

I'm Working Here

The Collected Poems of
Anna Mendelssohn

SAMPLER

edited by

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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2020 by
Shearsman Books
P.O. Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-714-8

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First published as a black and white photocopy in *constant red/mingled damask*, no. 1, 1986,
the original colour version was provided by Nigel Wheale and enhanced by Stuart Robinson.

INTRODUCTION

SARA CRANGLE

I. MENDELSSOHN'S PERAMBULATIONS

being a poet is nothing special
no more so than being anything else
you go to poetplace each morning
& if you are absent for more than five conseq. days
you hand over a mental note
to authenticate the reasons for
your incapacity to poetize from mon-fri.

—“Tansy Tchaikovsky” *The News* (1987)

walking is to make poetry
poetry is emptying the page and filling
its space in continuous motion
of breath
Breath is paradise.

— poem beginning “real does not know” (n.d.)

Anna Mendelssohn's is a restless poetry. Prolonged stillness cramps the writing hand, and propulsion eases compressions of the body, nerves, creative mind. “I [...] am not good at / being immobile” states the emphatically titled “POEM.”; relief is “a declenched spine now walking écriture”.¹ “[W]andering with primroses / acurling round her feet”, Mendelssohn's poetic persona Tansy Tchaikovsky is almost feral, a “Mortal Beastess” with a “tously skull” who “takes to the hills” to chase after the “UNknown”. So autonomous are Tansy's feet that she keeps close watch to ensure that they remain at the end of the body that sustains them, a body given to disappearances over which she has no control.² Tansy is a maker of mythico-magical journeys; she locates nightless lands, wriggling dragons. It is not Tansy who derides the exceptionality of poetry in this curt, comic epigraph, where verse becomes a brief for a nine-to-five job in versifying. Instead, this stanza disrupts Tansy's fervid whimsy, and its voice belongs more properly to what Mendelssohn describes elsewhere as “the peripatetic pedant” whose soul is “lost ... to ready words

& clipped momentum”.³ The absurdity of “go[ing] to poetplace each morning” does not lie in the travelling that poetry invariably necessitates, but in the unfathomability of an assured arrival at a prescribed location where poetizing might neatly commence and conclude each day. In Mendelssohn’s poetry, reliable straightforwardness is laughable, even as tranquillity is not without appeal. In 1992, she writes: “a full stop was what i was working for / several years ago. unhappily my mind was not in my feet”.⁴ Embattled, feet win out over mind, and writing itself only complicates matters further, as the same poem tells us that poetry perambulates away from fixity and use value, that poetry “is untraceable, indirect, adialogical, refractive, / imprecise, inedible, elevated, unmechanical”. Or as Mendelssohn puts it with ironic straightforwardness in her 2000 book, *Implacable Art*: “a poem is not going to give precise directions.”⁵

Anna Mendelssohn’s is a restless, impassioned poetry. The second epigraph inverts the scabrous first, steering a course just this side of the overblown. These lines take their place in a Western convention as old as Aristotle’s Lyceum whereby walking is a motif for thought, the feet emulating the ever-moving consciousness.⁶ Old, but always reborn; there is an audible echo of Gertrude Stein in Mendelssohn’s awkwardly didactic: “walking is to make poetry”.⁷ As this poem begins, words are weary from attempting to pin down an ever-passing reality. Pursuit of the evanescent is at stake: a child’s breath on a mirror; a satellite passing a moon. Against these images, Mendelssohn imagines a company director telling his managers to ban their secretaries from “walking, talking, / thinking or dreaming.” Epigraph two follows from these envisioned strictures, insisting that walking makes poetry happen, and in turn, that poetry clears the page for movement and bodily rhythm, accessing a breath so pure it “knows all / we hide from with smoke”. In the space of a few short lines, Mendelssohn roves from terrestrial, quotidian walking to a celestial, heady atmosphere, attaining an intellectual and creative ideal – paradise itself – foreshadowed by the innocent, unpolluted breath of the child on the mirror-page. Poetry is lived necessity; poetry is utopia; poetry is truth. These assertions are consistent with a poet who concludes one poem with the proclamation: “I do not fake, I do not lie, I worship at the shrine of poetry.”⁸ If poetry is religion, then the heavens urgently, necessarily ground the writer: “As soon as you can, walk / with your feet on clouds, / your hands on a dream / of earth.”⁹ Titled “As Things Stand”, this 1987 poem deliberately resists the status quo, its speaker supported by billow and vapour as the stuff of the solid globe evades the grasp. Mendelssohn’s walking often calls attention to the elusiveness of solid foundation, but pedestrian poignancy does not always require elevation.¹⁰ In 1986, Mendelssohn presents a stationary author undone by another’s steps:

yes it is official. sitting at a table. pen in hand,
watching one’s own neck curve like a swan’s
towards the sound of a heart-rending song.

[...]

and watching a hand of a woman
clasping a small box of peaches by its string
walking along with her lover.¹¹

The writer is all keening ear, eye, neck; midway through the poem, tears are sobbed into the pen as the speaker recalls how that neck was once cruelly hooked. The watched woman is hand, feet, heart; her movement quietly fervent, not restless. If walking is to make poetry, this poem projects a perfectly ordinary, perversely unattainable ideal.

Mendelssohn once declared a desire to write a poem topographically, in a manner “outgoing”, “OPEN to chance, and systematic in research”.¹² The peripatetic is just one of infinite ways into the intellectual and aesthetic thickets, outcroppings, and byways of her poetic surfaces and structures. It is notably pervasive. Mendelssohn’s poetic gaze is attuned to the language of the human gait, be it that of “school children walk[ing] past the window, infinitely beautiful.”; the “strong man” who “can take words” and walk the high road; or “a very old lady” on Cambridge’s Mill Road, “back bent permanently forward– / arthritic,–walks, pauses, takes a few steps”.¹³ Walking imbues Mendelssohn’s lyrics; walking is how she initially staked her expansive claim to art as roving, observant *flâneuse*, a “writer, artist, [who] started by placing objects found in the street in art exhibitions and having given them titles, walking out.”¹⁴ Where we might assume the inevitability of departure, Mendelssohn does not. “[F]ighting for exit” her speakers steadfastly delineate egress: “Walk in, walk out.”¹⁵ Mendelssohn’s walking responds to rejection, is self-asserting defiance, and enables freedom, escape.¹⁶ We witness these formulations in the very first poem in this collection: “Walk – legs last forever [...] One step further ‘Anna come back’ / Turn around: / They weren’t even looking.”¹⁷ In a poem that references prison walls, this stanza speaks to the combination of fierce independence and need for recognition that recurs in so much of Mendelssohn’s poetry. In a 1985 collection, Mendelssohn links a female figure “Clothed in / prison rags” to a nation’s inability to decide “who walks” whilst denigrating those who “march / to their death with righteousness.” Asking “[i]s there no room to move?” the speaker is paralysed, unable to commune with the “foot’s feeble nature”. The poem envisions a Futurist way out of this impasse: a high-speed, mechanised body, an “ankle-van, careering around / these high country corners”.¹⁸ But more frequently, walking is laborious: Mendelssohn’s subjects are shoeless or scratch at floors with shod heels; the roads they travel are poisoned or require interpretation, fastidious “attend[ance] to the traffic signals”; they arduously climb zebra crossings, not quite reaching destination.¹⁹ Escape from constraint is one of Mendelssohn’s most pronounced aesthetic drives. “Some say *wander* some say *formalize*” Mendelssohn writes in a poem that critiques closed structure, favouring open-ended reach.²⁰ Freedom to roam is never taken for granted, and is frequently hard won.

A descendent of Aristotle’s esteemed disciples, an itinerant in search of place, a writer or speaker prepared to risk rambling, prolixity; these are all ways we might think about the peripatetic Mendelssohn, an autodidact who worshipped poetry, art, music, and academia alike; who longed for and shunned domestic comfort and relationships; whose writings – poetry, fiction, journals – tend toward expatriation, copiousness. Walking makes poetry and art, walking determines artistic reception: “how people walk into art exhibitions is / vitally important.”²¹ Mendelssohn demands a reader adept at circumambulation, at deliberately going hopelessly astray, at marching and stumbling alongside staunch lyrics that resist as much as they invite. The journey rarely lacks ferocious intellection, highly sensitised aesthetic awareness, wit by turns playful and scathing, and extreme emotion (“softly the sound of woe / gallops [...] & every time hysteria rises”).²² By Mina Loy’s terms, Mendelssohn “proceeds recedingly”; by Mendelssohn’s, she “goes forwards by backwards”.²³ Or more succinctly, Mendelssohn participates in the “Ambulesque”, a word she coins in a poem that

marks a return to an old conflict, a covered territory.²⁴ So it is that Mendelssohn's humorously aggressive "minnie most" – purveyor of "civilized prose", inventor of "a new foot modelled infrastructure" – "walks backwards" because

its good for her calf muscles & her thighs.
rather than pushing on regardless, onwards ever
up hill down dale looking for birds' eggs.
with her sharp nose shooting rays across the thickets.²⁵

Here Mendelssohn might parody the propensity to return deeply embedded in her own work. Elsewhere, she describes countermovement with horror, imagining "walking" against the flow, "right through another's work in progress".²⁶ Mendelssohn's subjects evince an insatiable need to dispense with the past. Paradoxically, this need manifests itself as a "going back" to specific instances, a continual, inconclusive reversion justified because "the end is not the object" and "creation through language" may just "find its way back to structure".²⁷ Crucial to Mendelssohn's unique peripatetic mode, inward turns are consistent with the explorations of interiority that walking, writing, and the lyric portend. Or as Mendelssohn puts it in a line that speaks to the repetition of her involutions, her generative anxieties about implication and entanglement: "One is oned and backward turned for literary classification talks no-one."²⁸ Defiant, cautious, these circular perambulations are overwhelmingly inquisitive. Countering an otherwise strong poetic voice is a pervasive questioning, a seeking of clarities large: "What is love?"; circumstantial: "what could she say?"; and whimsical: "Who cycled in two fours?"²⁹ There are over 370 direct questions in this roving collection. At least two echo the peripatetic focus thus far, and, wilfully manipulated, foreground the biographical transition to come in this introduction, namely:

1. "who is this person, high-walking into fantasy?" and,
2. "who is this bemused, disconcerted, impersonal meanderer"?

To borrow and contort: who, then, is this Anna Mendelssohn, high walker into fantasy? The answer is circumscribed by question two, which is embedded in a poem where Mendelssohn details the "statuesque antiquity within / the by now secret meanderings of a poetess".³⁰ "[A]udienced by / hidden mockers" with a vicious propensity to stomp, this poetess becomes adept at "side-step[ping] accusative". "[W]ho is she" the poem concludes, "but the negative's bewitching?" Persecuted, the poetess-cum-sorceress enchants naysayers, thereby resisting negation. The poem is a cautionary tale about poetesses "complexed" by "historical flux", prey to their positioning, their ascribed identities. Bemused, disconcerted, yet detached: within her poetess, Mendelssohn perceives T. S. Eliot's venerated poetic impersonality, minus his scientific rationalism. The poetess yields openly to confusion, disharmony, convolution. In the early 1980s, Mendelssohn begins using the archaic word "poetess" in earnest; by the late 1990s, it is fully integrated into her diction.³¹ She is wholly aware of its comedic value. Read: "oh parasite poetess"; "problematic dreamy Poetess"; "Oh tangerine organdie poetess".³² But "poetess" is a gendered distinction that Mendelssohn values

as a means of communicating the difference between the writer and “the writress”, an identification that is lived, experiential condition, but not “any less literary and/or intelligent”.³³ Put another way: “Feminized, although not without dissent”.³⁴ Mendelssohn presumes her audience resents and repels her poetic voice. Her gender is part of this presumption; her vanguard aesthetic is another; her personal history is paramount. A lyric poet, she aims to “fi[x] interiority with an altogether different poetic.”³⁵ Straightforward biographical readings of her poems are unavailable to us, not only because anyone who wants to write autobiography can and should do so, but because Mendelssohn actively labours to separate self from lyric. In a draft preface for *Implacable Art*, she asserts:

It always seemed to me
that the act of writing involved the
exclusion of the writer; that the
subjects took precedence.
that they filled the work of art.
and gave it life.³⁶

These assertions are commonplaces of Mendelssohn’s archive.³⁷ In turn, her writing toys with biography. “She appears in thirteen dresses”, begins a Mendelssohn poem of 1985, her line eschewing the singular, identifiable self.³⁸ We soon learn that this “she” recalls “Jamaica in the white power days”, has associated with the Bedouin, and is now, racist parody at the ready, “an employed hireling of Tinker mafiosi”. As the poem moves toward its conclusion, Mendelssohn tells us: “She drags out the autobiographical and drugs it.” (Self-) conscious autobiography is altered, made fantastic, implausible, literary. Skilfully, expressly, Mendelssohn distanced herself from the tidy, confessional autobiography expected of mainstream poets, and particularly of women poets who came of age in the second wave of feminism.³⁹ Mendelssohn’s past was infamous; much of it she longed to reject. Her poem “Strictly personal” (2004) delineates a need for re-creation: “They know everything about me I won’t simply / take these words”.⁴⁰ These words are “a simplification” gratuitous, reductive, evanescent: description paraded and abandoned leaves the described with “nothing.” Mendelssohn proclaims her poetic subject bereft as Hopkins proclaims his tormented; while loss is vertiginously, devastatingly central to their work, both poets create, and create phenomenally, when faced with a society that threatens to overwhelm.⁴¹

II. ANNE MENDLESON / GRACE LAKE / ANNA MENDELSSOHN

Born in Stockport (near Manchester) in 1948, Anna Mendelssohn authored poetry, fiction, drama, and life writing; she was an artist, musician, and translator. From the early 1980s until her death in 2009, Mendelssohn published fifteen collections of poetry, the first being the self-produced *Crystal Love: D. N. A.* (1982); the last, with Oystercatcher Press, was *py.* (2009). Best-known among these texts are her perfect-bound volume, *Implacable Art* (Folio/Salt 2000), and three chapbooks with Rod Mengham's Cambridge-based Equipage Press: *viola tricolor* (1993), *Bernache Nonnette* (1995), and *Tondo Aquatique* (1997). In addition to these fifteen collections, another four were close to completion.⁴² Further, Mendelssohn published poems in at least fifteen journals, among them, *Parataxis*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Comparative Criticism* and *Jacket*; her work was translated into French by Robert Davreau in *Poésie*. And, from 1990, Mendelssohn was anthologised over half a dozen times, starting with *The Virago Book of Love Poetry*, edited by Wendy Mulford, which included female poets ranging from Sappho to Alice Walker. In 1992, she was included in Denise Riley's influential text, *Poets on Writing*; in 1996, she and Riley appeared in Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*. That same year, Mendelssohn was one of the few female contributors to Iain Sinclair's renowned anthology, *Conductors of Chaos*; come 2004, she was a part of Rod Mengham and John Kinsella's *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* alongside John Ashbery, Susan Howe, and Andrew Crozier.⁴³ These works – collections drafted and published; journal and anthology submissions – are all part of this volume, as are a further fifteen transcripts of single poems and series that Mendelssohn was preparing for publication. Among this latter grouping is a set of translations of Gisèle Prassinos's 1989 collection, *La fièvre du labour*. Of Greek origin, Prassinos was a child prodigy discovered and lauded by André Breton and his fellow surrealists. In securing permission to translate from Prassinos herself in the late 1990s, Mendelssohn continued an international focus discernible as early as 1969, when she rendered into English the work of Turkish poet and political exile Nâzım Hikmet.⁴⁴

In Mendelssohn's lifetime, presses including Methuen, Bloodaxe, Reality Street, Burning Deck, and Shearsman contemplated book-length editions of her work.⁴⁵ As early as 1982, Mendelssohn gave readings at universities and community centres; from the late 1980s, she was invited to read at Cambridge colleges, the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, the universities of Exeter and Southampton, the Southbank Centre in London, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and by associates in New Hampshire and New York.⁴⁶ She agreed to lecture on poetry at the Roehampton Institute at the University of Surrey.⁴⁷ Further, Mendelssohn won two musical residencies and entered composition competitions; evidence suggests that a copy of her piece "heartsease" remains at the International Women Composers' Library in Unna, Germany.⁴⁸ Although Mendelssohn aimed, always, to live with a piano to hand, and ascribed to the belief, at least as old as Schopenhauer, that music is the highest art form, the verbal and the visual remain most central to her artistry.⁴⁹ Equally central, in fact. Pen and ink is Mendelssohn's most accomplished and persistent medium, but she worked in oil, water colour, pastel, felt-tips, coloured pencil, and collage. She designed nearly all her book covers and published her art alongside her writing in journals including *constant red/mingled damask*, *Figs*, and *Archeus*; the poetry of *Implacable Art* is interleaved with her images. "I don't find that images merge into writing" Mendelssohn claimed, yet swathes of her work expertly blend the visual and the verbal, in much the same way as her notebooks

show her moving often and seamlessly from prose into poetry, and poetry to prose; the intertwining of music and poetry was another Mendelssohn constant.⁵⁰ Words appear within dense, collage compositions as indebted in their complexity, detail, and powerful affect to the legacies of Pieter Bruegel the Elder or Hieronymus Bosch as they are to outsider art. Alternately, Mendelssohn treats the blank page as a set of horizons upon which she intersperses lines of language with extended, transverse drawings that run from one side of the page to the other. And, from at least the late 1970s, Mendelssohn develops an ideogrammatic form that follows in the wake of Ezra Pound and Henri Michaux.⁵¹ Generating as much art as writing, Mendelssohn nevertheless poured far more energy into publicising her poetry; against a single known exhibition of her drawings, there are over 400 pages of poems prepared for publication.⁵²

Mendelssohn was also an activist, born into a highly politicised family, her given name Anne Mendleson.⁵³ Her father Morris was a respected Labour councillor and a former Communist who fought with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁴ Her mother, Clementina, was a member of the Manchester International Women for Peace, and took an active part in the family business, a local market stall. After the 1958 founding of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Mendlesons participated in its annual marches. The family's Jewish heritage was central, defining: an archived certificate confirms that to mark the occasion of her first birthday, Mendelssohn's parents had three trees planted in Israel in their daughter's name.⁵⁵ Mendelssohn visited an Israeli kibbutz in the mid-1960s, and occasionally attributes her later poetry to variants of her Hebrew name, Channa Nechama Enna Krshner Mendleson Lubovitch bas Hakolenian.⁵⁶ During World War II, Mendelssohn's mother volunteered to care for refugee Jewish children, some rescued from Nazi concentration camps, and this harrowing experience was often recounted to Mendelssohn and her younger sister Judi. Both parents were forced to leave school for employment in their early teens, but they were intellectually ambitious for their offspring: newspaper clippings of Mendelssohn's childhood achievements indicate that she grew up in a cultured household, learning Hebrew and French, entering music and elocution contests, performing in local theatre productions and with the Manchester Youth Orchestra, and becoming Head Girl at Stockport High School for Girls.⁵⁷ In her life writings, Mendelssohn often describes, with palpable bitterness, the exacting, relentless criticisms of her parents, with special attention paid to her father's domineering political drive. Her home environment grated and inspired.

Like so many of her generation, Mendelssohn became the first member of her family to attend university. From 1967 to 1969, she studied Comparative Studies at the University of Essex. Opening its doors in 1964, Essex quickly became a notoriously radical hub: although the English Department was set up in large part by the conservative, prominent Movement poet Donald Davie, in its early days Ed Dorn was a lecturer and Tom Raworth was a poet in residence. In spring 1968, influenced by Situationism, student activism, and the general strike in France, Essex was shut down due to a protest against a visiting speaker from Britain's Porton Down, the world's oldest chemical weapons research facility.⁵⁸ Mendelssohn was involved in this protest, and in the same year, took part in large-scale London marches against the Vietnam War. At Essex, she campaigned to be elected to the National Union of Students, was a member of the Theatre Arts Society, and wrote. She appeared with a group of students in the conclusion of Jean-Luc Godard's documentary on student unrest in England, *British Sounds* (1969); from under the brim of an out-sized orange felt hat, she argues for properly controversial counter-lyrics to the Beatles's curiously resigned "Revolution", beaming and hesitating before the camera, and accompanying the music with some rather accomplished playing of a kazoo.⁵⁹ Still enrolled at Essex,

Mendelssohn travelled to Turkey in 1969, teaching English and French to schoolchildren in Ankara, and possibly associating with members of the Turkish National Liberation Front. In 1970, she returned to London, where she wrote for countercultural periodicals and agitated on behalf of squatters' rights whilst working to move homeless people into unoccupied London council blocks. At this time, she describes herself as emotionally vulnerable: in mourning for a friend who had recently died in a motorcycle accident, and at perpetual odds with her politicised associates who chastised her for her devotion to writing. A long poem about London – now apparently lost – was her particular focus. This antagonism places Mendelssohn within a lengthy historical trajectory of vanguardists deemed traitors for privileging art over action.⁶⁰ As these domestic conflicts came to a head, a friend of Mendelssohn's suggested that she might be happier living with some people she had known at Essex. Mendelssohn appears to have made this move willingly, but claims, forevermore, to have been coerced – “seized”, “arrested” – to remain with her new housemates, who were affiliated with the urban guerrilla organisation known as The Angry Brigade. Mendelssohn's American contemporaries in extremist activism – among them, Jane Alpert, Susan Stern – similarly liken their involvement in clandestine organisations to incarcerations.⁶¹ Like Mendelssohn, these women found their lives irretrievably marked by associations that oscillated between the utopian and the dystopian. In her archive, Mendelssohn recounts bitterly and repeatedly how she “became known (with much revulsion) as the Angry Brigade girl.”⁶²

Two legal battles parenthesise Mendelssohn's adulthood, both of them distinctly marked by her belief, as a young adult, that revolution was the solution.⁶³ The first was the Stoke Newington Eight trial of 1972, which was, until the 2013–14 prosecution against News International, the longest criminal trial in contemporary British history.⁶⁴ Still lacking a well-researched account, and absent from most studies of contemporary terrorism, The Angry Brigade was part of a recognised international wave of predominantly middle-class, educated youth who became disenchanted by the inefficacies of democratic protests sparked by racial unrest in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. This disenchantment was fuelled further by the rise of the New Left, the urgency of American conscription for the Vietnam War, vestiges of ongoing fascist complicity in continental Europe and, in Britain, by the crisis in Northern Ireland.⁶⁵ Some hundreds of these thousands of student protestors began to form urban guerrilla groups, a list that included the Weather Underground in the USA, the Front de Libération du Québec in Canada, The Red Brigades in Italy, and in Germany, The Red Army Faction, or Baader-Meinhoff. Of the same lineage as their infamous counterparts, The Angry Brigade revolution was comparatively minimal, involving no murders or kidnappings.⁶⁶ Funded by fraudulent cheques, their activities included about two dozen small-scale attacks, primarily bombings of police stations, businesses, embassies, politicians' residences, and a BBC van at a Miss World beauty pageant in 1970, all believed unoccupied when the bombs were detonated.⁶⁷ Anna Mendelssohn's fingerprints were discovered on a sheet torn from *Rolling Stone* magazine found in a bag containing one of those bombs. Fourteen sets of fingerprints were located in the same bag; eleven were never identified. Arrested in August 1971, Mendelssohn was charged with credit card and cheque fraud. By November 1971, the charges were augmented to conspiring to cause explosions to endanger life or property. Mendelssohn stood trial with James Greenfield, John Barker, Hilary Creek, Christopher Bott, Stuart Christie, Angela Weir, and Kate McLean. Though Mendelssohn, scarcely 24 years of age, pleaded innocent and skilfully defended herself in court, she was convicted of conspiracy to cause explosions on 6 December 1972. Of the eight defendants, only Mendelssohn, Greenfield, Barker, and Creek were found guilty. Mendelssohn was sentenced to ten years at Her

Majesty's Holloway Prison in London, an institution that became female-only in 1903, and remains well-known for detaining the Pankhurst suffragettes.

Mendelssohn claims to have been the first woman behind bars to successfully petition for the receipt of a musical instrument, a guitar. In 1974, she won a drawing competition initiated by the Arthur Koestler Trust, entering a sketch of a tree in the prison yard. Her prize was an afternoon's furlough, which she chose to spend at the Tate to see Blake's drawings.⁶⁸ Mendelssohn taught her fellow inmates literacy, petitioned for improved conditions, and ran dramatic productions, including a performance of *Peter Pan* in which, fantastically, she cast herself as Captain Hook.⁶⁹ These efforts prompted her early parole in 1976. Post-prison, Mendelssohn briefly returned to Stockport, then lived in Cambridge, undertaking a Foundation Art Course at Anglia Polytechnic; in 1979, she moved to Sheffield, where she enrolled in Fine Art at Sheffield City Polytechnic. Inevitably, Mendelssohn's past came with her. In 1977, Robert Carr, one-time Home Secretary and target of an Angry Brigade bomb, invited Mendelssohn to spar with him on a chat show; in 1978, Eton College invited her to a debate between herself and a police officer, staged for the benefit of its privileged student body. Unsurprisingly, Mendelssohn declined both requests.⁷⁰ Between 1980 and 1985, Mendelssohn had three longed-for children: Poppy Juanita Dorothy Shoshanna Ruth Pascal (1980), Jet Jack George Alessandro (1984), and Emerald Tulane Cassia (1985). Mendelssohn changed her name by deed poll to Sylvia Grace Louise Lake in 1983, the same year she passed her entrance examinations to the University of Cambridge; in 1984, she began a degree in literature at Cambridge's St Edmund's College.⁷¹

Mendelssohn's writing indicates that the late 1970s and early 1980s were relatively happy years. Her poetry in this period has a levity that is later overtaken by vehemence. This is not to negate the struggles associated with her twin, all-absorbing ambitions to be a parent and a successful student at an excruciatingly paternalistic institution. As a young activist, Mendelssohn often laboured to improve support networks for parents and children. When she had a family, she believed that the community should help her raise her children; in a different world, this attitude might be incontrovertible. But another family upon whom she relied heavily desired a better routine, financial assistance, and the involvement of a third party: social services. For a woman who had served time, the scrutiny of her daily machinations by authority figures was a source of pronounced distress; still more worrying was the possibility that the vexed past she had scarcely put behind her might be unearthed in court, to which Mendelssohn understandably feared returning. Poverty exerted its daily grind, as did severe ill health and the stigma of single parenthood.⁷² In 1988, she gave permission to have her children temporarily fostered; they were never returned to her care.⁷³ Mendelssohn's case was harrowing and traumatising; when it was finished, the lawyer who defended her renounced child custody litigation.⁷⁴ While the phrase "Angry Brigade" appears nowhere in Mendelssohn's poetry, loss is a pervasive theme of her later work.⁷⁵ "The children were music," Mendelssohn writes to poet, publisher, and friend Peter Riley; hence her overwhelming need for a piano in their absence. The valediction of this short, unsent note encapsulates unresolved protestations, claims, needs: "I am an artist not a terrorist. Love, Grace".⁷⁶ Let art supersede harm; love grace, the strength to endure, benevolence freely bestowed. It can be no accident that Mendelssohn named herself after clemency, favour, reprieve, refinement. And as assertion and plea, love is an abiding concern of Mendelssohn's poetry, far more important than sex.⁷⁷ This collection is replete with loves aesthetic and intellectual: love cynical, sceptical, anxious ("if thought be woven from the brain wished ill may learn to love again"); love clumsy,

if determined: “crashing through stuttering / stumbling for love / right round the town”.⁷⁸ And parental: “I like to tickle my children. They curl up for ever in / laughter.”⁷⁹

Mendelssohn professed her innocence, and her loathing of extremism and violence, until her death in 2009. Throughout these years, she maintained her reverence for academia. Mendelssohn may have gained entry to, or started degrees in seven or more universities.⁸⁰ She lays claim to no fewer than six PhD proposals: the first, in 1968, on “Ships and Slavery”; the last known, in 1989, entitled “Nancy Cunard: The Naming of Reality”.⁸¹ Mendelssohn speaks scabrously about contemporaries who did not adequately value their education, and was adamant that she was not a 1960s drop out. In 1969, or the same year that Mendelssohn took part in Godard’s *British Sounds* at the University of Essex, students at Cambridge launched a Campaign Against Assessment. In the culminating move of their Situationist-inspired, year-long protest against the university, these students entered their exam halls in June 1969 and tore up their final examination papers.⁸² The gesture was public, symbolic, and a genuine breaking of their three-year contract with Oxbridge. They left the university without degrees in hand; among their number was John Barker. Three years later, Barker was convicted alongside Mendelssohn at the end of the Stoke Newington Eight trial. Twenty years after the Campaign Against Assessment, Mendelssohn had her second attempt at completing the Cambridge Tripos, or the very exams Barker and his peers tore up. The process had been delayed once due to the legal negotiations over her children, and friends generated a fund to pay for her ongoing tuition costs. The day of her final exam, Mendelssohn wrote her good friend Lynne Harries and suggested that her answers were “Demoralised yet committed, too contentious – I’m being hopeful when I say 2/2.” She then discusses American poets Ed Dorn and Charles Olson, whose work she is contemplating.⁸³ As in her life, in this letter, Mendelssohn’s educational ambitions are supplanted by her voracious auto-didacticism; the breadth and incessancy of her reading defies encapsulation.⁸⁴ In her stunning memoir, Harries details the aftermath of Mendelssohn’s exams:

In the early summer of 1989, [she...] told me that the Finals results were posted on the Senate House but her own name was not on the list. This never happens, I kept saying, it’s a printing error. It wasn’t: she had ignored the questions on her papers and written a tirade against the lack of nursery provision in the university. Later, she petitioned to get the ‘Fail’ changed to ‘Unclassified’, leaving the academic door once again ajar [...]. It is impossible to exaggerate the value she placed on being acknowledged as a serious, scholarly person.⁸⁵

Mendelssohn’s exam scripts were a plea for help in the private, domestic realm she was expected to manage with innate aplomb, making her educational history bathetic counter to Barker’s seemingly heroic, historicised Cambridge protest. “I have renamed the university adversity” Mendelssohn writes in a letter to Peter Riley. But nor can she quite free herself from the institution. Her letter continues: “if there were any other environment conducive to both life (which uni is not) and literary work I’d remove myself into it.”⁸⁶ For the rest of her life, Mendelssohn treated the Cambridge University Library as a second home whilst retaining the status “unclassified.”

In her final two decades, Mendelssohn revived her relationship with her children and met her first grandchild; she was in regular contact with her parents in their final days in the winter of 2001–2002. From the 1990s, Mendelssohn

lived on Mowbray Road in Cambridge in an unheated shed at the bottom of a friend's garden. Satirically labelling her domicile "la kiosque du jardin", she filled it to the rafters with books, clothes, furniture, and more than one piano. Through these years, Mendelssohn wrote, drew, read, and played music unremittingly. Now permanently housed at the University of Sussex, her archive is an enormous repository of visual art, nearly 800 notebooks, an estimated minimum of 5,000 poems, and a vast array of loose papers, letters, drawings, paintings, and memorabilia.⁸⁷ Throughout her life writing, Mendelssohn steadfastly rejects her political past, railing against whilst identifying with the Left and identity politics, feminism included. A voracious reader, Mendelssohn admires and resents artists and thinkers whose fate counters, replicates, or betters her own. She oscillates between anxious justifications of her artistic vocation and past actions, an entitled awareness of her expertise and creativity, and a pronounced sense of victimisation. She is, in short, the ideal accursed poet, or, by her terms, accursed poetess.⁸⁸ Mendelssohn loathes her political past for preventing ready access to employment and financial ease; she begrudges the inevitably limited reception of the experimental artistic proclivities she could neither profit from nor renounce. Yet she cannot stop writing, justifying, protesting injustices. Mendelssohn might be seen as the emblematic "graphomaniac", a term Max Nordau lifts from the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso and defines as a person with a flaccid grasp on reality and "a strong impulse to write"; these compositions revolve repetitiously around the distressed self.⁸⁹ But the very acuteness of Mendelssohn's poetic consciousness troubles just such a diagnosis. Mendelssohn loved Auden, a truth that may well be tied to his famous pronouncement that "poetry makes nothing happen".⁹⁰ Politics devoured Mendelssohn's life; she did not want it to devour her artistry also. Instead, Mendelssohn wanted to wear politics down, grinding and hacking at its monumentality with a view to erecting a poetics free and clear of its contrivances. Paradoxically, this process involved a continual return to the site of the political. Still more paradoxical was Mendelssohn's weapon of choice: she levied an always leftist assault on the inconsistencies and injustices of political system with the lived reality of the personal, all in the full and certain knowledge of the feminist maxim that the personal *is* political, that these realms are inextricable. On one hand, Mendelssohn's is a self-imposed, irresolvable malediction exacerbated by a gendered double standard that insisted its resilient, condemnatory way into her vanguardism.⁹¹ On the other, the literary – and poetry in particular – offers a way out of this impasse. In her finest lyric moments, Mendelssohn can bring the inherent paradoxes of the accursed poetess role to articulate, felt fruition. This very volume contains an extensive account of these "bemused, disconcerted, impersonal meander[ings]", these often extraordinary high walks into fantasy.

In her lifetime, the published criticism of Mendelssohn's work was limited, by and large, to two book reviews by contemporary poets.⁹² Following her death in 2009, this situation is rapidly changing, but as a writer, Mendelssohn remains an oblique and little-discussed figure who, if known, is said to have "had some association, tangentially, with that most underground of poetic brotherhoods, the Cambridge poets".⁹³ What follows aims to lay foundations for a reversal of Mendelssohn's relative anonymity, whilst bearing in mind that she is a difficult writer whose work will never be popular, though may yet prove canonical. The next section, "Mendelssohn's Modernism", addresses the coordinates that are Mendelssohn's primary influence, both historical and formal. Mendelssohn's devotion to a modernist legacy situates her work within the British Poetry Revival, an aesthetic category that emerges in the 1960s and continues, multi-generationally, to the present day. An inevitably contested grouping, the Revival is considered Britain's belated but productive response to modernist poetics, particularly the lineages of Ezra Pound and William

Carlos Williams; for Mendelssohn, the inspiration is predominantly continental.⁹⁴ While Mendelssohn's poetic semantics anticipate interpretation *ad infinitum*, this section unearths discernible lines of influence and specific modernist practices – neologism, listing, jarring juxtapositions – that offer a way in to the density of Mendelssohn's writing. Section four of this introduction, "Mendelssohn and Politics", considers how Mendelssohn, though compelled by an unabashedly avant-garde ethos, is nevertheless resistant to espousals of violence and political thought as the driving forces of poetry. Mendelssohn's didacticism in these regards is enormously complex, particularly as her poetry regularly addresses harm, echoes a vanguard disdain for the masses, and exhibits reverence for revolutionary figures. Mendelssohn's claim to neutrality is repudiated by her ardent writing, and by a radical politics that is rooted in vast and microscopic inequities of class, race, and gender, yet remains curiously conservatively tinged. An abiding and consistent aspect of this politics is Mendelssohn's concern for the fate of the woman writer, in whose name she creates the vanguard movement, MAMA. From Mendelssohn's politics, this introduction moves to Mendelssohn's equally complex writing processes. Consisting of two parts, section five, "Mendelssohn's Editorial Practice", is devoted to genetic criticism of Mendelssohn's drafts and paratexts. Part one is an exegesis of Mendelssohn's extensive rewritings of two poems from *viola tricolor* (1993). What emerges with extraordinary clarity are Mendelssohn's entrenched patterns of eliding the autobiographical self and specific political affiliation from her work. In combination, these practices are an acute reminder of the need to read Mendelssohn's poetry for its multivalence, rather than as a limited and limiting exposé of her life and times. Part two of section five centres on one of Mendelssohn's finest poems, "Silk & Wild Tulips" (2006), and examines the *longue durée* of Mendelssohn's editorial practice, tracing the gestation of this poem from a 1974 notebook, through to work of the 1980s and 1990s, to its final publication in 2006. Again, this genetic criticism serves an underlying purpose, namely: to curtail perceptions of Mendelssohn's discursive, affectively urgent poems as unsystematic or indiscriminate. Section six, "Mendelssohn's Publication History" moves from Mendelssohn's earliest published writings in countercultural newspapers of the early 1970s to the work that was published immediately after her death in 2009. This section recounts Mendelssohn's presentation of herself as an artist, her goals and aspirations, the poems she selected for republication, the journals and collections to which she submitted work, and her methods of self-publication. It concludes with an overview of Mendelssohn's poetry collections, tracking aspects of her style and content from the levity and surrealism of her work in the 1980s; her turn toward martyrdom and outcasting in the early 1990s; the preoccupations – feminist, Jewish, political – of *Implacable Art* (2000), and her return to the ludic in her last published collection, *py.* (2009). Section seven offers "A Last Perambulation" on Mendelssohn's peripatetic mode and is followed by "About this Collection", which is a guide to reading that details editorial decisions taken and inevitable compromises made in collating this scholarly edition of Mendelssohn's writing. The ninth and final section is "Acknowledgements and Permissions". This introduction aims to do justice to Mendelssohn's extraordinary *oeuvre*, to the work that she honed over a lifetime and considered a meticulous labour, a vocation, as suggested by the volume title, which reproduces that of her 1983 collection "*I'm working here.*" Throughout, wherever possible, every attempt has been made to defer to Mendelssohn's own language. Mendelssohn's disquiet about silencing is writ large through her poems; in both introduction and textual body proper, it is the goal of this collection that her lyric voice prevail.

Dear chaos.

we can't make our world go right
three jigsaws in tumbled out glory
birds chip at the sky a few
who were weasels now screams on wings

the tic in your eye i
told you was a butterfly
is now your pet
invisible, secure

landing in luxurious poems
a soft tower of un-used bubblebath
with its lid on,
unlike the disinfectant.
DISINFECT THIS POEM .
it had a baby lying in it
when suddenly
out of the sky
fell a torrent of brown disinfectant
missing her face and hands

missing her face and hands.
she misses her mother
this is all this chaos
in the city's modern face
chunks out here and there
in the city's modern room
where robots know the routine
in the city's roomy mess
no citizen is left.

a room a

softly the sound of woe
gallops is that acceptable
& every time hysteria rises
in the form of a make-believe bow

to tie in your hair
without the tug

chugging down the river of despair
if only alastor's hair would
be as insignificant as that

convenient stewed hat
what is the hatred about
violent propensity
floating round the brain

a flushed imagination

suddenly the form changes
a glass case or crystal typewriter

there's only the white on grey left
someone has written a poem about this

it's filed in an office somewhere

SAMPLER

In the end tulane –

carved in sweeps, midnight velvet
pumps and white stockings
make me feel feminine again

the struggle was the struggle of a man
the mental strife commanded by
a forceful male law

darwin would have been proud of me.
not of my daffodil dress, you understand
nor of the deep green
& the pearl lattice trims

nor of a floor-length broderie curtain's flutter

these shutters have no opening
merely seams, a wooden christ
& a different way of staring at a convex wall
with no other part to the room
apart from a vacancy
where a sleeping baby lay
waiting for her unadulterated dawn.

SAMPLER

tripping up on jibes

Oxford.

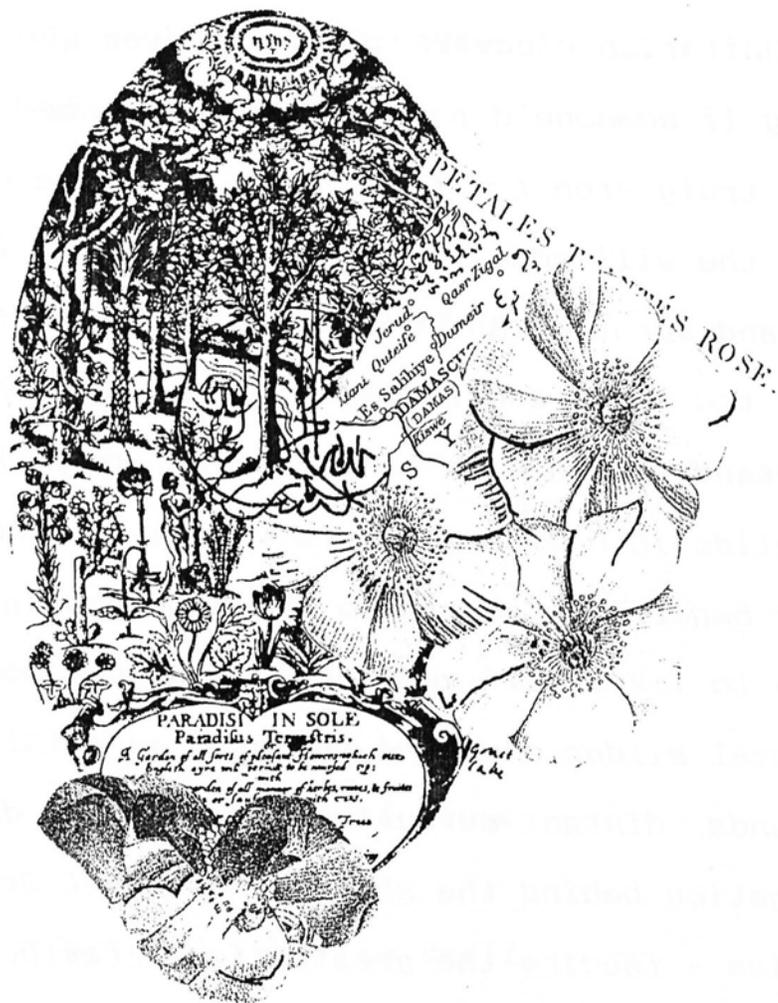
steadily studying music/philosophy/foreign languages/architecture/science
serrated edges suddenly lose their charm
screwing potatoes, that acrid juice
“it’s all go, and we have to make a show”
arm crossed relentlessly over stomach
creating nothing for the left shoulder.
a pair of red lace tights
shoes with ornate filigree buckles
time & time again enumerating appearances
bouncing care bears into the crowd
digging holes for pebbles
studying sound science in Oxford
stuck at an organ about to strike a chord
packed back in bottle neck
cars thrown into the roadside ditch

is this the hallow?
the crisp?
the batting for fun?
crashing through stuttering
stumbling for love
right round the town
empty town,
embryonic
winking rhymers
chorusing “tectonic”

Above her heart, a grand piano.

siblings serene, oblivious.
that's where it went.
it stares, glares, presents itself to me
I might. that's all. I might.
long lacy tassels. a black and gold shawl.
luxurious adjectives.
draped in black.
a dragon. a dragnet. a dreadnought.
the voice of war
calling to be heeded
the removal of a city wished for
anschluss. the war is too close
for revolution to be understood.
Terms will be confused.
Socialists will be called fascists.
Communists will be called fascists –
and all that. Tokens. Bus tokens.
The underlying factors have nothing to do with earrings.
smooth shoes.
another topsy tale.
turvy. one out the window.
cigarette ends on the window tops.
they'll punish you for nothing –
strawberries growing in their right places on the bush,
for being in clusters even
for shoving one in someone's mouth without warning,
for keeping a hand over the mouth until it is swallowed
they'll call it torture rather than love.

SAMPLER



Radiated? Light?

to see sense
to know the clatters
to be screamed at: 'see sense'
and to know the impenetrability.
clatter not 'see sense' silence 'see sense'
the immobile receptor seeing, trying, to
see sense.

to question the 'see sense'. Being blind.
'you come first' knowing that to be untrue.
to come first is to cheat and to lie.
so further back we go. Into the lyrics of
a poet's former agony. And they writhe: trying to write again!
Inventing phrases! The actions of an artificer.

Be not whom you are.

I am other. Not the children. That was the warning.
The slipper. The sock. The mess. Now rush through
the messy wet street to the oncoming, crash through
BUS and back over the bridge to the poor houses
the town behind, the hospital at the roundabout, the
route into the country, the wandering around in
hard frozen fields with footprints, how precious!
Making fine prints in a thin layer of snow and back
to the shoulder of mutton, or human, hand stay me.
Heart mind me. Cram my lips with poisonous stares,
buried houses, fussing crows, crushing the crowds into
warm woolly mufflers. I shall turn you into
that young lad on a scruffy fast horse. Go. Go. Back
out to the sea. Break through the sandbagged, concrete
barracked shoreline which NO light lights
no light other than electricity board pylons, thick tanks,
industrial machinery, clockwork ducks, a toy lighthouse,

a plastic guard, a dirty grey oil & radar'd, reagented ocean,
Go. to be checked by another official at the NEXT barrier
and then delve into night-life like the person with 24 hours
to live and not a penny to spend.

*

Train to L'pool

Travelling too hard – a girl chatters incessantly.
thin, long mid-brown hair – says that she
does not speak at home – saves it all up for
saturday

The café severs chatter, like they do in
the fruit shop back home, ignoring the
customers. One woman gets a chip in her
eye. She wears faun and the pangs prowl.
Some split off, eat cornish pasties.

There is no salvation in this city. You
can tell by the pavements which are
still stinking from the night before.

Everyone? Hardly any:
and hardly any out of hardly any.
No wonder i was never any good
at Mental Arithmetic: does set the
mind dreaming: What an expression *Set*
the mind dreaming: more Japanese
Suicide novels.

as we dream . . . decade.

*

yes it is official. sitting at a table. pen in hand,
watching one's own neck curve like a swan's
towards the sound of a heart-rending song.

letting the eye fall into a pool of black coffee
placed by the side of the eye that fell in.
supposed to be reading about justice v tyranny.

sobbing into a pen on a dry july day
thinking of the butcher's hook which caught my neck
lying on the bed, yesterday, window open, fumes drifting in.

and watching a hand of a woman
clasping a small box of peaches by its string
walking along with her lover.

SAMPLER

*

Shiva's crackling on a spinal hair
two swans nest they look wide apart

elfin at 50 nines are sixes
band bog french carbel caban urea
read round zeppelin rota
fresh as canned daily daisies
cloaking an april which must beat march
go DARKER sky i want that half
must not be over-thick earth in air hung
over the roof, people crawling between
the horses but it is totally incomprehensible
like a machine gone mad
why want to write *breadcrumbs*? or read
an italian poem with a blue wavy underlined title
thrown headlong into 'cane diem'?

SAMPLER

Graves' Art Gallery Tea Room, 1981, Sheffield

it's the truth! He cannot contain his stains
what should I do in his position?
eat the table at a guess – that is
die miserably chewing a chunk of melanine.

poor man, he keeps trying to drink his cigarette
yet his cup is half-full, yet his glasses are new
yet his hair is mouse-grey
though his finger travels from nose to mouth

his portion of table is covered in puddle spray
flecks of tobacco dissolve their colour
I am eating tobacco in my coffee
i want him to go away
so i light his cigarette
but he stays.

Itching his right nipple
flicking his list of christmas-card addresses
whilst the two german girls discuss brezhnev
over orange juice and erotic novels.

I am on the bread line too, his glasses are N. H. S.
i know his watery eyes, his bonyness
Yet i drink coffee, he drinks tea
and his cup is not half full, it is empty, empty.

SAMPLER

MOODIST

stuck after slide down
a cavern reveals ms
fall over rip off mal
petre out petre in
touch in pik din

twice tried to knock
over my twins knit
scare out from
read a paragraph
circular straightened

habits mean as pears
pushed in plainly
to tambourine one day
heart felt flies
fire bird fired noses

strumming the anterior gauge
two jumped, waistcoats snapping
then we add a bit of landskip
& it nearly crushed a pal's pip
guarded by her wish-nack

on the right mouth nick
of his last nick nack
that KIND chick she
shines dope pills, paints
nostrils in with gunge glop

silly mama, minute mama,
in a ma, thus a ma,
thus overmore further a
ma ma in a nutshell
groom muh fuh mothball

sound might don't ask doctor
he is white tablecloth loved
another one not, another
doctor with hat walks on
his heels snappy dresser

points silently to the objects
snarls insults, bourgeois
goody goody then tits drop out
brush pavement, one cut off
she cut out, chevrolet tout signed another

SAMPLER

Follow her magic

LEAVE AT SIX, there is reward in the
two BARE FIELDS trumpeting merry
SOLACE swifts flew by cat called
night under a window by a road
woke with rough illiterant gurgitation
swallowed swift's shit, coiled infanticide,
trodden misty indian deities reduced
to snig-papers, derelict harmony
prohibition serving fear through
a plexiglass woman's pristine, puerile
hard-knocked stuck hairstyle.

Silver PIN followed her trajectory,
better than clock-watching JIVE JIVE
'she worked for *CHIVERS* in w. w. II
why can't you' END OF QUES MON.
she is NOT a machine though, this
purefingered gold-ringed woman,
she is your question, tacked
to an elm-diseased form

*

*yes, it is a shame, a real shame: oh you have used that word before: real?
the ultimate real? you saw that label today? You wanted the jacket? or whatever it
was? You like the shot green? it looked, what? Unusual? Oh you think that you are
resisting falling in love again? that deserves one note down on the scale. every
time you close your eyes a surge of panic grasps your soul? to do with failure?
are you screeching for the sink? you do not want to be the sink again? who
frightened you? men frighten you? Your father's presence frightens you? He
is not even there yet. Sorry for laughing, you really are ridiculous sometimes.
You want another note – a middle 'c' (again) or that nice equal 'A' on the guitar.
Three fingers, side by side. Level on the fret. The objects in this house are
falling into my head. Tell that to your father.*

SAMPLER

*

to have some stupid bloke laughing and giggling at you.
or some it would have been a different ostrich
bitter as a rat's tail.

grandmother died. i was with her. she left
go of her earth. Harmonious? had there been a couple dancing
under one of the fruit trees in her back garden, her manner
of dying would have eased: the passage of her soul. danced
in the low sun.

woman who is weaving a stronger canvas: female quality
firm and caring, from the heart of caring

In the harbour town, the
successful remnants of the old woman's family, did make
statements which showed economic domination in their value
systems. They did not make much of themselves. the observation:
these families who should have grown rich in order that their
children's futures could be secured, and a portion of the nation's
heritage fall to their lot. That in the future they would be respected,
not laughed at. respected through domination and power.
the sophisticated kind of power, imbued with a culture, indelibly
native. but grown from nativity within regions familiar.
on t.v. shows, sliding about . . . on the young who sniff the sharp air
of a blue, crackling winter sky . . . on these shows, which are going on in kitchens
too: the friendlier neighbours come in sometimes and laugh. Their hardships
were listened to, and no-one grinned. But these hard truths are part of the
emotional cycle of this particularly sensitive, volatile race of people,
and an equal measure of respect is not shown.
When will your hair go grey, mum? your bones crunch up? will you dance again?
come down he cried. She was coming up however. You look at it: SIDEWAYS.
show her the door. If she recognizes it. You should have seen the quality of
her gravure: thick slaps of a wooden jungle shape. A door which held
a lot of meaning, their nature. cold, calculated, regular. The bedroom door which would
never close. Smooth action of other houses in comparison: there was a muddle through:
You are nothing special: over and over again: you are not unique: why do you think
that you are any different: and sink, sink, sink, in the shape of three diamonds
slantwise or vertical, the fashion in engagement rings, choose now at nine years of

age, marriage was so important, deeply embedded into the family structure, life's reality. and if the girl became one of those pitter patter cake people? fun for a while?

rehearse the sequence until the practice of organised life becomes really incorporated into TOTAL GREY TARMAC. she measured the music's paces and wondered why that was not enough. to satisfy or appease their insatiable demands for labour. the daylight did not bore her: ever. If you want to know more, there is no time for repeats. except on the piano. or the theme.

stupid old mothers. i hate being a mother.
i do not mind being friends but i like my freedom, and all this is illegal, to think this to write this, if it is true. I used to have words. Now they are absent. if you love your children you want to eat them up. I want to eat my children up. They are delicious to hug. When i want to be on my own, and very very very very very very very tres mucho mucho mucho quiet with the day then on my own my legs will sail away. i want I like to tickle my children. They curl up for ever in laughter. I want to be thinking and speaking in another language. I turn into a machine in this language. This language is a machine language now. Do other languages turn into machine sounds and lie flat, heavy, immobile on the page? I might lie flat, heavy and immobile on the bed. My page changes into a sheet of sky, or more complicatedly a form of the external environment, language travels along the construction.

SAMPLED

*

words won't break these walls
that mock and mocking moan
dripping water slowly slithering
o'er moss and lichen to the weeds below
stray and foul, the end of words.

the mind of words won't go
although the words themselves won't break
asundering the solid that is the substance of this woe
wherewith the flight of oft seen gulls
took not the sea apart from cloudy flight.

SAMPLER

viola tricolor

for judith, frank and nathan mendleson-blum

the young girl taken from a trained woman,
whose poetry was mocked not as a man's,
and charged with jealousy as her inspirational motive,
was thrust into pirateer's hands
accused of purity – the south was waiting
to tighten its iron band
– lock it with another *idea* of purity
that of revolutionary command.
to train her poetry into ice
crunched by a vocular donkey
implanted with a tightrope voice
to slice up a fair country
as broad became no love
deemed wide lined prostitution
that no other ship could be manned
by open *institution*.

it was not on the news the cries for help
and might take years to strip mystique from
what gives pleasure in defining how a girl
can never be a boy in artificial reality
and not enough of a dupe to believe that
plays throughout reality move to what came first
created artificiality and much one wanted not to wish
with food to muse on others' starving
there being no books allowed at table
took to minor anti apartheid reminders
on envelopes in christmas work
and reveries upon custard
ladled out from giant vats
by pasty girls in white starched caps

a painting struck my dream the other night
within a frame of three grooved wooden white
behind a partly revealed green foliage
custard came to light as delicious paint might
which sinks and sings with natural ecstasy
crossed in no which way here there and nowhere overmuch
firm streaks of black at most odd angles.

SAMPLER

language blows away

for kim longinotto landseer

it's foggy and delicious

i'm in love with a chimney stack
my aversion to applying my concentration
to what is not what I want is as strong as it ever was
although i am less bothered by machinery than i am by people
who are anyway, mostly, a lot stronger than the people who are being
turfed out from their communities to make way for f.m. and b'y.
if i had an apple mackintosh i could delineate the chimney stack for you.

i could argue until the idioms vapourized.
what Does experimental mean? in terms of division of experience determinative or subjected
but was carted off. the clerk at the family court agreed. what
other than all the trappings of western civilization do they want?
denial of the thirties. mostly. and philoan. i've returned to deserted
landscapes. i like them but children are being fictionalised into
demons and cherubim. who is going to be invited when art has been finished?

here, as always, i was betrayed
for staying within the confines of art. i was brought a matron's cap
that i saucered out into a southern breeze that drifted it onto a lombard's peak.
when women are amorphous and power hungry finding causes to flip over,
they have to be doing something about everything. nothing can be left
untouched. curly hair has to be washed from the brain
scraped back or razored up and stormed into airless terminals.

Sauce

1) on the message, should goodness be lost in silence. where can these go to
now they are lowered who were found to be in hell although on high
a gargoye to a princess, one head less, facilities with trick photography
that pure separation of visuality our schools of art have been ruling
to be an eye alone and strangely wandering, did you hear?
or are you seeing something which cannot be touched to be posited
was considered supremacist. Dearest world. I am at the mercy
of one whose nature is unlike my own. And still the truth remains as covered
as a Beuys grand piano in a blanket with a stitched on red cross.
Such was the Tyranny of necessity which stripped me to the bone.
how it straightens to rigid duty & is marched away. whilst musicians play on
their consort falling, shot in the snow, playing to hold up a city with a tremulous bow

2) is this something uncalled for. impossible. for not bending to her will.
and what that will might state she will not level as her sanity
was impaired by birthing me who shocked her with resemblancy.
whose face was less refined in feature, her sister did agree, &
many times would take it for analysis. vile once love exhausted
a deflected comment, these features will not pass, & if they do
it will be for reasons of pity, to them both wedded. The audacity
to challenge gods. the very thought. the very word.
and many a poor poem was thrust in to squelch with the rubbish
which would take this latter day impossible to the Council tip.
because i write: the poems are not in my face that horrified you.
the very thought. the very word. to not receive the love i felt for you.
but fed me more to hate me more or love what life abhors,
a Fruit, a brainless Carnal lassitude chewing primate gristle.

Cultural

we are then when impressions are all and bitten
judged and devoid of hostile response
as insignificantly nothing amounts to nothing
nature subjected to critical sense

seated & desolate, eyes unblinking
rocking ourselves into quatrain
punished for poverty sterilized forcibly
arms dealers drive to work the same.

here come the masses fed on molasses
sexually inept and incontinent
hair undressed parroting best
ironing away without irony

how dare one dare what gall moves there
to heighten with no increase in volume
a forgotten face from a distant place
an obsession with an impression

impressions cannot be built upon
if valid results are required
art does not match it cannot conform
but by retarding format

this is extant a constrained line
which circulates around thirty objects
to enter within and not join in
presages market research projects

for those who opine that brains sublime
must have travelled in proof provided
a sojourn in some stable societies
as esoteric lacks standard merit

is defined as potentially insane &
populations sub-divided
ensures prohibition of views one-sided
whatever that may mean

*

Eulogy

she smoothes her skirt
to show her ineffectual language
unhappy to be english speaking
to the interesting sound of spoken greek
but what could she say? this is music
in comparison to what I speak
& that is really the crux of her problem
she feels another language not this one
she is impressed. she wants to learn
these new inflections.
but will she be seized
a traitor to the nation
he sings a sentence between talking them
it goes soft, it asserts, it narrates &
faces change, animate, picking up
on each others' words
it sounds a bit italian, a bit spanish,
the girl who is with them
told me
that that was because they were speaking mediterranean.

“I am nicely” was “I’m nicely” (5/A/2/4)

“net-wise” was “net-wize” (5/A/2/4)

“small gap” was “small gap” (5/A/2/7)

“cud kind of thud, curdling there” was “cud kind of thud without the noise, curdling” (5/A/2/4) and “cud kind of thud to curdle there” (5/A/2/7)

“phonecall last night” was “phonecall last night.” (5/A/2/7)

“One on each shoulder, carouse.”

Next to “aeaea”, Mendelssohn writes by hand: “(read aCaCa)” (5/A/6/4; see also 5/A/5/3, 4, and 5). This annotation is photocopied, but the altered lettering remains ambiguous (ed).

“LOCALIZED EFFECTS.”

By hand, Mendelssohn writes beneath the poem: “2 / 1975.” (5/A/6/4; see also 5/A/5/3, 4 and 5). This annotation has been photocopied.

Poem beginning “Must you? She seldom burns”

Annotations made before photocopying include corrected typos and: “now they are”; “march tœ”; “all in ^a^ tricky”, and “(sic)” referring to “microphes” (5/A/6/4).

“Who cycled in two fours?”

This poem does not appear in all archived copies of *Is this a True Parrot, a Mountain, or a Stooge?* The definitive variant appears to be a manuscript photocopied in the same orange paper used for the cover (5/A/6/3). A typescript is held in 5/A/6/1; signed in blue ink, “Lake”, it differs from the manuscript in punctuation, spacing, and capitalisation, including: “hard, empty” was “hard empty”; “say) leads to” was “say). leads to” (and, in another manuscript in the same file, “say) lead to”). Further, “Quite Different” was “Quite different” and “Wrapped round” was “Wrapped around”.

“Where?”

The manuscript of this poem in 5/A/6/1 includes a rhomboid drawing where a title might be expected; in the photocopied manuscript of 5/A/6/2, this same drawing is copied and included next to the underlined title. This latter variant does not include the third stanza and is signed “Grace Lake.” with a note reading: “Shirley Prendergast has lost a whole file of my poetry. / A. M.” The version used in this collection is that of 5/A/6/1, which is identical to the copy of stanza three that appears in the orange, photocopied and possibly final text in 5/A/6/3.

In addition to minor changes in punctuation, the untitled, incomplete typescript in 5/A/6/2 shows differences from the manuscript photocopies, including: “this SQUARE TRIM JUMP” is typed as “this square trim jump”; “by he” is rendered “by He”; and the stanza break after “auditories” is elided. The typescript shows only the first two lines of stanza three, beginning “the Pleasure of Petrol’s stretch”.

Grace Lake, Typescript (1985).

With a photocopier, Mendelssohn reduces “WHY” and “Dear chaos.” to A5 size as she does for some chapbooks, among them, *Is this a True Parrot, a Mountain, or a Stooge?* A minimalist doodle akin to the one contained in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* occupies a page in

the file these poems share; it is also photocopied and reduced (SxMs109/5/A/42). Across the top of “Dear chaos.” Mendelssohn types: “Michelle . . . please hear the ironic voice. O.K?” She then signs “Grace” by hand; both additions occur pre-copying.

There are two typescripts of “WHY” and the original title (“WHY . . .”) is redacted on both. One is corrected by hand, and in its margins, Mendelssohn writes: “This poem has an effete voice, is searching sense, is progressively reluctant to reveal artificial constructs as fitting substitutes for the cycle of natural decay.” On this copy, used here, Mendelssohn alters spelling and typos, and makes the following substantive changes:

“firstly” was “first”
“secondly” was “second”
“onto” was “on”
“questions” was “question”
“summonsed” was “summoned”
“sea; mellowed” was “sea, mellowed”

A related file includes a photocopied photograph of Mendelssohn replicated in the introduction to this volume. The image is surrounded by doodles and is placed on a hand-written manuscript of “WHY”. Along the left border, from the first stanza, reads: “father / her bear’s / JUL / EMBLEMATIC”. The photograph is placed on an angle, and the last two lines of stanza two are just visible along the bottom edge. The third stanza is fully visible, and it differs from the typescript in that there are no mid-line extended spaces; the first word reads “the”, a comma is added after “meadow” in line four, and a hyphen is added to “back seat”. The entirety is attributed to “Grace Lake. / 1985. ©” (5/8/2/19). See also below notes on the undated poems at the end of this volume, specifically “moxed metaphor” and poem beginning “nit freaks”.

Grace Lake, Typescript (22 April 1986).

The poem “a room a” is a dated typescript on *Mus Fabric* watermarked paper. It is in file SxMs109/5/A/43/1, which contains “oh yes we are entitled mohican slaves” and “dig; dig.” (1983); the poem beginning “rolling, and all these words are alive and” (1985), and a typescript of “Winter.”, a poem that appears in *The News* (no. 1, 1987) and *Slate* (no. 3, 1987). The folder holds extracts from Mendelssohn’s *roman-à-clef*, including a portion of *What a Performance* (1987).

Grace Lake, Typescript (September 1986).

Mendelssohn typed these poems – “In the end tulane –”; “tripping up on jibes”; “Above her heart, a grand piano.” – into a booklet made from a folded A3 sheet. The first two poems were photocopied onto A3 and similarly formatted; a final A4 photocopy shows these two poems reduced to sit side by side on a partitioned A4 sheet, as Mendelssohn often does with a view to creating a chapbook (SxMs109/5/A/26). A related manuscript sheet exists in 5/B/1/1b; starting *in medias res*, it reads:

& PROUD of itself, arms folded, tree bashing back with a mumble,
ah! Benediction. the rising tide’s threatening voice. mix ’em up.
what doth it come down to? Sea-garden owned by whoever can,
but this is a mystery, kyrie, – however to oversperse which it would be,
intoxicating mystery, the part of history which doesn’t, on a low sling,

send you shivering to a corner intent upon sweet innocence, his sea
might be travelling chiasmically, he doesn't need his arms to indicate
his strength, although conjunctions may be banned, around here,

above her heart, a grand piano.

By hand, Mendelssohn corrects a line in the fourth stanza of “In the end tulane —”: “part of to” and may place a bullet point between the title and line one (ed.). “Tulane” is a middle name of Mendelssohn’s third child, Emerald, born August 1985. The title is hand-written, as is an upper-right corner note reading: “from Grace. / September 4th 1986.” In the bottom left corner, Mendelssohn writes: “1st birthday.” All corrections recur in photocopies. Exceptionally, in the A3 photocopy, pencilled forward slashes suggest that Mendelssohn may have considered making “a vacancy” a distinct line (ed.).

In the single copy of “tripping up on jibes”, each portion of the poem occupies its own page. In the photocopy of the A3 booklet, “Above her heart, a grand piano.” includes the following annotations by hand in blue: “another topsy tale. / turvy. one out the window.” is changed to “another topsy turvy tale / one out the window.”; “window tops.” becomes “window tops?” and “call it torture” is altered to read “call that torture”.

The same A3 photocopy includes handwritten reference notes. In the blank centre of the booklet, Mendelssohn writes:

Lit & Phils. Thomas Henry, Thomas Percival, & John Aiken founded the Manchester Lit & Phil. Society in 1781. The radical, Joseph Priestly, lecturer at the Warrington Academy, was a founder member of the Lunar Society and honorary member of the M/c Lit. & Phil.

Thomas Henry: The natural tendency of a cultivation of polite learning is to refine the understanding, humanise the soul, enlarge the field of useful knowledge.”

Beneath “Above her heart, a grand piano.” Mendelssohn writes:

James Miller’s “Lady Science” portrayed in The Humours of Oxford (1726) – a middle-aged matron who through scientific diletantism, had become a nuisance to society.

Swift. “On the Education of Ladies.”

The first boarding schools were set up in and around London in the latter part of the seventeenth century for the purpose of providing daughters of the titled and landed with a polite education.

An essay in Defense of the Female Sex. Anon. [^][unclear, possibly “sel”—ed.][^] 1696. praises Locke’s recognition that women have rational souls & abilities which equalled men’s,

London’s coffee houses “penny universities”

The bluestocking coterie revolved around Mrs Elizabeth Montagu (1720–1800).

Grace Lake, “*Inbuilt Flash Nix, & Nine Poems, Three Collages.*” *constant red/mingled damask*, no. 1 (September 1986).

This journal was produced by the poet Nigel Wheale in Cambridge. A photocopied, stapled booklet of eighty pages, this first issue includes three black and white collages (and possibly a block print) from Grace Lake on the cover and within; Lake

is thanked for her graphics. Published authors include Alphonso X el Sabio (1230–84), Peter Riley, Kelvin Corcoran, John Wilkinson, Peter Middleton, Wendy Mulford, John Welch, Ian Patterson, Steve Holland, Wheale, and Mendelssohn. The journal was intended to be occasionally produced, and “free [mostly] to interested persons.” In issue one, plans are announced for a second number in December/January 1987; the back pages advertise small presses, among them, Equofinality, “open township” (Hebden Bridge), and Peter Riley’s Poetical Histories series.

The original, collaged cover of this issue *constant red/mingled damask* is housed at Sussex Special Collections (SxMs109/5/A/8). A portion of issue one is also filed at Sussex, and though it replicates the British Library edition used here, the occasional variation suggests that this may have been a proof copy (5/A/5/6). For instance, in line four, stanza seven of “MOODIST”, “doctor” is “doctore”.

Mendelssohn’s entry is titled “Inbuilt Flash Nix & Nine Poems, Three Collages” and includes the titular prose piece of that 1985 collection (see above notes). Images are interspersed with Mendelssohn’s contribution. After “Train to L’pool” is a photocopy of the 1905 portrait of Clara Rilke-Westhoff by Paula Modersohn-Becker (another copy appears in 5/B/2/48). In an undated, untitled part of her *roman-à-clef*, Mendelssohn suggests that while a woman mightn’t like to be called a single parent, “she may prefer to be likened to Clara Westhoff” (5/B/1/1b).

Beneath the clearly identified Westhoff portrait, Mendelssohn writes:

*Dry paint, marked, dwindling rose, dwindling
between a holy touch, not quite pierced by a thorn,
mouth down-turned, a deep background, chalk dress,
square neckline slashed behind the rose’s crown, eyes
on the brink of tears, fearful expression, knowing*

After the poem beginning “to have some stupid bloke laughing and giggling at you.”, Mendelssohn includes a labelled photocopy of Augustus John’s “Dorelia and the Children at Margites”. Under the painting, Mendelssohn writes: “He didn’t tell me he had a thing about ‘Dorelia.’” After the John painting, she includes a photocopied article by Jasper Becker for *The Guardian*, dated 9 August 1986, and titled “China gets a touch of Hollywood”. Becker discusses the making of Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor*, a biopic of Pu Yi, the last recognised royal descendent of the Manchu dynasty who spent a decade in Mao’s prison system, and another five in Stalin’s, before becoming head gardener at Peking botanical gardens. Cited and dated by Mendelssohn, this article completes her entry.

At the end of *constant red/mingled damask* is a page entitled: “Among the Contributors”. Mendelssohn’s is the first and longest authorial biography, reading:

GRACE LAKE: writer, artist, started by placing objects found in the street in art exhibitions and having given them titles, walking out. Published co-operatively one edition of a national newspaper STRIKE in 1970. One volume of poetry 1967–1970 disappeared prior to publication. Rolled off her poetry in short runs, all given away. Green Suede Blues Press, Working Class Women’s Publishing House, Writing Round an Ideal World Press, Scrap Publishing, and Bone Dry. Poetry published by Sheffield Free Press. Poems with Tim Mathews. A volume withdrawn from Common Ground Printing Co-operative following disputation over the license of printers to censor. She preferred to reserve two pages (or an agreed number) for printers’ criticism. Difficulty ensues between those who write/read poetry and those who, whilst maintaining control over printing machinery, do not.

Another draft of the same biography includes information about publishing co-operatively a single issue of the national newspaper “Strike” in 1970 and writing “articles for the long defunct West London Underground ‘Frendz’ magazine” (5/B/1/1b). In this draft, the publication “dispute” is a “row”, and a sentence is struck through that reads: “She is single with three children & is in the process of organizing an exhibition of painting & poetry in order to raise funds.” In the final sentence, “do not” is embedded within the sentence, as in: “& those who do not, yet who have control of ~~the~~ printing machinery”.

Some of Mendelssohn’s poems in this volume are the final published variants of poems previously published. These poems, and their variants, are listed below:

“Radiated? Light?”

This poem was previously published in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985). In 1986, the slight indent of line two is excised, as are the double quotations used throughout the 1985 version; additionally, stanzas one and two of 1986 are a single stanza in 1985.

“Train to L’pool”

This poem was previously published in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985). In earlier versions, “L’pool” was “L’pool.”; another has pencilled along the top, “Train to Liverpool”, though this may not be in Mendelssohn’s hand (5/A/5/1). Further, “*Set / the mind dreaming*” was in quotations and not italicised, and “dream . . . decade.” was “dream decade.”

Poem beginning “Shiva’s crackling on a spinal hair”

This poem was previously published in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985), where “*breadcrumbs?*” was not italicised but is in quotation marks.

“Graves’ Art Gallery Tea Room, 1981, Sheffield”

This poem was published in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (August 1985), where it is untitled and begins “It’s the truth! He cannot contain his stains” (see above notes). As “It’s the truth!”, it appears in a list of poem titles and first lines from earlier in the decade (see notes for Sheffield typescript, November 1981). Minor differences in punctuation and spelling in Sussex variants of *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (5/A/5/1–4) include: “his position?” is “this position?”; “puddle spray” is “puddle-spray”; and “bonyness” is “boniness” (5/A/5/4). In another earlier draft, the lines “I am on the bread line too, his glasses are N. H. S.” were preceded by: “I am on the bread line too / I know his watery eyes.”; both are heavily redacted in blue ink.

“Follow her magic”

Published in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985), this poem bore a full stop at the end of an underlined title, and at the bottom, Mendelssohn pens: “10/1983”. Minor variations between 1986 and 1985 include: “derelict harmony” was “derelict harmony,” and “CHIVERS” was “CHIVERS”. In *constant red*, lines three and four of stanza two read: “she worked [. . .] can’t you END OF QUESTION.” The closing quotation mark in this volume has been added (ed.). In *Inbuilt Flash Nix*, the same lines read: “she worked [. . .] can’t you?” END OF QUESTION.” Pre-copying, Mendelssohn adds the punctuation after “you” by hand.

Poem beginning “yes, it is a shame, a real shame:”

This poem appears twice in *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985) and as part of a three-page A5 typescript, a play attributed to Grace Lake entitled “THERE was a great ripping up OF ROMANCE OCCURRING.” The play was intended for performance at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, 1985; 7/A/6. The earlier versions are not italicised. Further differences between the 1986 and the 1985 poem include:

“before: real?” was “before: real”
 “You like the shot” was “You liked the shot”
 “you think / that you are” was “you think / you are” (7/A/6 only)
 “you are / resisting” was “you are re / resisting” (5/A/5/5 only)
 “a middle ‘c’” and “equal ‘A’” were “a middle c” and “equal A”

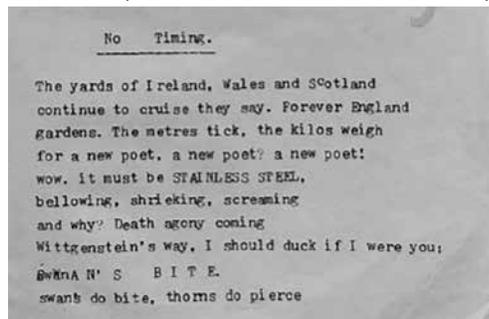
Grace Lake, Typescript (October 1986).

Mendelssohn dates the manuscript and typescript variants of “to fit the prototype.” precisely: “completed 2nd October .86. 10.30.a.m.” (SxMs109/5/B/1/1b). In addition to minor differences in spacing and punctuation, distinctions between typescript and manuscript are as follows:

“cat in chanterelles imbibing” was “cat in mushrooms imbibes”
 “doloraosa” was “dolorosa”
 “leaven spanned ear” was “leaven broader ear”
 “fallow scoopydoo sounds” was “fallow scoopydoosounds”
 “leaven spanned ear” was “leaven broader ear”
 After “lops” in manuscript there is a long space, then “Arkansas home.”
 “littler & plump” reads “littler & ~~fae~~ plump”
 “ALL” was “All”
 “it, i usually” was “it, usually”
 “which buzzes now electronic division” was “which buzzes now with electronic subdivision”
 “the other’s sub-division,” was “the other’s electronic subdivision,”
 “than they can” was “than ~~them~~ they can”
 “interwoven top uppers” was “interwoven tops” (possibly first: “interweaved”)
 “the passage is / is opened” was “the passage is opened”

Both manuscript and typescript are two pages, but the typescript ends with the conclusion of manuscript page one. The second manuscript page is consistent in style, tone, and some references, among them, to children, “red ankle straps”, and “turbo shoe”.

Grace Lake, “AN ACCOUNT OF A MUMMY, IN The Royal Cabinet of Antiquities at DRESDEN” (October 1986).



An independently published A5 pamphlet on pink paper, *AN ACCOUNT OF A MUMMY* has a beautifully formatted title page in capitals, subscript, and regular text; its layout and long title are an homage to eighteenth-century book design.

The complete pamphlet contains four poems: “Not so Good”; “Not Bad”; “That’s Fascism”; and “No Timing.” The first two poems will reappear in *constant red/mingled damask*, no. 2 (see below notes). In the poem, “No Timing.”, the line “SwWnAN’ S B I T E.” is conveyed by a series of over-typings, so that the first “S” was initially “s” and the “W” is typed over an “a” (see image).