use of animated typography with Apollinaire's calligrammes, whose formal function she defines as something syncretic: "an object between a poem and a picture". (Leslie, 2002, p. 23) Paul Wells uses literary theory to analyse animated textual adaptations and he observes that "if orthodox animation is about 'prose', then experimental animation

is more 'poetic' and suggestive in its intention". (Wells, 1998, p. 46) Unsurprisingly therefore, since the 1990s, poetry and animation have been emerging very slowly as subjects that may be more critically and aesthetically connected.

Analysis of Practice

My introduction to creating poetry animation began in 2001 when I interviewed Andrew Motion about the inspiration for his short poem *The Lines*. I recorded his voice as he read the poem. He explained that it was written during a bleak part of his life, when his mother was dying in hospital and he was making regular train journeys to see her. He brought a meditation on the history of the railway and the landscape together with terrible sadness of inescapable bereavement in what he described as a "pyx". His poem had become a tiny container of sacred moments from a bitter pilgrimage. He gave permission for the composer Sebastian Castagna to edit and process his recorded voice. This led to the creation of an innovative electro-acoustic soundtrack illustrating train journeys, cold weather and deep sadness described in the poem. The shared mechanical history of trains and typewriters became a focus for the structure of the film. Hayley Winter and I collaborated on animation design and production, inspired literally by each line of the poem, and using text on screen as the continuous 'line' of reference. Animation could morph objects into landscapes, words into weather, the fluid juxtapositions of thoughts expressed in the poem could be represented without being literal. It received some critique as an example of the animated 'subjective correlative' from Paul Wells:

The ontological equivalence of the animated imagery is matched and echoed in the ontological equivalence of human feeling and expression. This readily fits the ideographic logic of the piece as the typographic text – almost a version of concrete poetry – is rendered freely as a fragmented, sometimes seemingly incoherent form representing the discontinuities of grief,

while at the same time maintaining the linear 'inner logic' of the poem through its overarching structure and purpose. (Wells, 2006, p. 90-91)

The Lines was screened on ITV as part of the *First Take* series (2001); it was selected for numerous international festivals including Manchester Poetry Festival and Hamburg Animation Festival, and it was featured in a touring programme *Shooting Rhymes and Cutting Verses* (2003) curated by the British Council for promoting UK Culture across the world. Britpop band Gene used the film as visuals on a concert tour and it was shown in cinemas around the UK as part of the *Sonimation* project which I instigated in 2001, in collaboration with Sonic Arts Network and the Digital Arts Network. The film evidenced great potential for exhibition to diverse audiences. This first experience of creating poetry animation made me curious and excited about clear possibilities inherent in the form.

In 2016 I was selected to take part in a poetry film commission with the New Zealand poet Bill Manhire. The *Fierce Light* project brought together leading poets from countries that participated in the First World War, co-commissioned by 14-18 NOW, Norfolk & Norwich Festival and Writers Centre Norwich. The poets were asked to create new works that *endeavoured to understand the incomprehensible*, and some explored contemporary events through the lens of the First World War. I made an animated film in response to Manhire's poem *Known Unto God* and will share some of that process here. He sent me the poem, which was written as a series of epitaphs for unknown soldiers. He also provided some explanation of his process.

The starting point for me was all the headstones in northern France that simply say "Known unto God". It's clear that "a soldier of the Great War" lies beneath the ground, and it's often clear what his nationality is – but the name is gone entirely. Hence

I've given 11 of those soldiers a brief, quick piece of self-description, though not their names. The 11th section, with the reference to skateboarding, is NZ's 'unknown warrior', who was brought home just a few years ago, and rests in a bi-cultural monument in Wellington. In the early days of re-interment his tomb became a magnet for late-night skateboarders - a fine new object for doing jumps. And then the last three sections (set in the contemporary Mediterranean) are a single voice: I imagine maybe an 11-year-old girl speaking/thinking the words. I've deliberately left it unclear as to whether it's she who drowns, or her parents - or, most likely, all three of them. I've tried to give the various speakers a tone of voice, a little individuality. (Manhire, 2016)

When I offered to send Bill my work in progress for critique, he declined, but gave me some familiar advice about avoiding the literal.

I'll be pleased to be in conversation, but certainly don't want to be too heavily involved in critique. The only thing I hate in poetry films, or when poems are set to music, is relentlessly direct illustration - when, say, a bird is mentioned and we have to see a bird flap across the screen or hear a flute making bird-calls. I'm all for a complementary relationship between the various elements, and happy if the relationship sometimes resists explication. (Manhire, 2016)

Making a film concerning the Battle of the Somme was also personal as my own grandfather served there. According to a medical card, one of the conditions that put him in a field hospital was Enteritis, a common illness for those soldiers literally living in mud and filth. Dan Todman's description of photographs of those battlefields rings true.

These are...overwhelmingly pictures of mud. But if it is mud that dominates these images, it is the associations it carries with it that make them so striking. For here mud stands for much more than a mere amalgam of water and soil. It is made up of excrement, dead soldiers and animals, shrapnel, barbed wire and the remnants of poison gas. For all the opportunities it offered to bacteria, surrounding splintered trees and dead men, it seems opposed to nature. This mud bears the terrifying potential to engulf the soldiers who struggle within it, to suck them down - spluttering, choking, drowning - and to convert their corpses into yet more mud. (Todman, 2005, p. 1)

As part of the commission, the Imperial War Museum gave me access to photographs of battlefields and the distressing effects of trench warfare. Influenced by the imagery of WW1 artists such as Paul Klee, Paul Nash, and Otto Dix and following in the tradition of direct tactile animation as created by Caroline Leaf and Ferenc Cakó, I decided to draw into mud and raw pigment under the camera to depict Bill's poem. My biggest challenge was not the manipulation of a difficult physical medium but expressing the extraordinary compression of eleven epitaphs, each of which described a whole life (and death) sometimes in as little as two short lines. Bill declined to read the poem, thinking that a female reader might be more interesting, and he suggested Stella Duffy.² Her reading of the poem was inspirational. She captured those varied voices in her performance and created a solid temporal framework for the production. She described the poem thus:

Each of Manhire's stanzas are a story in themselves, each one poignantly evocative and full - and also, because these echoes from Aotearoa/New Zealand have been told less often and live less forcefully in our

2 Bill Manhire speaks about writing and reads the poem *Known Unto God* on BBC 3 The Essay Weds 6th July 2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07j43n7>

collective memory of WW1, there is a new vibrancy, a new life to the loss. (Duffy, 2016)

I researched geographical references in the text and found information about New Zealand soldiers' experiences in WW1 such as the marginalisation of the Maori. For instance, Bill's line "I built Turk Lane before I died" refers to the hard labour of Maori soldiers put on permanent trench digging duty. My animated interpretation of this epitaph shows a rapid hand of cards, a black Jack of Spades trumped by the Ace, before soil covers the trick. The horizontal aspect and dimensions of the card are deliberately redolent of a body in a coffin. Phil Archer's sound track creates a direct link to the poetry with the synchronous sound of a spade hitting earth as each card was played. He said:

The sound design was intended to weave in-between the spoken word and the images, playing different roles throughout the film. At times it accentuates specific parts of the text or draws attention to a visual element, at others it serves as a bridge to link the poem and the images, and sometimes it acts as its own third voice in the piece. The sound was constructed in a 'poetic' way, using metaphor and allusion to create new meaning. Sounds which I imagine would have been familiar to the soldiers from their everyday home lives are transformed into the new, unfamiliar sound of mechanised war. Waves become explosions, tanks growl like 'strange beasts', and the whistles of falling bombs recall shouts and screams. (Archer, 2016)

Poem by Bill Manhire from *Some Things to Place in a Coffin* (Victoria University Press, 2017) *With permission*

Known unto God

*To you, your name also,
Did you think there was nothing but two or three
pronunciations in the sound of your name?*

— Walt Whitman

Boy on horseback,
boy on a bicycle, boy all the way
from Tolaga Bay

blown to bits in a minute.

*

Once I was small bones
in my mother's body
just taking a nap.
Now my feet can't find the sap.

*

In Devil's Wood
I broke my leg and went beneath a tank.
Strange beast! Last thing I heard
was the guns all going, you know,
blankety-blankety-blank.

*

My last letter home
turned out entirely pointless.
I wrote *whizz-bang*
a dozen times

to try and say the noises.

*

Well I was here from the start, amazing . . .
straight off the farm at Taieri Mouth.

I lifted my head and ran like the blazes.
Went south.

*

I whistled while I could.
Then I was gone for good.

*

So strange to be underground and single
and dreaming of Dunedin.

But such a picnic!

The last thing I saw
was a tin of Ideal Milk.

*

I remember my father and my mother.
They yelled, they cursed.

My whole head hurt.

Up on the wire I couldn't hear a thing.
I who had spent my whole life listening.

*

They dug me up in Caterpillar Valley
and brought me home –
well, all of the visible bits of me.

Now people arrive at dawn and sing.
And I have a new word: *skateboarding*.

*

Not all of me is here inside.
I built Turk Lane before I died.

Kia ahatia!

*

Somewhere between Colombo and Cairo,
the ocean seemed to dip. I thought I could hear
the stamping of horses coming from it.

*

They taught me how to say *refugee*.
Then my father and mother floated away from me.

This was on the way to Lampedusa.
By now we were all at sea.

*

We were all at sea.

*

They called out while they could.
~~They called out while they could.~~

Then they were gone for good.

A detailed analysis of an example of an animator's
interpretative process follows:

Known unto God

Boy on horseback,
boy on a bicycle, boy all the way
from Tolaga Bay

blown to bits in a minute.

This first verse establishes the innocence and youth of NZ conscripts, and hints at their long journey across the sea to war. Horses pulled heavy guns, transported weapons and supplies, and carried the wounded and dying to hospital as well as mounting cavalry charges. More horses than men died at the Battle of the Somme. Starting in the sea (at Tolaga Bay) and transforming the beach into battlefield mud gave me the opportunity to show the boy in both locations simultaneously. I looked at Otto Dix's powerful images of dead horses, but these capture a static aftermath of battle and the poem is active. One of the challenges from the outset was to keep the animation moving when the poem is all about death.



Fig. 1 Known Unto God Verse 1
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

Once I was small bones
in my mother's body
just taking a nap.
Now my feet can't find the sap.

The dead soldier here is depicted as a foetus in a womb of mud, reclaimed by Mother Nature, reduced into 'sap'. The drawing style was influenced by Paul Nash's drawings of sleeping soldiers.



Fig. 2 Known Unto God Verse 2
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

In Devil's Wood
I broke my leg and went beneath a tank.
Strange beast! Last thing I heard
was the guns all going, you know,
blankety-blankety-blank.

This verse contains several events and ends with an empty vacuum of death "blankety-blank". I tested many approaches including trees morphing into guns and a monstrous tank shadow, but decided on a less literal solution. The tree silhouettes are made of wet clay and the shapes are taken from a photograph of Delville Wood after bombardment. This layered section is like a stage set for the theatre of war.

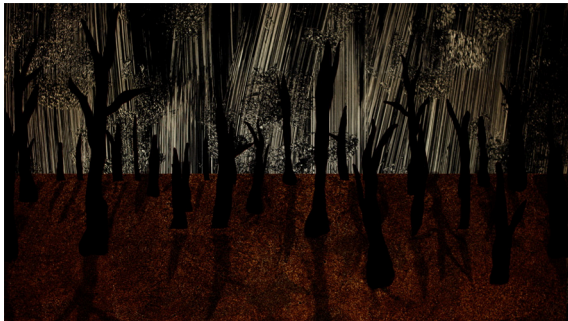


Fig. 3 *Known Unto God Verse 3*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

My last letter home
turned out entirely pointless.
I wrote *whizz-bang*
a dozen times

to try and say the noises.

Scrawling shapes of barbed wire are as incomprehensible as the victim's hand writing, a metaphor for "pointless" battles. David Jones in his poetic record of the First World War, 'In Parenthesis', describes a shell-shocked soldier endlessly rearranging matchsticks, and here Manhire captures that same condition with great economy.



Fig. 4 *Known Unto God Verse 4*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

Well I was here from the start, amazing . . .
straight off the farm at Taieri Mouth.

I lifted my head and ran like the blazes.
Went south.

Another country boy is sacrificed to the cause, Manhire turns common sayings, "went south" and "like the blazes", into something deadly. By ending the shot in the soldier's open mouth I am referring back to Taieri Mouth as well as to his unheard scream.



Fig. 5 *Known Unto God Verse 5*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

I whistled while I could.
Then I was gone for good.

My Godmother's father was at Passchendaele, I recorded her recounting some of his stories about the war. He told her that falling into a shell hole meant you would drown as you could not escape. If your friend tried to pull you out, he would slide in on the mud, and you would both drown. I imagine an injured soldier whistling in the hope someone will save him, drowning alone in the mud. "Gone for good" implies the opposite of dying for a great cause.

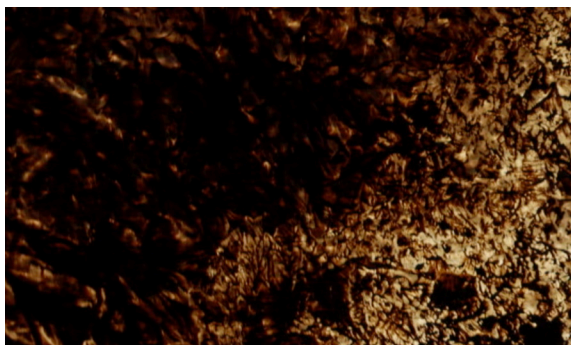


Fig. 6 *Known Unto God Verse 6*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

So strange to be underground and single
and dreaming of Dunedin.

But such a picnic!

The last thing I saw
was a tin of Ideal Milk.

A sad bagpipe drone emphasises the Scottish ancestry of a dead boy from Dunedin. Soldiers lived outdoors, with guns in their hands and kit bags on their backs, they carried mess tins and folding cutlery along with their ammunition. This image is of a macabre abandoned picnic, the victim's bones and his personal effects are all scattered in the mud for eternity. My grandfather never recovered from the war, he continued to live like a soldier, eventually inhabiting a caravan in the woods with a home-made crystal set for his radio, continuing to drink tinned milk in his tea. Ideal milk may speak of the 'ideals' that called young men to war from distant lands, as well as the much less than 'glorious' reality of becoming one of the glorious dead. But the words can carry those ideas without direct image reference. Milk is also a metonym for the youth of the soldiers, echoing the reference to those small bones of the unborn child in verse 2.

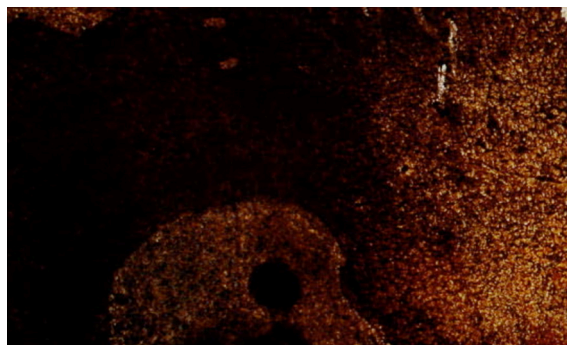


Fig. 7 *Known Unto God Verse 7*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

I remember my father and my mother.
They yelled, they cursed.

My whole head hurt.

Up on the wire I couldn't hear a thing.
I who had spent my whole life listening.

Another reference to children, as this boy goes to war to leave a battle behind. The final image references an archive photograph of a dead soldier on the wire.

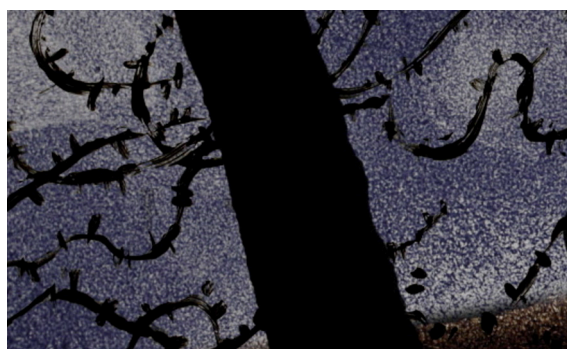


Fig. 8 *Known Unto God Verse 8*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

They dug me up in Caterpillar Valley
and brought me home –
well, all of the visible bits of me.

Now people arrive at dawn and sing.
And I have a new word: *skateboarding*.

This is the most literal piece of animation in the film, as its location is so specific, but I scratched out a reductive version of the tomb to maintain the graphic style. I remembered Edmund Blunden's 'rosy dawn' and intended to create an oppressive bloody sky. Singers have left poppies, the skateboarder could be seen as a ghost by the dead soldier.



Fig. 9 *Known Unto God* Verse 9
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

Not all of me is here inside.
I built Turk Lane before I died.

Kia ahatia!

Kia ahatia! means "so what", and like the pointless letter from verse 3, the sacrifice of war seems devalued. I experimented with animating figures shoveling earth, a line of men's shadows disappearing into mud, but decided that I could better invest a game of cards with clear symbols in close up. The Jack of Spades is a black jack, trumped by the Ace in the hand of Fate.



Fig. 10 *Known Unto God* Verse 10
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

*

Somewhere between Colombo and Cairo,
the ocean seemed to dip. I thought I could hear
the stamping of horses coming from it.

This verse demanded a swift move from the battlefield mud of the Somme to the Arabian Sea across a century. By zooming out to a bird's eye view, the mud of the battlefield extends into the world made of mud and ocean. I used white silhouettes for seagulls, with a visual reference to the ghost skateboarder. Phil Archer processed sounds of boat engines as a threatening sonic undercurrent. The reference to horses may echo the mythical conception of Pegasus from Poseidon's sea foam and Medusa's blood, but this poem and film are too compressed to explore many peripheral references.

They taught me how to say *refugee*.
Then my father and mother floated away from me.

This was on the way to Lampedusa.
By now we were all at sea.

The graphic style used for the child's view of her parents may resemble a drawing of them that she would make herself, so a universal innocence is intended.

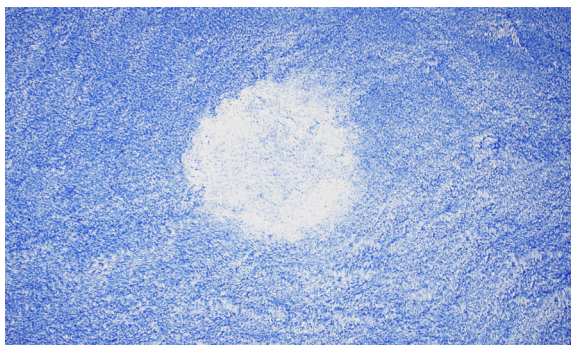


Fig. 12 *Known Unto God Verse 12*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

We were all at sea.

They called out while they could.

~~They called out while they could.~~

Then they were gone for good.

To me the deleting line symbolises an ocean horizon lifting as refugees sink and drown. I made test animations of realistic waves, studying films of sea storms and images of overcrowded boats. But a simpler more abstract depiction of the surface of the water allows the words to dominate. The sea is hostile and endless, and the nameless victims of war, like those soldiers at the Somme before them, break down and become part of the world's mud.

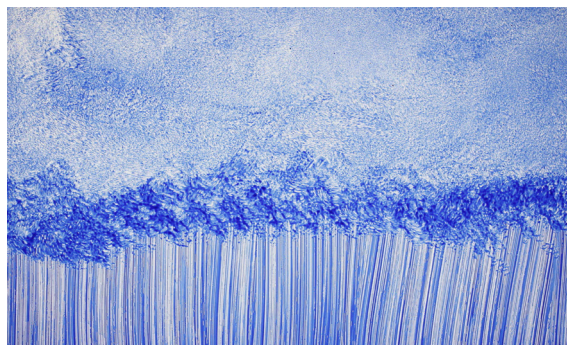


Fig. 13 *Known Unto God Verse 13*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

The film never returns to solid black between verses, but to a dark moving sludge, the idea being that all the stories and the people appear and disappear into the same viscous base material. The animation reflects the claustrophobia of the poem, there is no time to pause for breath, as a relentless vocal delivery of this list of fatalities demands a visual shorthand. All 2000 images were scratched out with kebab sticks on a backlit glass plate. I used sponges to add oil, water and sometimes vinegar to clay and pigment powder, so the animation process experience itself was tactile and visceral.³

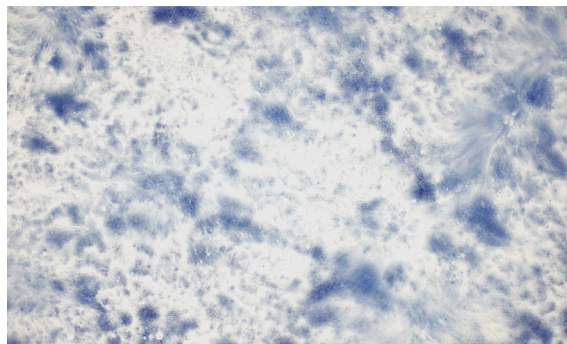


Fig. 14 *Known Unto God "Gone for Good"*
Susan J. Hanna, 2019

3 The animated film is viewable on the 14-18 NOW vimeo site <https://vimeo.com/173053863>

The film was shown in UK galleries and theatres as part of the 14-18 NOW project, and it was selected for screening in many international animation, short film and poetry film festivals, including the 1st Annual New York City Poetry Film Festival in 2017.

Bill Manhire's comments on the poetry animation include the following:

I think the use of ocean/waves (+ apposite sound-scape) at the beginning is very shrewd in terms of where the whole piece ends. The old snake with its tail in its mouth. And there's never any sense of heavy-handed illustration of the text. The closest the film comes to this is in the section where the unknown warrior speaks, and I suspect those words would have been meaningless (esp the skateboard-ing) without the visual nudge - beautifully done, too. So I'm very happy. She enlarges the text, whereas I can imagine how some other film-maker might easily have reduced or limited it, making it just too single-minded. (Manhire, 2016)

For me this is some evidence that an animator can successfully apply poetic process to the interpretation of a poem, and avoid the literal. Richard Bradford's statement about the nature of poetry is, I believe, directly transferable as a description of the nature of animated film. Animation's poetic strengths can lie in processes and material of *visual* and *sonic* language.

In all non-poetic genres and classes of language, priority is placed upon the delivery of the message, but, uniquely, poetry is concerned as much with the processes and material of language as it is with its use as an efficient medium of exchange. (Bradford, 2010:3)

In attempting to translate, augment or respond to poetry as an animator, the sense is often one of 'harmonising' with the words, as if joining in with the poet's own performance. This potential is reflected in the terminology used in Cleanth Brooks' comment on poetic structure.

The essential structure of a poem (as distinguished from the rational) resembles that of architecture or painting: or logical nature of the "statement" which we abstract from it, it is a pattern of resolved stresses. Or, to move closer still to poetry by considering the temporal arts, the structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition. It is a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme. (Brooks, 1975, p.203)

In creating animated poetry films there is an initial *expansion* or *decompression* of the poem as close reading of the text reveals the "pattern of resolved stresses". Transferring those revelations into equivalent non-literal temporal visual and sonic experience requires *recompression* for which the art of animation is particularly suited.

Poets who animate their own poems have established a receptive audience via poetry film festivals, and through representation on dedicated online poetry film and blog sites visited by people who are fans of poetry and of poets. With thoughtful transcription and translation by animators and sound designers who have expertise in their own medium, animated poetry films can reach larger and more diverse audiences through many distribution channels. These include competitive selection in mainstream international film and animation festival screenings, as well as literary festivals and poetry film festivals. In cross-disciplinary collaboration, the work is opened up to scrutiny from many varied fields of influence. This shared dissemination across arts and humanities can be manifested through gallery exhibition, conference commissions and academic and creative workshops.

As a dynamic tool for reframing and representing the poem, animation can challenge, educate and inspire specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Poetry animation is a wonderfully rich and varied area of contemporary practice, a distinct emergent genre in its own right. In animating *Known Unto God* we brought together documentary and academic research with personal knowledge and stories about victims of war, in a collaborative engagement that spanned written, visual and sonic experiment to create an interpretation that is an expression of *Ecstatic Truth*.

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