

Between The Lines

Newcastle University and Poetry School
Creative Writing / Writing Poetry MA
Anthology 2023

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POETRY
SCHOOL



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Forewords

Within the covers of this book, there are 33 pieces of writing by 10 supremely talented writers, numbers which were limited not by any scarcity of excellence in this year's MA cohorts, but simply by the available space. In work which showcases the breadth of excellence within the Newcastle University writing courses in poetry, prose and scriptwriting, our writers have conjured love and grief, fires and oceans, ancient myths and newly hatched terrors. There are images that will stay with you long after the final page, and moments of incredible beauty and emotion. All of which is to say that editing this anthology has been an absolute joy. We want to thank NCLA and the wonderful Melanie Birch for enabling us to put together such a brilliant collection. We hope that you love these pieces just as much as we do, as you read their lines and discover what lies between them.

Ceri Barrett, Amy Harte and Sarah Terkaoui
Editorial Board

There are no hypotheticals in the writing life, no acclaimed unwritten stories or novels, no acclaimed ideas for a piece of writing: there's what gets onto the page and what we do with it there. Transformation, then, is a peculiarly hands-on matter for writers; it's what we can achieve, not with the material we hope to have or might have one day, but with the material we have now. It's clear from the writing included in this anthology that these writers, who are coming to the end of programmes with us, have a powerful sense of their own practical, hands-on transformative opportunities – opportunities that come when we open a book we didn't know was a book we'd love, opportunities that come when we realise we can get the writing out *that way*, or opportunities that come when we realise that, actually, the material we have is material for a field of writing we hadn't ever realised was *our* field. The work included here is a wonderful demonstration of this: we invent, we write, we revise and here, on page after marvellous page, is writing confidently striking out to meet that strived-for thing, deserved by every writer represented here: a readership.

Jacob Polley, Degree Programme Director MA in Creative Writing + MA in Writing Poetry and Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University

Each year, the final year students taking the Newcastle University MAs in Creative Writing and Writing Poetry produce outstanding poetry, prose and script work we are very proud to present here. Through their wild imaginations and their skill in their craft, readers will discover voices that capture our lives, evoke our shared histories and explore our interwoven selves in moving ways that will surprise and delight. Each writer draws on a local history refracted through universal themes to find a form and voice at once fresh and accomplished. Each has worked incredibly hard to overcome inner doubts, hostile circumstances and global and personal traumas to make this brilliant work. Reading them, it is clear that they are ready to take their place at the forefront of literary culture, and we can't wait to see what each of them will go on to achieve.

Preti Taneja, Director of NCLA and Professor of World Literature and Creative Writing, Newcastle University

Eve's Lover

Then there are nights when I whisper
his name into the gilt-framed mirror
until his shadow glazes my bare shoulder
and a coil of my hair glows in his fist
as his mouth scalds my earlobe,
and each of the small bones in my wrist.
My throat is raw with the smoke of his skin,
and I burn on the stone of his limbs. Who
would not want such a lover? God knows,
if I hadn't found him that day – in the blooms
of hot-wooded dust, where his tail licked the earth
the sage patch all broken up, its oils
lighting the air, the fumes of fallen fruit –
I might have invented him.

Kitchen Artefacts

It's why we have fingernails, you once said,
so when I slide the knife through a block of butter
and it glides through the nail, into but not clean
through my fingertip, I am grateful.
You told me blunt edges were more dangerous,
and you whetted every carbon steel blade
in the house into a fine grey crescent.
I wonder which knife you were holding
when my father found you that night,
how close you came when the morphine
stopped working. What would I have done?
I have your hands: slender, cold
enough for pastry, a tally of white scars.

Things hang well on me now

I back out of the room into a wardrobe,
into a scoop-backed dress of raw silk
to a party held at a rare altitude.
I am in love with the depression
between each rib, with a man
I've just met, who runs his hands
over my various sorrows and
why would I take off my dress
to go back to that hospital bed
where the machines have given you up
and your body is to be shared out
in small and hopeful packages, god
the corneas of your wide brown eyes.

Peekaboo

All those days we spent rehearsing my death
with the sour muslin that covered my face.
Your hands, which would have taken my eyes,
pulling out the insides of each new word
I offered. Yes, that is a button. No,
that is a bolt. Perhaps it is like a button.
A planet is not a ball you can hold.

I grew you in my blood.
I whittled my bones to milk,
even my death is not my own.
I keep it in a box on a high shelf.
I pray that when you open it,
I will have done enough.

Last of the salt days

We boiled water, stirred in our portion of salt,
waved the vapour into our nostrils, good
we'd say, good as tomorrow's scattering
of rice. Menelaus found me in his orchards
once, filling my pockets with strips of bark,
veins of bitter leaves threading my teeth.
I couldn't tell him what it was like to dream
of bread baking, of oranges and persimmons,
stews paprika-bright, thick with meat
and fat green olives. To wake to stone again,
to watch a boy skin, gut and spit a rat
when there were still rats and still boys,
for which mother of sons would wait
for Agamemnon, already heating his knife.

Wulf

after the Old English, *Wulf and Eadwacer*

Don't make a fool of your family.

They'll slit his throat if he looks for me.

The boat keel slices through salt and reed.

My lover is left without oar without mete

on that islet remote and ringed by fenland.

I watch his fate unfurl from the mainland.

With sword-sharp eyes and hidden knives

they prowl the shore. Blood-driven hounds

are patiently waiting for Wulf to make

a rash and reckless final mistake.

Don't make a fool of your family.

They'll slit his throat if he looks for me.

They watch the bold one wed me and bed me,

his tongue taming mine. Hands and knees

wedged between, bruising my thighs.

The war-horn is clear beneath violent skies.

His breath is bitter, sweet with mead,

hot on my breasts, wet with tears.

Don't make a fool of your family.

They'll slit his throat if he looks for me.

They tear her from breastmilk. Our cub

howls in the wood in the jaws of Wolf.

Wulf, can you hear her?

Wulf, are you listening?

Don't make a fool of your family.

I'll slit your throat if you look for me.

To Lose a Child

after *Beowulf*, ll. 2444-2462a

The pain of losing a child is endless.
But watching your boy twitching to stillness,
hanging from the gallows, that is torturous.

I sing my song of screams to kill the hush
of his untimely death, while his father hangs
his head in shame to the raven's delight.

With each new sun, the grey ring framing
the watcher's eye is the knotted rope snaking
my son's throat, cutting short this fleeting life.

I sit on the edge of his bed and smooth
his blanket, fold his tunic, and stroke
my dry and hollow womb, knowing it's vain

too late to start again. I take my husband's
hand and we pass by the lonely mead hall,
where dust clings to harp strings, cup rims, and all joy

lies wasted. I rest my hand on the soil
of his sleeping-place and sing. My shrill hymn,
smothered by the wind, goes on, un-consoled.

My Baby

after *Beowulf*, ll. 1276b-1295

I grip grief's neck. I'm bitter yet gifted.
I tread the fen to rewrite the epic.
No one sails after slaying my baby.

It's time to flip the tables. On Hrothgar's floor
the Ring-Danes are sleeping sweetly, swollen
buds of severed Devil's-bit. Don't be fooled

foes. My fight is more fearsome for being
female. Watch me match any man swinging
a sword stung by sinew and iron claws.

They smell me. The foul fiends fall over feet
and seats, feeling for steel and boards. Helmets
and byrnies bypass their wits. I won't lose

my soul too. But where is Wolf, son-
snatcher? I seize another, then slip away
and march to the marsh to cleave Æschere's life

limb by limb.

Riddle

after the Old English, *Riddle 7*

Silence is my style
unsettle the streams
Sometimes my dress
raise me up high
or the violent veil
far and wide across
sing so sweetly
a splendid sound
on brown or burn.

when I step on the ground
or inhabit house.
and Heaven's motion
over roofs of townsmen
bears me away
nations. My quills
their silvery song
when I'm not bedded
I'm a soaring pearl.

The Ruin

after the Old English, *The Ruin*

this stonework is stunning spoilt by fate
the city is broken giantswork decays
tiles have tumbled towers have toppled
the gate is idle the concrete corroded
the storm shelter yawns barren and brittle
bruised by the years and soilbeds embrace
masterly masons dust to ashes
motherearths fists enfold generations
of nations long lost this wall
rustfreckled goatgrey kingdom after kingdom
stood tall under storms
steep and arched
it collapsed
yet lingered
lying on grim ground it glitters in a mudcrust crown
the creative mind concocted a plan
devised a system a formation of rings
a wallbrace of wires woven together
beautiful were the buildings the bathhouses
grand were the gables the great songs of heroes
the meadhalls brimming with merrymaking wo men
but fate put a stop to that
and fighters fell days of disease came
the swordbold were stolen by death
and warzones were wrought into wastelands
the city surrendered and souls sighed
red curvedroof beams broke away

terracotta tiles were torn from trusses
razed to rubble ruined lost
are the glad and goldgreat gorgeously adorned
mettlesome and merry in military rings
who gazed on garnets and silver and coin
on crystals and chattels and delicate chains
on this fair fortress of farreaching power
this stone structure stood and springs supplied heat
surges so wide and the wall held it all
in its bright breast where the baths were
hot to their hearts handy and soothing
they let loose
scalding streams over cold stones
to heat those beautiful pools

now dust
return to the earth as it was

Notes

Mete – food/meat

Riddle – Swan

Dust return to earth as it was – “Ecclesiastes”, *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 760, 12:7

FLASH FLOOD

A scream - shatters every pane of glass in the courtyard -
heralding a flood like no other

and out of the windows of flat 4C, chattels, possessions,
goods, objects, flow with the force of a river in spate, a surge
of DVDs and CDs, the ancient order of Japanese directors,
Kurosawa, Ozu, Kobayashi, Ichikawa, swirl into the vortex,
the rigorous moral code they enshrine for the autistic young
man who absorbs every faded, jerky, black and white scene
is no saving grace, they sink without trace under a library of
insight into Samurai History, Samurai Armour, Samurai
Wisdom, Ninja Fighting Machines, Ninjas Rewritten, and
Takebe: The Japanese Art of Saving Money, testament to a
far superior culture, he knows, and then, Japanese
Patisserie, Baking School, Super Sourdough, The Hairy
Bikers Go Forth, and every baker going forth, necessary
knowledge for an aspiring *shokunin*, and to go with cakes,
well, Coffee Art, The History of Coffee, Coffee Obsession,
Coffee Culture, Cafe Culture, Milk Culture, 'the culture of
culture - yoghurt' said his mum and he laughed, and then
charting his own course through an alternative education, The
History of America, The History of Russia, The History of
China, Europe, Greece, Britain and Ireland, and onward
through Operation Mincemeat, Life Skills, The Psychology of
Love, The KamaSutra, 2000 QI Facts, Harry Hill's Joke
Book, Oliver Twist, Dracula, 1001 Films You Must See, 1001
Books You Must Read (oh god), and fast on the torrent of

books, a collapsing mountain of collectibles bought at
country fairs and forgotten shops down side streets and
Whitby's biannual Goth Festivals and phantasmagorical
websites promising to send 'you can't buy these anywhere
else' goods from Java and Jakarta and Jaipur and Juba and
Jinzhou, each ornament cast in homage to the Terracotta
Army, Indian deities, Sith lords, the Seven Japanese Lucky
Gods, and he has faith, yes, honest traders will send them,
and then, a bodiless army of hoodies and cloaks and frock
coats, writhing in the murky waters like a nightmare of
Dementors, and then, a battalion of bottles brimming with the
obsession for cleaning and cleanliness, Dettol and Cif and
Toilet Duck and Mr Muscle and Mr Sheen and Molton Brown
hand wash and Heath shower gel and L'Occitane Aqua
Réotier and Artisent eau de parfum and Moschino eau de
toilette and eau de David Beckham, and then,
heave,
and then,
heave,
sailing on the final purge of despair,
the nine-ounce bottle of beard oil
bought at Kardashian cost
by her
clean-shaven son.

In Conversation with a Wall

'Mum...? I'm home!

It was so hot today, wasn't it?

It's a good thing we packed all those cucumbers
for lunch

I finished all the slices you gave me.

See? There's nothing left.

Mum...? See—'

'Food's on the table.'

'Oh...

Is it the...the shoes?

I'll put them away.

Sorry, I'll put them next to the wall on the balcony.'

Just like you tell me every day over the phone—

but I never do it until you're at the door.

I stand below the towering clock and wait for "five to".

'Do you see? I always put them exactly

how you ask me to.'

'The bed....?'

I think I made the bed,

didn't I?

'I'll make the bed.'

I'll make it perfectly this time.

We'll have spotless, wrinkle-free bed sheets.

All the winter afternoons on which you napped right here

and the ones on which you talked to me

your voice as soft as a murmured prayer

lay wrapped in spotless, wrinkle-free bed sheets.

'Done!

Don't just lean in the doorway Mum, come in!

Mum, look here...?'

'Eat it before it gets cold.'

'I'm sorry Mum,
you must be tired...'
*and on days like this one,
your aching arms stay by your side*

hanging

from your drooping shoulders.

*They can't s t r e t c h all the way over
this wall as old as 'us'*

between

you

and me

*Silence is a sly brick-layer
eager to get back to work.*

'But—'

'You left the door open on your way out!'

'I did leave the door open!'
*Back then, reluctant goodbyes
held back in plump red cheeks
needed hurriedly (un)closed doors
to sneak past
even if it was only to get lost
in a walled maze.*

'I have been leaving doors open for years!'

Closed doors often fade into stone walls;

they lose their names;

they forget they can open

to let people in.

'I have been building doorways leading to you

ever since,

and leaving them open.

The ones that swing shut often screech,

"See? There's nothing left!"

Letters in a Rented Tongue

I.

Dear *Tthamma*¹,

This is yet another letter
that I couldn't write to you
in our native tongue.

It sits on my table like one of your heavy sighs
that keep our home rooted to the ground
in this place that you'll never call
'home'

But, for how long will it stay that way?

The world you keep trying to build around me
with faded photo albums,
recipes passed down like heirlooms,
and your talcum powder-hair oil fragrance
is drifting away now

Your sighs,
your nods,
your scowls
don't transmit over phone calls

Your absence is teaching me
how to call my name
in your voice

¹ *Tthamma* is a Bengali word for paternal grandmother.

I can't see you this time
sitting in the balcony with balls of wool near your feet,
storing the winter sun in your voice's troughs and peaks,
with questions about where my notebook is
waiting in a queue behind your stern gaze

So I sit at my desk again
and retrace our midday lessons in our native tongue
—your way of saying,
'remember'

II.

Dear *Tthamma*,

This is yet another letter
that I am writing to you
in a rented language

This month's rent is overdue

The landlord's notice sits on the table
next to your muted anger;
the landlord's ask, as always,
is for another instalment of who we used to be

He demands we say our names
how he would;
he demands our kitchen smells like his;
he demands,
and demands,
and demands,
until his wants begin to drip off the table,
and weigh down our shared world

You negotiate with but one word

You whisper from across the room
over your sighs,
and nods,
and scowls;

You look at me
and say,
'remember'

III.

Dear *Tthamma*,

This is yet another letter
that I couldn't write to you
in our native tongue

It sits on my table
like another one of your heavy sighs
and stares at me
hoping to be rescued from the void named 'being forgotten'

But for how long will it stay that way?

The world you built around me
with songs from a time left behind,
spices borrowed from a village we've only visited once,
and your talcum powder-hair oil fragrance
is drifting away now

Your sighs?
your nods?
your scowls?
they don't transmit over phone calls

Your absence is teaching me
how to call your name
in my voice

I can't see you this time
sitting on the balcony,
stray flowers playing sheepishly with your cotton saree's corner,
storing the winter sun in its flimsy troughs and peaks,
as your questions about my missing notebook
wait quietly behind your stern gaze

So I sit at my desk again
and retrace our midday lessons in our native tongue
—your way of saying,
'remember'

Farewell Miss Healey

Even in your calass
before the cranage of my spelling
occluded my mind
I wanted to be a wirter

But you said I mustn't nur
before I could walk
and no mater my olve of words
spelling counts more

So here I am a wirter
I have walked many miles
to get here and send you
my haertfelt regards

The red metal door

'Yan, tyan, tetherer'
I try the words for size
in the cavern of the barn

'Metherer, pimp, sethera', he yowls back

and comes right up
and lands a kiss, smack
on my mouth

The gimmer hogs need a feed

his wellies flap and suck
as he slides through the red metal door
to do his chores

'Lethera, hoverer, dovera', I whisper
and nearly complete the set

on my neck, he plants
his lips

and with a quiver
we both say 'dick'

No title

after Rilke

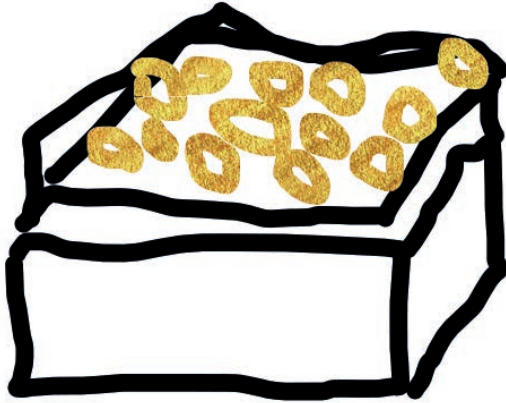
A road accident occurs without cars.
The rain was dry that day, its agency
stolen. The casualty is thrown but lacks
anatomy. Onlookers don't see.

In Paris, strangers celebrate
their wedding anniversary, the long years
unnecessary. Champagne flows, a toast
unhindered by each other's names.

In the jungle, there are no leaves,
the winding track is unimpeded by growth.
The scythe is missing a blade, my guide
has no face, or village or map.

The panther lost its silhouette.
In total darkness with camouflage complete,
it curls on the ground and licks
the unfathomable memory of its claws.

Billionaire's shortbread in Costas



What's the difference? It's those little balls on top. Crunchy, biscuit filled, coated in real gold, the delicious yellow stuff that never dims. Untarnished by time, it is the very hieroglyph of desire. Millionaires' taste buds are ten a penny now, a paltry set of zeros - so common. How they fill their buttered faces on a thousand barista jokes. But it takes real change to make a billionaire salivate: glossy rounds of crypto-gold might do it. The golden promise of carbon trading prompts a dribble. Data-mining whets the tongue, from digital platforms, gold is spun. Lucky are the frothy coffee makers with shortbread in their pocket. Blessed are the zero hours contractors lining silk jackets. In the hollow of the cobalt miners' hands, air is weightless. In the feathered vane of our phones, laughter is heavier than a vault of gold.

Hanging baskets

Lined with a scoop or two of fluffy black -
a coffin of old sphagnum for the petunias.

The black stuff, extracted from four metres down,
when Edward the Confessor wore the crown.

Both have come a long way: the peat from the past,
the petunias from Holland, grown under glass.

On Gallows Hill the hanging baskets swing.
In the warm breeze, a hose pipe ban begins.

The trailing ivy crisps, the lobelia shrinks.
The inn keeper frets, keeps serving the drinks.

The pensioner wants his display on the green,
swears the new stuff is just not the same.

It's still cheap in the bag - three for a tenner,
what's not to like for a leek or a dahlia?

The bag doesn't say quite where it's from,
Latvia, Estonia, Monaghan or Oban.

Line your baskets this season from times of old:
The Plague, The Famine, The Battle of Arbroath.

Now plant up your beauties and water them well,
it's not getting hotter, it's just a dry spell.

Don't worry your head with inconvenient things
what matters is that the basket still swings.

PLANT BABY

Characters

JOANIE, a woman in her early thirties.

SEBASTIAN, a man in his early thirties, JOANIE's partner.

Notes on the play

Pauses and beats are indicated by the space given between lines. A forward slash indicates the point at which the next character begins speaking.

A naturally lit living room. Sunlight shines through a window directly in one corner of the room. There is a door to the right which leads to the kitchen. JOANIE and SEBASTIAN are sitting on the sofa in the centre of the room, staring lovingly at a potted plant on the floor in front of them.

JOANIE: Beautiful, isn't it?

SEBASTIAN: Yeah.

JOANIE: And all ours.

SEBASTIAN: Yep.

JOANIE: I'm glad we're doing this.

SEBASTIAN: Me too.

JOANIE: I think we'll be great, don't you?

SEBASTIAN: I know we will.

JOANIE looks over to the corner where sunlight is shining.

JOANIE: It looks a bit sad though, don't you think?
Maybe we should give it some sun.

SEBASTIAN: It'll burn.

JOANIE: I'm sure I read that it likes the light.
SEBASTIAN: Yeah, natural light...not direct sunlight. You'll burn it.
JOANIE: It'll be alright for a bit. Let it live a little.
SEBASTIAN: It won't live at all if it burns. Some water's what it needs.
JOANIE: I fed it already.
SEBASTIAN: Thought we were doing the first feed together?
JOANIE: Poor thing looked parched.
SEBASTIAN: Great. Memory missed. What else have you done without me? Enrolled it into school?
JOANIE: Just that, I promise.
SEBASTIAN: Well, I think it needs more.
JOANIE: It had plenty.

SEBASTIAN gets up and kneels beside the plant.

SEBASTIAN: Are you thirsty? Do you want daddy to give you some water?

He waits for the plant to respond.

See!

JOANIE: It had plenty!
SEBASTIAN: I'll just get a bit.
JOANIE: No!

SEBASTIAN gets up and heads towards the door. JOANIE shoots up and pulls him back before he reaches it. The pair grapple with each other.

SEBASTIAN: Get off!

JOANIE: You'll drown it!

They continue to grapple but it soon becomes more playful. They pause to look each other in the eyes. They laugh, then sit back on the sofa.

SEBASTIAN: I'm doing the next one though.

JOANIE: Fine.

SEBASTIAN: And we need to be careful of that.

JOANIE: What?

SEBASTIAN: Fighting. Shouldn't do it in front of...

JOANIE: I know.

SEBASTIAN: Because that can affect it.

JOANIE: I don't want to fight.

SEBASTIAN: Neither do I.

JOANIE: Do you think...do you think we'll...?

SEBASTIAN: We'll be fine.

JOANIE: I hope so.

We haven't named it yet. Let's give it a name.

SEBASTIAN: How about Sebastian?

JOANIE: (laughing) You're joking right? We can't name it after you.

SEBASTIAN: Why?

JOANIE: That's ridiculous!

SEBASTIAN: Why?

JOANIE: Because every time I want one Sebastian, I'll get two!

SEBASTIAN: Yeah? Lucky you.

JOANIE: But it's a bit...a bit narcissistic, don't you think?

SEBASTIAN: It's a tradition.

JOANIE: Tradition?

SEBASTIAN: Yeah, all the first-born sons in our family are named Sebastian.

JOANIE: But your dad's called Baz...?

SEBASTIAN: Short for SeBASTian.

JOANIE: Grandad Ian?

SEBASTIAN: Also short for SebastIAN.

JOANIE: Oh.

SEBASTIAN: Yeah.

JOANIE: What makes you think it's a boy anyway?

SEBASTIAN: I'd just...I'd prefer it.

JOANIE: You'd prefer it to be a boy?

SEBASTIAN: What's so wrong with that?

JOANIE: What if it's not?

SEBASTIAN: We'll have to have more.

JOANIE: One at a time thanks!

So wait, anything other than a boy won't be good enough for you?

SEBASTIAN: It'd be disappointing.

JOANIE: Disappointing?

SEBASTIAN: Okay, that's not the word I —

JOANIE: Disappointing? I wish I knew that's how you felt before we...

SEBASTIAN: Come on.

JOANIE: Because now I'm thinking...

SEBASTIAN: I didn't mean...

JOANIE: I think you made it very clear what you meant.

SEBASTIAN: Jo?

SEBASTIAN reaches out for JOANIE's hand. She pulls it away.

I'm sorry. That was stupid.

Jo?

Come on. Don't be like that.

JOANIE: Does it really matter to you?

SEBASTIAN: No.

I mean...maybe.

(Seeing Jo's reaction) Just a bit, just a bit...but-but I'll still love it.

JOANIE: I should hope so.

All I care about is that it's healthy.

SEBASTIAN: Me too / that's what's important.

JOANIE: Good.

Do you think we should get it baptised?

SEBASTIAN: What?

JOANIE: I think it'd be nice.

SEBASTIAN: You want it to be Christian?

JOANIE: Well...

SEBASTIAN: When's the last time you went to church?

JOANIE: That's not relevant.

SEBASTIAN: Oh, I think it is.

JOANIE: Why?

SEBASTIAN: Because why would you baptise it if neither of us even care to go to church?

JOANIE: I care.

SEBASTIAN: But you don't go?

JOANIE: I do...in my head.

SEBASTIAN: What?

JOANIE: I pray and stuff.

SEBASTIAN: When?

JOANIE: Well, like, if I lose something I —

SEBASTIAN: You want to get it baptised because you sometimes ask Jesus where your keys are?

JOANIE: I ask Saint Anthony actually.

SEBASTIAN: Who the fuck is he?

JOANIE: (insulted) Sebastian! He is the Patron Saint of Lost Things.

SEBASTIAN: Oh God, of course he is! I've heard it all now.

JOANIE: It'll be nice. We'll get everyone over and —

SEBASTIAN: We're not bloody baptising it!

JOANIE: But it would be important to Mum / you know how —

SEBASTIAN: Sod your mum! Don't you think it deserves a choice?

JOANIE: I think you're overreacting.

SEBASTIAN: No, I just don't like the whole charade of it all.

JOANIE: You think my religion's a front?

SEBASTIAN: What religion? You said it yourself — you only pray when you want something. That doesn't count.

JOANIE: How dare you!

SEBASTIAN: I don't want your mum getting involved either. Don't want her...trying to control things.

JOANIE: Well, we'll need someone to take care of it when we're not here.

SEBASTIAN: She won't know what she's doing.

JOANIE: Course she will.

SEBASTIAN: Did you see the state of her anthuriums?

JOANIE: Obviously that's different.

SEBASTIAN: She forgets to feed herself most days.

JOANIE: This is different — you know it's different. She'd be careful with...

SEBASTIAN: Yeah yeah.

JOANIE: You're just saying that because-because you don't have anyone to...

SEBASTIAN: Nice.

JOANIE: I...

SEBASTIAN: That's real nice.

JOANIE: I-I didn't mean...you know I didn't mean to...

SEBASTIAN: Just...let's just leave it.

They sit in silence and stare at the plant.

JOANIE: I'm sorry. I am. I really didn't mean it to come out like that.

Seb?

Seb, I just meant that we're gonna need some help. She's all we have. I'm just-I'm just scared. Shit scared. I mean... look at us...already. What've we got ourselves in for? I'm not sure I can do this.

I thought I was ready but...now...now I'm not so sure.

SEBASTIAN: You are. We both are.

JOANIE: But we can't agree on anything.

SEBASTIAN lies down on the sofa, carefully resting his head on JOANIE'S lap. He puts his hand on her belly and listens to it.

SEBASTIAN: I love it already...do you?

JOANIE nods.

SEBASTIAN: Then we can agree on that.

JOANIE: So-so you think we'll be alright?

SEBASTIAN: Yeah.

JOANIE: Even if it's not a boy?

SEBASTIAN: Yes.

JOANIE: And if it like...likes Jesus and stuff?

SEBASTIAN: Yes.

JOANIE: And we don't have to call it Sebastian?

SEBASTIAN: We'll think about that...

JOANIE: And, do you think...do you think you'll still love me? Even if we fight?

SEBASTIAN: Always.

The pair embrace.

JOANIE: Let's just try and work together through this.

SEBASTIAN: Okay. We'll be a great team, don't worry.

You hungry?

JOANIE nods.

They get up from the sofa and SEBASTIAN puts his arm over JOANIE as they walk out of the room, through the kitchen door.

Moments later, SEBASTIAN re-enters the room with a cup filled with water. He looks back over his shoulder and then sneakily walks over to the plant and pours the water into its soil.

He leaves.

Moments later, JOANIE re-enters the room. She looks back over her shoulder before she walks over to the plant and moves it into the sun-lit corner.

She leaves.

THE END.

Apples

Cezanne's apple sits
by the stoneware pitcher

I wonder
how the paint suggests

more of the fruit
than its subject.

The rich green gloss,
the way light catches

its russet edge
inviting teeth.

The apple hangs above me
as I sit and look.

The moment settles
in the core of my body.

I too am lustrous skin
among folds of cloth,

inviting the abandonment
of conventional perspective.

The pink flush of my cheeks,
the way that, even now,

my strong black hair
refuses to grey.

Absence

Somewhere a bird has lost
her feather.

It blows in circles
along the frozen lake.

Below the ice,
the far- off beat of blood.

Water, shifting
to hold a body,

the sound of drowning
once the panic has gone.

Light from the surface
slips over silent lips,

Searches
still staring eyes;

*A room warm
with coffee*

*My father's kind hands
briefly on my shoulders.*

How far we travel from
the things that hold us.

glass creatures
skim the frozen boundary.

Above, the lake is still the lake.
A bird calls.

Butterfly Box

She liked to collect
beautiful things,

and often showed me
the butterfly

in a shadowbox
on the study wall.

She spent hours
admiring its colours,

its spiracled body
the sheen of its scales.

She liked to detail
the way it was caught;

the balletic swoop
of the aerial net,

the firm pressure of finger
and thumb on thorax,

squeezing until
the wings became still.

When I was alone,
I pressed my small hands

against the thin prison
glass of the case,

breathed in the varnish
of the antique wood frame,

feeling the fumes catch
in my throat,

and understood how
it felt to be pinned.

She had a way of disturbing
the air – made my pulse

a blue flicker
in the killing jar.

Types of Fossil

Body

Our soft parts matched.
Light travelled our skin
the same way,
showed our faces
were alike but that we wore
our bodies differently.

Molecular

It was the illusion of stability
for billions of years.
Something in the cells
meant my bones were rock
for your lipids, proteins, acids.

Trace

Your colours dazzled
bright impressions worn
across my throat,
detonating
behind where the eyes
would have been,
leaving scorch marks
where you travelled.

Carbon

There was your breath,
the way you grew us
from pods, slick with fur.

Pseudo

You passed through me
so violently,
I took your shape
for a time, I was mineral.
I was part solution.

The Burning Season

They are burning heather on the hills again,
dark figures

hunched on the skyline, hazed in silent flare.
Flames viewed

at distance glowing tracks of bracken, grass
and bramble,

purging habitat for red grouse, deer,
and mountain hare,

briars white tipped then blackening, unshackling
the chattels

of the year. Wooded knuckles, thicket-forming
vaulted holts,

glow like lamp-lit chapels, their thorny scaffolds
caving in,

sending orange scantlings fleeting into shadows.
By dawn

the land has cooled to ashen hollows,
funeral veils

drift across the barrows, fading out the boundaries
of meadows.

Pond Life

The loft is full of junk: boxes of CDs, old TV sets, and stacks of books. In the corner is the cold-water tank.

He appears through the hatch with two cups of coffee. He's tall, on the wrong side of forty, his too-dark hair touching his collar. He's dressed lumberjack-style in jeans and a red, plaid shirt that's tight around his stomach. He might have been good-looking once.

He runs his eyes over me, my ponytail, my face, and lingers on my breasts. "I must say, you're not what I was expecting," he says. He holds out one of the cups. "I made yours black, I know how you ladies like to watch your figures."

I ignore the proffered coffee and continue packing away my tools. "Your water tank should be covered. It's a health and safety hazard."

"Are you going to shop me?" He's still holding the cups, still smiling.

"I need to replace one of the pipes," I say, hauling my bag over my shoulder. "I'll be back tomorrow." He doesn't move away from the hatch so I have to brush past him.

"Don't go back," says Meg in bed that evening. We're snuggled under the duvet, dark chocolate melting in our hands and mouths as we watch reruns of Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

"I can handle him."

The woody aroma of myrrh and the warmth of cinnamon rises from Meg's body, her skin soft from the blend of oils I'd rubbed in earlier.

"But can you handle me?" she says, her hand on my leg, travelling north.

He watches me cut the pipe to size the next day. "What made

you become a plumber?" he says, lighting a cigarette. He blows perfect Os of smoke into the cold air.

"I like working with water," I say, unscrewing the old pipe.

His eyes are on me as I work. Maybe Meg is right, but I can't afford to turn down jobs.

"Have you ever thought of trying out as an actress?" he says.

"What?"

He takes a long drag of his cigarette and blows out more smoke rings. "We need extras for a couple of scenes we're shooting. I could have a word with my casting director. She listens to me. We're like that." He emphasises that by holding up his right hand, two fingers intertwined.

"I'll stick to plumbing thanks." I hand him the old piece of pipe. "You can throw that away and turn the water on now." I pack my tools into my holdall and walk towards the hatch.

He stands up, blocking me.

"You should think about my offer. Being an extra doesn't pay much, but you could fit it in around your plumbing jobs."

"No, thanks," I say moving around him.

He sidesteps and blocks me again.

"Look, why don't I take you to dinner? We could talk about it some more."

He moves closer to me, stopping when I pull the wrench out of my holdall.

His smile disappears, and his eyes bore into mine.

"No need for that," he says moving out of my way.

Meg is in the garden when I get home, sitting by the pond I dug last summer, working until sunset, appearing in the bedroom covered in mud and sweat. Meg said this was a turn-on, and maybe I should dig more holes when this one was finished. As it was, it took six months to finish the hole, as it had to be deep enough for what she wanted to breed in it. She's wearing one of

her long cotton dresses that hides her legs. This one is Delft blue, covered in dragons and other creatures I don't recognise. She's made a hairband to match, pulling her long auburn hair off her face.

"How's business?" I say, bending down to kiss her. Tonight, she smells of patchouli and something slightly astringent.

"It's still slow," she says. "Only one order, so I thought I'd get a bit of sun."

"It's early days yet; it'll pick up once your name gets around."

"I hope so, I hate being like this. You shouldn't have to – "

"Don't say it."

The evening is peaceful, the sun still high in the sky. Meg's herbs scent the air, the heady fragrance of wormwood overpowering the others. A blackbird sings from the hawthorn.

"Look," says Meg, pointing to the pond. Its surface, in the shadow of the Slippery Elm, is ink-black, undulating, writhing.

"It must have hatched overnight," she says.

I'm mesmerised by the movement. A pond skater lands on the surface, long delicate legs holding it fast until suddenly, it's gone, disappearing into the depths as if it never existed.

"It's hungry," Meg says. "It means it's growing fast." Her face is now bright, beautiful, all traces of sadness gone. I want to hold her and never let the world hurt her again.

"That's great," I say, as another skater disappears. "I'll have a shower and make dinner. We can eat here and watch the pond until the sun goes down."

"No," I say. "Definitely not."

My boss, Bernie, sits back and rests his chin in his hand. His once-black hair is streaked with grey and in retreat. "He says he won't pay unless you go back and fix the mess you made."

"There's nothing wrong with my work."

"He says you were rude. He wants you to apologise."

"You mean, he wants to humiliate me."

Bernie shakes his head. "Lucy, I told you it would be hard when I took you on. You said you could handle yourself, so do it. Politely. I can't afford a shitload of bad reviews because you've upset a customer. Either, you go back and apologise, or I'll get someone else to replace his damned pipe."

He runs his fingers through what's left of his hair. "I like you, Lucy, I really do. I don't want to let you go but—,"

"— you will," I say, slamming the door behind me.

Meg catches me checking our bank account. I close the laptop and try not to show how worried I am.

"How bad is it?"

"It's fine," I lie. We'll be lucky if we have enough to pay the mortgage this month, and next month the insurance is due. "Let's go sit by the pond."

She turns her wheelchair and takes it down the ramp. "It's getting legs now," she calls over her shoulder. Her muscular arms swiftly navigate the wheels along the uneven path. Before her accident, Meg would spend hours walking in the woods. Now, to her annoyance, she has to ask me to collect what she needs.

When we reach the pond, we can just make out long, gangly legs under the surface of the pond, showing no signs of the strength they'll have when fully grown. The surface breaks and two yellow eyes appear, blink, and retreat into the gloom.

"I had some more orders today," she says, her lucent green eyes focused on the pond. "Word has got around that my products are," she raises her eyes and stares into mine, "useful in certain circumstances."

I ring the doorbell and wait. It's so hot, sweat is running down my face, my holdall so heavy, I let it rest on the doorstep.

He's wearing shorts and a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt open to the waist: his black chest hair, thick and wiry.

"Well, if it isn't Ms Plumber," he says emphasising the Ms.

"There was nothing wrong with my work, and you know it."

He starts to close the door.

"Ok, I'll replace the pipe."

"And?"

We stare at each other.

"And I'm sorry if I was rude."

"If?"

I take a deep breath. "I'm sorry I was rude."

He opens the door wider. "Make sure you do it properly this time."

I heft my holdall onto my shoulder and squeeze past him. His breath smells of stale cigarettes, his sour body odour overlaid with citrus, and something cloyingly sweet.

"You know the way," he says. "I'll be in the garden."

Relieved he's not coming with me, I haul my holdall up the ladder and into the loft.

I have to be quick as Meg is waiting for me at home. She's had such an influx of orders, she's asked me to help out. Using both hands, I pull the bell jar out of my holdall. The yellow eyes stare malevolently through the muddy pond water, its mottled viridescent body squeezed against the sides of the jar. *It's still a baby*, Meg had said a little ruefully when she handed it to me.

I open the lid and watch as it hits the water, the claws disappearing first, then the legs, followed by the bulge of its body. Our eyes meet one last time; it blinks, and then it's gone.

Day Chasers Parted Ways

*Once we gained wings of freedom,
eventually recalling we were terns
destined for pole-to-pole migration,
regarding every polar day as our return.*

Before departures, elders said:
'The southbound might be the same,
but half night and half day
could never be day-to-day.'

In Gibraltar we gathered
and then left each other.

You somehow
insisted on heading for somewhere;

we passed by Western Sahara,
Gulf of Guinea,
and the tip of
South Africa.

Then the ocean current said
you stopped by South America
to visit the last human town—Ushuaia!

We reunited on the land of wonder,
staying through the ever-bright winter,
leaving before the day another polar night
reached the southernmost.

Before departures, we can say:
'The northbound won't be the same,
but half night and half day
may never be day-to-day.'

The Last Embrace

Before hundreds of encounters, the first
resembled a rainbow bridge in the mist.
You and I, standing by each, said to each:

'Nice to meet you!' 'Nice to meet you!'

Yet I asked you for an embrace
as if it had been a riddle to tackle
for aeons. Then came its echo:

'Glad to see you!'

'Glad to see you!'

Blue Poetries

We both cherish blue poetries.
She loves infinite Celestine,
yet I admire songs of marine.

She may be pleased by seas,
while the Celestine is always
her genesis of shedding tears.

Lay of the Last Harp Seal

The seal pup flops on melting snow,
Yawning for the milk to flow,
As the mother hauls herself
from the water, from the water,
Rolls her body down beside,
Fat to fat, through fur and hide.

Days lengthen with the hanging sun,
The mother yearns to journey on –
Hours given and hours taken
from the water, from the water,
One last feed and one last dive,
Looking back at dark-rimmed eyes.

Time passes and seas are raised,
The seal pup waits for days and days
For the mother's head to rise
from the water, from the water,
Looking out through dark-rimmed eyes
For one last feed or one last dive.

The mother lands a distant shore,
Living under a different law.
Heat rises and days are stolen
from the water, from the water,
One last feed and one last dive,
Looking back through dark-rimmed eyes.

The pup is still; its breathing slows
The mother drifts on smaller floes,
Time has passed and ice retracts
from the water, from the water,
Looking out through darkening eyes
For one last feed or one last dive.

Oceans swell and waters rise,
She doesn't see the hunter's guise,
Swiped and bloody, tossed and torn
from the water, from the water,
Rolls her body down beside
Life to life, through fur and hide.

Notes to Self

Ah stood outdoors in't mizzle in me woollen coit

Outside, in the rain, I'm standing too, watching you melt

Took me baggin to school in a box – a buttie or a barm

the words dripped off your tongue, like bees in a swarm

'allus stayed for dinner and tea, an't words didna seem strange

so why do you flinch when they creep back into play?

Ah was never feart. All'us thronged, rarely fratching

No, you were never afraid, and too busy to be arguing

Ah wasn't one to blubber whoever tried to mek me skrike

You didn't cry much then. Now, I'm straining to hear you speak.

Mother was mithered and moidered, ah knew it'ud never be reet

yet I watched you worry and, no, it would never be right.

So ah gabbed and skitted, tried not to be mardy or mek a kerfuffle

That was your way. Making fun of it, trying not to cause a stir.

Ah 'ad a laff, ran up the path, went for a bath – jus' t' prove ah could

That short 'a' won't save you, a few relics won't do any good;

Stop faffing around. Tha'se flummoxed theself, are ya saying 'owt or nowt?

it's true I've forgotten the words, my lines have almost dried up.

Ta-rah then. I'm off now. 'appen tha'll never hear me again.

So, you're really going this time. It was always going to happen.

Viking

In the street today, I saw a Viking
pulling his three flame-haired children
in a wheeled wooden cart, as if it were a ship.

I followed him through town to devil's dyke
where he stopped, then tipped the children out.
In the street today, I saw a Viking

tumbling his children down the grassy slope
as he waited, expecting to hear the splash
of the wheeled wooden cart, as if it were a ship.

There are cuts and ditches everywhere,
but the devil's dyke has long been dry.
In the street today, I saw a Viking

who couldn't remember that other time
when he held back the Saxon *fyrð*
from a wheeled wooden cart, as if it were a ship.

All he could think was his wife had gone
as his laughing children climbed up the slope.
In the street today, I saw a Viking, pulling
his three-wheeled cart, as if it were a ship.

Vane

Stanley's sheds are coming down
brick by brick. Sheet by sheet,
their corrugated metal grooves

caught the afternoon light,
rippled with indifference
and snubbed their weathered faces

at those who thought
they should have come down years ago.
Stanley didn't care and nor would I

if I had sheds like these. Sheds with
fallen roofs and gaping timber sides
that harboured broken machines

and those who wheeled them in.
One by one, he put them together,
with quiet nods and hands embalmed

in many oils, each part within reach
from planks that served as shelves.
They might just leave the metal vane

where he'd wired a model aeroplane
to watch the whirring propellers
signal a changing wind

A Saint's Lament

The children are the first
to give me name and shape;
not quite true, but it allows me
to enter into their streets.
They whisper about me
on the way to school because,
despite everything, they must go
and ask each other if I will visit
if I can bring back their friends.

The old people hold back,
numbering the dead in digits,
sewing my name in samplers.
They shake their heads, combing
the ashes of memory, leaving
no room for intervention. I wait.
Mostly, their arms are wrapped
so tightly around their breasts,
it goes with them to the end.

Hardest are the ones between,
who first bury, then rage
at the gods and themselves.
For them, I can offer only bones
in jewelled boxes, stored
out of sight in vaulted crypts.
They might find me one day
in a wall niche, and reach out
to touch, beyond glass.

Jackie Bennett

Jackie Bennett started the MA Writing Poetry at the Poetry School London in 2020 and after taking a year's break, is due to graduate in 2023. Born in the Pennines, she now lives in East Anglia and her poetry, although grounded in rural life, is more widely about 'place', with people at its core. She is interested in form and using old forms in contemporary ways.

Hemangi Chakravarty

Hemangi Chakravarty is an international student from Jaipur, India, pursuing an MA Creative Writing at Newcastle University. Some of her writing has been featured in *The Courier* and *Gulmohur Quarterly*. She is also the author of the e-book *Uninterrupted - A Collection of Poems*. Additionally, she's a spoken word poet and storyteller. Hemangi writes to create pocket-sized reflections of the world.

Tung-Yun Chen

Tung-Yun Chen is a full-time MA Creative Writing student. Originally from Donggang, a fisherman's village in Taiwan, he is a published author and professional translator in wetland ecology but with a poetic heart. Having been inspired by humanity and nature, he notably loves to share what a naturalist has seen with readers worldwide through his poetry.

Helen Compson

A journalist by trade and a country bumpkin at heart, Helen Compson is fascinated by human psychology, particularly how it manifests itself in our relationships with each other and the natural world. That, and the rich history of her native Tyneside, is the inspiration for much of her work.

Gillian Fielder

Gillian Fielder is a writer based in Wallsend. She studied BA (Hons) English Literature at Newcastle University where she developed an interest in Old English poetry. On the Creative Writing MA, she has written versions of *The Exeter Book* riddles and elegies, placing a focus on the voices of women. She is currently working on a feminist translation of *Beowulf*.

Juliet Fossey

I'm late to the party, but enjoying being able to finally say, 'I am a writer'. It's been a long time coming (due to delays caused by my dyslexia) but I'm keen to get on with it. I was brought up in Cumbria and currently work on a farm that makes peat-free compost from sheep wool and bracken (The poem 'Hanging Baskets' draws on my work life). Many of my poems are inspired by the natural environment and often by the tension between rural and urban experience.

Sarah Gibbons

Sarah Gibbons is in her final year of the MA in Writing Poetry. Her poetry and fiction has been published in *Msllexia*, *Ambit*, *South Bank Poetry* and *The Wolf Magazine*. She has had work placed in various national and international competitions. In 2022, she was longlisted for the Rebecca Swift Women Poets' Prize.

Liv Gilchrist

Liv Gilchrist is a Creative Writing MA student at Newcastle University. Her short story 'The Dark Space' was shortlisted in the 2020 Fresher Writing Prize and she was also highly commended by judges of the Fresher Best Student Writer prize. She is new to playwriting but is already enamoured with the craft and aspires to be a playwright herself.

Susan King

Susan King was born in Merseyside and now lives in County Durham. Her short stories have been published online, in women's magazines, and featured in two anthologies by The Women's Press. She was recently a finalist in the London Independent Story Prize 2022 with her story 'Growing Pains'. She is currently working on her novel, *The Disappearances*.

Lauren Thomas

Lauren Thomas has been published in various print and online publications including most recently, *Magma*, *Lighthouse Journal* and the *New Welsh Review*. She is in her second year of the poetry writing MA at Newcastle University, with Poetry School London.

Ceri Barrett

Ceri Barrett grew up in Cambridgeshire, has a BA in Literature and Philosophy from the University of York, and is now studying for a Creative Writing MA at Newcastle University. They write about nature, wonder, and creative obsession, as well as whatever else happens to be on their mind. Beyond writing, their own creative obsessions include photography and design.

Amy Harte

Amy Harte is a screen and fiction writer from Leeds. With a BA in Filmmaking from Leeds Arts University, Amy is now studying for a Creative Writing MA at Newcastle University, and is also currently writing a proposal for a PhD in the same field. Writing about relationships, music, and subcultures, Amy is currently working on a debut novel.

Sarah Terkaoui

Sarah Terkaoui is an Irish/Syrian poet. She was shortlisted for the Cinnamon Press Poetry Pamphlet Award 2022, commended for the Goldsmiths Poetry Festival and the Hippocrates Poetry Prize 2021 and longlisted for the Live Canon international poetry Prize 2021. She has been published in *Fragmented Voices*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Imposter*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Propel*, *The Storms*, *Visual Verse*, and *Dreich*.

