

**NEW WRITING NORTHWEST 2021**

A Litfest Anthology



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## CONTENTS

Foreword	5
<b><i>Fiction</i></b>	
Introduction: Yvonne Battle-Felton	6
from <i>Love, Lost and Found</i> a novel by Mary Ainsworth	8
from <i>Sandsborn</i> a short story by Loren Cafferty	10
from <i>Charity Begins at Home</i> a short story by Phil Cooper	12
from <i>Jumping Off</i> a novel by Charlotte Morris	14
from <i>Conspiracy</i> a novel by Marta Pacini	18
from <i>The Disappearance of Ninian Blythe</i> a novel by Michele Thasim	22
from <i>Glossolalia</i> a novel by Emily Winter	24
On the New Writing Northwest Fiction Workshop by Jenny Bayliss	26
Biographical notes	27
<b><i>Nature &amp; Environment Writing</i></b>	
Introduction: Karen Lloyd	29
The Call of the Wild by Michelle Allwood	31
Fragments by Nicola Carter	33
<i>from</i> The Writing-glass Key an essay by Geoff Cox	36
Fragments of Mr Quercus by Jane Corbett	38
Picture Perfect? By Stephen Dunstan	41
<i>from</i> Thoughts on Trains: Broadwells Wood by Miles Kinsley	43
Old Norse by Anne Taylor	45
Caravan of Love by Tara Vallente	47
Biographical Notes	49

**Poetry**

Introduction: Kim Moore	51
Three Poems by Claire Burnett	53
Three Poems by Julie Carter	56
Three Poems by Melissa Davies	58
Three Poems by Kelly Davis	61
Three Poems by Eleanor Denvir	65
Two Poems by Amelia Loulli	68
Three Poems by Sara Mellen	70
Two Poems by Clare Proctor	73
Biographical Notes	76

**Translation**

Introduction: Daniel Hahn	78
from <i>The Channel Swimmer</i> by Ulrike Draesner, translated from the German by Rebecca Braun	80
from <i>A Solid Home</i> by Elena Garro, translated from the Spanish by Louie Ariza	83
from <i>Cosmonauts Come and Go</i> by Elitza Gueorguieva, translated from the French by Lise Tannahill	87
from <i>The Forsaken</i> by Matthias Jügler, translated from the German by Jo Heinrich	90
from <i>The Sawmill</i> by Daniel Odija, translated from the Polish by Kasia Beresford	93
Biographical Notes	96

## Foreword

From 16 March to 28 April 2021, Litfest ran an exciting pilot project — ‘New Writing Northwest’ — a series of workshops in four genres for emerging writers based in the Northwest region. The genres were: Fiction (led by Yvonne Battle-Felton), Nature & Environment Writing (led by Karen Lloyd), Poetry (led by Kim Moore) and Translation (led by Daniel Hahn).

In February, we invited anyone and everyone interested in the Northwest region aged eighteen or over to apply for one of the eight places in each workshop, reserving a number of spaces in each one for writers from diverse communities. A selection process based on each writers’ writing sample, statement of aims and ambitions, cv and commitment to attending each of the six sessions’ saw twenty-nine writers selected from among more than fifty applicants. Eight writers took up the available places in each of the Fiction, Nature & Environment and Poetry workshops, while five joined the Translation workshop.

The aim was for the workshops to offer encouragement and build confidence through a range of writing exercises, reading experiences and criticism of each other’s work, all undertaken in a mutually supportive atmosphere, with guidance on next steps coming in at the end. We were delighted with the commitment all the writers showed, the way they supported each other and above all by the quality of their work.

We are now delighted to share with you extracts from that creative initiative in this Litfest anthology, *New Writing Northwest 2021*.

The New Writing Northwest project was supported by funding from Arts Council England.

## FICTION

Yvonne Battle-Felton

Wow. I've read and re-read these pieces and the word I keep coming back to is: wow. What a joy it is to introduce these writers and their stories. Their writing is confident and creative. Whether fiction or non-fiction, the pieces are haunting, immersive, tension-filled, vulnerable, piercing, engaging.

Their writing will take you places emotionally, imaginatively, vividly. Through attention to detail and description, with often vivid and concise or generous and lush language, they will introduce you to interesting characters with distinctive voices grappling with life, love, loss and a number of issues that make you want to read on.

The tension! Oh, my goodness the tension! Each piece has its own rhythm and pace; its own terrains to explore and insights to reveal. Some start out with a boom! Others a gentle pulse simmering within the narrative. Each has an energy, the tantalising promise that there is more to come and the knowledge that you will not be disappointed.

Over lockdown, I was fortunate to have facilitated workshops hosted by Litfest. These workshops were an opportunity for writers to develop confidence, skills, and techniques to write – wherever their writing and writing paths lead. Before or after work, study, life, commitments, we gathered over Zoom in the comfort of our living rooms, bedrooms, home offices, or anywhere we could grab privacy, WIFI, or both. It was lockdown. We were strangers coming together over words.

I had the pleasure of working with these writers as they developed character, setting, tension, conflict, and plot. Their writing got stronger with each exercise, task, and workshop. What a treat watching as they explored, took risks, honed characters, developed confidence, and even more, developed community. They challenged, supported, and championed each other, providing insight and feedback meant to strengthen the writing.

Their bond remains even after the final workshop and I'm excited to see where it leads them.

These pieces are just a taste of what these writers are working on. Together, they are crafting romances, adventures, historical fiction, political fiction, mystery, horror, comedy, and more. If you are looking for characters to fall in love with, stories to dive into, writing to explore, you are in the right place and let me tell you, you are in for a treat.

*from* Love, Lost and Found

a novel by

Mary Ainsworth

David pulled into the drive and slammed on the brakes. There were two cars parked outside the farmhouse: Laura's stupid Volvo V60 Estate (he'd told her not to get another diesel car) and a Mercedes convertible. Metallic blue, looked like an SL – nice.

He edged in behind the flashy motor, blocking its exit, and ratcheted on his hand brake. Jumping down, he circled the unfamiliar vehicle. Who the hell did it belong to? Maybe Juliette was here. Shit, he hoped not. No way Juliette could afford a car like this. Unless she was making a lot more money than Laura.

Never mind that. Focus. Hopefully Matt was asleep. Laura would probably be on the terrace. For some reason, the bats didn't bother her and she often stayed out there till all hours.

David decided to walk round the back and surprise her. Well, his arrival would surprise her however he staged it, but he might as well go for the full effect.

Would she be pleased to see him?

He wasn't looking forward to this. Understatement. He hated confrontations. Laura wasn't great at them either – that was probably why they hadn't had it out before – but she could be devastatingly honest and articulate on occasions. Her mother's daughter in that respect, although she wouldn't thank you for saying so.

As David approached the corner of the building, he heard low voices in conversation. One was definitely a man's. David hesitated. Could it be fellow Brits from the holiday villas nearby? Or some of the toothless old geezers from the village who were always telling him they remembered Laura when she was 'this high'?

Whoever it was, they didn't seem to have heard him. And he wasn't exactly being stealthy. David rounded the corner, getting ready to shout 'Surprise!' and throw his arms out in a 'ta-da' gesture. But instead he stopped short and stared.

He registered that Laura looked shocked, maybe a bit uncomfortable (she never did have a good poker face). She was sitting on the terrace drinking beer with a bloke who



looked like – David did a double take – Aldo Chirolli. What the fuck was Laura doing in a late-night tête-a-tête with only one of the best footballers Europe has ever produced (in David's humble opinion)?

Nah, it couldn't be him. David found his voice. 'Hi! Laura, how's it going?'

Laura stood up, her chair scraping on the flagstones and tipping backwards. She tried to catch it but missed and it clattered to the ground. 'David! I wasn't expecting you until Saturday.'

The lookalike was also on his feet. Tall, lean and tanned, wearing those poncy slippers that European blokes seem to like (God knows why). He walked towards David, held out his hand and said, '*Bon soir. Aldo Chirolli. Enchanté. Pleased to meet you.*'

Shit, it really *was* him. Well, obviously the awkward conversation with Laura was going to have to wait. And maybe it wouldn't be quite so awkward now? These two had looked very cosy when he broke up their little soirée. Hmm.

But hey, it wasn't every day you got to meet one of your sporting heroes, even if the circumstances were surreal. David clasped Aldo's hand and shook it enthusiastically.

'David,' he said. 'Wow. Pleased to meet you. Yeah, *enchanté*, me too.' He turned to Laura as she came and stood beside him, squeezing her around the waist and kissing her on the cheek. She was looking flushed, quite sexy actually. 'Hey,' he said, speaking into her hair, then (addressing Aldo again): 'Uh, I'm Laura's partner. Just driven over from London. Sorry, I didn't think we'd have any guests. Can't quite believe you're here, if I'm honest.'

'Please, it is no problem. I stay here with my son tonight. We leave *demain matin*. Tomorrow.'

Laura intervened. 'Matt and Aldo's son Zac are having a sleepover. Aldo stayed too, in case there were any problems.'

'Oh, right. Well, it's great you're here. *C'est formidable.*' David looked at Laura. 'I'll get a beer, ok?' And then you can tell me what the fuck's been going on.

David grabbed a beer from the fridge and took a long swig. In spite of the weirdness, he couldn't help thinking this would make a great story for the lads in his five-a-side team. Pity the great man didn't speak much English. Still, Laura could always translate. Other stuff could wait (off the hook, for now at least). He stepped back out onto the terrace. 'Cheers!'

*from Sandsborn*

a short story by

Loren Cafferty

He bounces on the jutting ribs of the exposed skeleton. He is tentative, there is something tender about the bend of his knees and the placement of his feet. There is no fear, I can sense the twitch of his muscles, ready to spring away if the give and creak splinters into destruction.

He is not the first to test the sureness of this broken body. She had been beautiful, her allure is not dimmed by her abandonment here on the margins of my waterline, but she is little more than slender remnants of wood, more like the echo of a vessel than something that had once fought and conquered my sweeping tides. And now she is here, rotting into the pits and gullies of my slick mud.

He has not been in the town long, his English not quite enough to understand properly the signs strapped to the lampposts on my promenade, but he is already aware that my shifting silt is a silent threat. He knows via a force as strong as my lunar push and pull that the racing sweep of water, scudding inwards in its crescent arc, can leave a person stranded – with no way of knowing if my banks of glistening sand will take your weight or suck you under, the puckering brown and black claiming you toe to scalp.

I begin to send my speeding tide, though there is little visible change in the mud flats of sodden sand that stretch out until they hit the line on the other side of the bay. There, the man can see the point where the white dots of coastal villages rise until they peter out and bleed into the dark and light shading of purple-black hills, angular against my cloudless sky. Today I am gracious, magnanimous – I give to the senses in generous doses of salt air, harrying seabirds and forever views.

He jumps, sees the changing colour outline his shoes, my spreading blush as the water just beneath the surface is forced out. I watch him reach the boulders that mark my fringes; the point Morecambe Bay becomes Morecambe town. Ignoring the disapproving stares of couples walking the prom he makes his way by leaping from rock to rock. He moves, casually surefooted, until he reaches the point the sloping stripes of the big top

appear, where it stands erected so obtrusively beside the Edwardian elegance of the promenade and the white art deco lines of the hotel beside it. He jumps down lightly and takes a last glance at the silhouettes I have painted in the distance.

There are groups stood in clusters, like wasps round sugar, the buzz of their panic rising and falling.

Lockdown.

The chatter, the gossip, the endless scrolls of social media speculation are apparently true. There is talk of trying to pack up and move on but a general confusion about where they might go. Beyond the ephemeral existence of circus life those disparate figures who range around the man have few claims on a place to call home. They are simply my guests, nestled against my southern shores; stuck, as fast as if in the tight grip of my sinking sands lying just metres beyond the caravans, tarps and tents.

I send a breeze from my centre towards the town's edges and he moves away from the group, out of my momentary chill, like an anchor wresting free. The caravan door he pulls at is old. The laminate bubbles around the edges like frogspawn and copper rust streaks run from the hinges. Even in the few days since it was parked I have not been kind, adding my salt and corrosive air to the breaches in the paint.

The interior is dark, I cannot force my light around the blankets hung at the small windows. With nothing to do but wait the man swings himself into the narrow space between the top bunk and the curved roof where stained and puckered polyester has begun to thin.

As the expected news comes the frenetic circus life stills and stillness becomes a listlessness that settles over the whole encampment.

I feel the pull of the moon as I always do. My sands, the colour of tea brewed too long, still shift. Only I see it, only I feel it. I watch him, see that he discovers without the daily rigours of training and performance his muscles constrict and even after just a few days the fear of atrophy – of brain and body – grips him.

*from Charity Begins at Home*

a short story by

Phil Cooper

Martin and Rosemary were regulars at The Insole. They were both teachers at local secondary schools and about as law abiding as it gets. In fact, sober was a description that could be applied to both of them. Martin's leisurewear was the trademark teacher apparel of sports jacket, complete with leather patches, and trousers that vaguely went with the type of jackets he wore. He was decidedly hirsute, with a full head of unruly hair and a beard for good measure. His passion was computers, and Computer Science was what he taught. Rosemary, also conformed to a sort of teacher stereotype. She favoured floral dresses and cardigans. She hardly ever wore make up and was extremely diligent and conscientious in her approach to everything. She devoted part of what spare time she had to leading a local Girl Guides group. Both had fathers who had served in the Army and that shared experience bound them together. Rosemary's father tended to be rather dogmatic in his views and had the firm belief that he was the head of the household. Consequently, he felt an overwhelming compulsion to demonstrate that he was 'in command'. Rosemary had learned to 'keep the peace' and this habit sometimes manifested itself in her relationship with Martin who was generally peaceable enough, but sometimes, when an idea came into his head, it was difficult for anybody, let alone Rosemary, to dislodge it.

Martin and Rosemary had been together for some time but had no children. So on Wednesday nights, the path was clear for them to indulge in their one bit of shared frivolity, The Insole's weekly pub quiz.

One November night in the mid eighties when there was a distinct chill in the air and the era of mass unemployment and political discord was in full swing, the local pub seemed to offer a particularly welcome refuge. Martin and Rosemary took their accustomed seats ready for the fray. After Martin had bought their drinks, they couldn't help but notice a new figure who was sitting near them on his own. He was a rather distinguished-looking gentleman who appeared to have something of a military bearing. He had a camelhair coat under which he wore a suit and tie. In his lapel he had a poppy. He appeared to be in his early eighties.

Martin glanced across at the old gentleman and became aware that he was feeling sorry for him. He felt he could not ignore the man who might welcome a bit of company on such a dreary evening. So Martin plucked up sufficient courage to start a conversation.

‘Hello, I don’t think we’ve seen you here before. I’m Martin and this is my girlfriend Rosemary. Have you come for the quiz?’

‘Good evening, pleased to meet you both. I’m Charles Martin,’ the old man replied in a voice redolent of a High Court judge.

‘Well, I hadn’t really thought about that. I’ve just popped in for a drink or two, but, now you mention it, that might be a bit of fun and probably just what I need. I spend too much time on my own. Too much for my own good, really. Just moved to the area and don’t know very many people. It’s nice to see you’re both wearing poppies. It seems to be going out of fashion these days, more’s the pity.’

‘I think it’s really important to remember,’ Martin affirmed, adding, ‘My own father was killed in the war.’

‘I served in the Army during the war, too, so it’s close to my heart,’ the old gentleman confided.

[...]

The weekly quiz became a regular thing. Rosemary and Martin even started to look forward to meeting up with Charlie. He seemed such vulnerable yet charming company. They found out that Charlie lived alone in a one-bedroom flat on a street near where they lived, so they always walked with him to his flat to make sure he got home safely.

One week as the three sat together, Charlie asked, ‘I hope you don’t mind, but you know we were talking about the war, well, I’m doing a sponsored pub quiz in aid of The Star and Garter Home for veterans in London, at St John’s Church Hall. I’m suggesting that people make a donation to compete. Would you think of participating?’

‘Absolutely: we’d be delighted wouldn’t we, Rosemary?’ Rosemary glanced up at Martin in a quizzical way. She couldn’t help but think that it was typical of Martin, the way he rushed into things without too much reflection.

When they got home: Rosemary expressed her misgivings: ‘We don’t really know the man. What if he isn’t who he says he is?’

*from* Jumping Off

a novel by

Charlotte Morris

'Hey, why aren't you girls swimming? Afraid of the snakes?' One of the boys shouted over, the obvious innuendo making his friends laugh. He was ignored by the girls, but spurred on by his friends' amusement, he started squawking and head bobbing like a chicken.

The girls tried even harder to ignore them but that encouraged the ringleader even more.

'What are you girls made of? Sugar? Afraid you'll melt if you get in?' The laughing and squawking grew louder.

A few minutes later they were surprised to see the skinny girl in the yellow bathing suit stand up, wedge her feet into her sandals and march back up towards the road.

'OOOOOOh. You've offended her now,' one of the boys called to the ringleader. However, it soon became apparent that she was making her way towards the bridge which crossed the river.

The little hump-backed bridge had waist-high wide stone walls on either side and stood almost ten metres above the water. It was a popular diving spot for experienced swimmers.

On the steep climb back up to the road, Alice's mother's voice rang in her ears, *what are you thinking?* For years, she and Giulia had been warned about the dangers of that river. Ignoring the voice, she concentrated on avoiding the dog-poo which lined the gravel pathway. She was determined to get to the bridge before she had a chance to change her mind.

*Once you're dead you'll know about it* the voice chided her. She reached the bridge and leaned over the side to look down. The river shimmered, deep blues and greens catching the late afternoon sunshine. It was a long way down. *I've seen other people make the jump before. I know the water is deep enough.*

Her friends shouted up *'What are you doing? Come down!'*

Alice pretended she couldn't hear. She chewed her bottom lip. Her heart was beating fast with adrenaline. She would show those boys. She climbed carefully onto the wall of the bridge, taking her even higher now. She stood on the wall of the bridge, her solitary figure casting a shadow over her friends below.

The sound of the crickets grew louder, like spectators in a stadium cheering her on. She slowly inched towards the edge, took a deep breath, held her nose, and without making a sound stepped clean off.

The shock of the ice-cold water forced her to let out a small puff of air before hurriedly remembering she needed to conserve her oxygen. Gravity and the force at which she entered the water were pulling her deep, deep down. *Why did I jump? Why didn't I dive?* She had not yet touched the bottom. She could feel the current dragging her sideways, disorienting her further. She knew she was in trouble. Thrashing around, her limbs uncoordinated as each one searched in a different direction for the surface Her panic deepened when she thought she felt one of those snakes brushing past her thigh. She jerked it away. Told herself it was just a leaf. Tiny bubbles surrounded her and she could not tell which way was up. *This would be such a stupid way to die. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold my breath. Oh God Oh God Oh God please if you get me out of this situation I promise I will never do anything so stupid again in all my life.*

Unfortunately, He wasn't listening. Her lungs were burning now.

Another voice, not that of God but of Alice's mother again came into her head. Warnings from when she and Giulia were playing pooh sticks at this same bridge many years ago rang clear. *If you ever fall in, remember that humans float, go against your instincts, put your body in a star shape and relax.* Forcing her muscles into a state of relaxation which was far from the state of her mind, she felt herself floating to the surface. Not a moment too soon, she emerged gasping and flailing to find a distressed scene at the edge of the water, her friends were screaming and shouting at the riverbank. The boys were in the water searching for her, Stefano being the closest grabbed her under her arms and started pulling her to the edge. 'I've got her,' he yelled to the others like he had caught a prized fish.

She attempted to argue that she didn't need saving but no words would come out. In truth she felt dizzily grateful; she knew she did not have the strength to swim against the current to get out.

He pulled her from the water inelegantly, scraping her ankles on the large pebbles, lay her on her side and put a nearby towel under her head. He gently pulled her wet hair out of her eyes and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. 'What happened?'

She answered by spewing up river water next to his feet.





*from Conspiracy*

Marta Pacini

*This is an extract from the upcoming work, Conspiracy, which will be published by new Lancashire-based publisher Disturbance Press.*

‘The Ravenmaster, Your Majesty.’

Queen Isabel studied the man in front of her, trying – and failing – to recall their last meeting. No fault of her own, she decided: the Crown and the various royal palaces employed far too many people for her to recognise them all by sight. Besides, this man looked utterly unremarkable: average height, average build, average pink bald patch on his head. Though as Isabel watched him straighten from his bow she fought to suppress a chuckle. There *was* something remarkable about this man after all: an abnormally large and crooked nose, which reminded the Queen, rather appropriately, of a raven’s beak.

‘Please, have a seat, Mr—’ What was the man called again? Isabel glanced around for her equerry, but Major Phillips was already on the other side of the heavy, gilded white door, pulling it shut. He was a recent appointment, and the Queen made a mental note to admonish him later for the ineffective introduction, made worse by the fact that her private secretary had been too busy with Whitehall matters to brief her for this appointment.

‘Forgive me,’ the Queen told the Ravenmaster, ‘I seem to have forgotten your name.’

‘Maloney, Your Majesty. Cameron Maloney.’ For some reason, the Ravenmaster had remained standing.

‘Of course. Please, have a seat, Mr Maloney,’ Isabel repeated briskly. ‘Apparently you told my staff that you absolutely needed to see me, and I was happy to oblige, but you should know that my afternoon was busy enough to begin with. So what is the matter?’

Finally, Maloney took a seat on the richly upholstered chair facing the Queen’s, smoothing down his coat as he did so and casting his eyes to the floor. His hand remained on his coat, and he spent several seconds fiddling with the belt buckle, looking down all the while.

'I hope it's nothing ominous,' the Queen added, forcing her lips to extend into a smile and her fidgety toes to still in her stiff brogues. She had intended to reassure the clearly nervous Ravenmaster, but achieved the opposite effect: Maloney pursed his lips, drew a shaky breath, began 'Your Majesty ...' then stopped again.

'Now you really have me worried,' Isabel frowned. 'What is it?'

Maloney lifted his eyes to the Queen's face, then dropped them again. 'Nero has left, Your Majesty,' he murmured eventually.

'Nero? I take it you're not referring to the Roman emperor?'

'No, ma'am. Nero is one of the ravens.'

'Oh? And how long has Nero been missing, then?'

'I'm afraid I haven't seen him since early yesterday morning, ma'am.' As if on cue, three distant chimes rang through the open window.

Isabel considered this information for a moment. 'Mr Maloney, I don't mean to be rude, but why have you come to me for this? I was under the impression that the ravens were at liberty to fly throughout the Tower grounds and beyond. Wasn't one of them spotted outside an East London pub, once?' The anecdote had been the subject of the Queen's dresser's conversation for two days running, until Isabel had grown bored of it and had snapped at the woman to move on to another topic already.

'That's right, ma'am,' Maloney sighed. 'The ravens *are* free to fly around. They even leave for a day or two, sometimes.'

'Then what's the problem?'

The Ravenmaster looked at the Queen and swallowed visibly. 'The problem, Your Majesty, is that another raven did exactly that, about a week ago. Florrie. Flew out across the Thames, and I haven't seen her since. When a raven is away for that long, we have to presume the worst.'

'I see.'

They remained in silence for perhaps half a minute as Isabel studied the floral silk patterns on the antique-pink wall fabric, her mind already drifting towards matters more pressing than avian movements. At last, the Queen caught herself and gave her head a slight shake, forcing her gaze back onto the Ravenmaster.

'Forgive me, Mr Maloney, but what is your point, exactly?'

Maloney cleared his throat. 'My point, ma'am, is that this could be an ominous sign.'

Isabel's eyebrows shot up. 'Don't we keep spare ravens, precisely to avoid the omen you're talking about?'

'Only one, in recent times, Your Majesty.' The Ravenmaster dropped his gaze again. 'With Florrie gone, and now Nero, the spare raven has left. There are only five ravens left in the Tower.'



*from* The Disappearance of Ninian Blythe

a novel by

Michele Thasim

We waited for sunset, until it was dark enough to sneak over the top unseen by the enemy. When we scrambled over the parapet and into the night, we heard the first primordial howls from the creature. To my surprise, its calls made my heart ache. It sounded lost and filled with melancholy as opposed to crazed and murderous.

It made me question the validity of our mission for the first time. Was what we were about to do absolutely necessary? Something brushed passed my hand in the darkness, jolting me from my reverie, forcing me to continue moving forward.

We made slow, painful progress through the entanglement zone. The barbed wire cut our hands and sent searing pains up our arms, as it mercilessly grabbed at our clothes and dragged us backwards hindering our progress.

I inhaled deeply and struggled on. The air smelt of musty hay and horseradish, which belied the deadly nature of the odours source and it made my tongue feel thick and dry inside my mouth, as traces of chemicals settled within my nostrils.

Suddenly panic set in and all of my senses heightened. My heartbeat was deafening as it played percussion in my ears, rattling my brain. Every exhalation felt like a miniature tornado on the ground beneath me, sending dust particles spiralling into the air and as fear coursed through me, I broke out into a cold sweat.

A rivulet of perspiration trickled down my face, on to my lips and slowly seeped into my mouth. I found the familiar briny taste strangely comforting and, as such, I swallowed and continued moving forward.

When we finally escaped the entanglement, we wriggled along on our bellies across craters, debris and dead bodies. The dirt that coated our lips and clung to our faces, tasted scorched, polluted and devoid of life.

Frogs croaked and sang unselfconsciously, blissfully unaware of the destruction that surrounded them and rats scurried over the corpses feasting on their open wounds.

Meanwhile, the haunting howls of our quarry grew ever closer, intensifying my sense of unease.

There were no star-shells or strafing, which could only mean one thing. The Captain stopped dead in his tracks and confirmed my suspicions. 'It's too quiet Blythe. They must have patrols out too. We should probably hang-fire here for the present and listen out for any clues as to the beast's whereabouts.' He whispered.

And so we waited silently, hunkered down in a ditch, for what felt like hours.

I lay there trembling and watched entranced, as the indigo night sky transformed into the violets and pastel pinks of dawn and the frog song segued seamlessly into that of the lark.

Presently, a shiver ran down my spine and my skin began to tingle in horripilation. I felt the faintest ripple of electricity undulate through the air and turned to whisper to the Captain, 'This doesn't feel right. Something's coming.'

*from Glossolalia*

a novel by

Emily Winter

I pray on my way home. I hold Hannah in my mind and imagine her raised up – held, whole, healed. The gauze of reality lifts and I glimpse the other side. I see her clearly, plunged into a white marble pool of crystalline, blue water. She’s wearing a bright yellow dress and emerges with it plastered to her small frame. Her growing curves are gone, her body childlike again. Her skin is clean and bright, her nose covered with the smattering of freckles that she gets in the sun. She is safe.

The vision pierces through me and I know what I’ve got to do. Any doubt is erased when I arrive home. Hannah’s wearing a yellow dress I’ve never seen before. It’s the clearest sign I’ve received for a long time.

We’re at the sea a couple of hours later. It wasn’t easy. Hannah had been full of retorts – ‘I thought we did adult baptism,’ she said. And then, ‘I thought it would be my choice, Mum.’ That scared me. I had to pause, spell it out, lingering on each letter – C-H-O-I-C-E – to diminish the fear coursing through me. How hard it is to protect someone who so vigorously asserts their own will over the will of God. I knew I had to act fast. The baptism had to be performed today. I phoned Pastor Nick first, of course. No answer. It left me no choice – it was up to me. The only option to enfold her straightaway in His protection, to Save her.

I scout the pebbled beach, eager to find the best possible spot. Eventually I find a large pool cut into the rock. It’s not bright turquoise and pure white, but it’s good enough – the water’s clear and the rocks smoothed into rounds by the sea. The voice murmurs *yes* to me.

‘This is the place,’ I say.

I enter the water gingerly, my bare feet scratched by hidden barnacles. Hannah’s shivering, the pale summer sun gone behind the clouds.

I take her hand, gently pull her towards me. I can feel her resistance and smile to reassure her,



'It's ok, it won't be long. Are you ready?'

She shrugs, 'I don't like being underwater.'

'I'll be careful, you remember how Pastor Nick does it? It'll only be for a couple of seconds.'

Hannah looks around, taking in the scene, its solitude, the steady beat of the waves.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' I say.

She looks at me, opens her mouth as if to say something, then closes it. A determined frown crosses her forehead. Good. She's ready. Slowly she bends down and begins to inch her head under the surface. I gently push her a little deeper, so she is fully immersed, and I hold her there: one-two-three-four-five. I release her and she surfaces, coughs, rubs the salt water out of her eyes. I make the sign of the cross on her forehead and baptise her. The sun emerges from behind its cloud, and I cry out 'Praise God!'

'How do you feel Hannah?'

She looks at me, her blue eyes lighter than normal, her pupils tiny specks. Very quietly, but each word crisp and distinct, she says,

'How am I meant to be feeling?'

'There's no one way to feel,' I try and explain, 'it's different for everyone. I felt amazing, reborn'.

A small voice finds that dangerous word again,

'It was your choice though.'

Has it worked? I wonder. *Patience*, says the voice, *God's timings are His own*.

As we are walking back, she falls on the slick pebbles. I hear the smack of her head hitting a rock, and her cry of pain. I clamber fast over the rocks to her. She has lost part of a tooth. Her front tooth has been cracked in half – the missing half nestled in a clump of seaweed, like a pearl. Blood pours out of her mouth, and a huge, angry bulge is already blossoming on her forehead. Tears stream from her eyes and she becomes the child she once was, not so long ago, and a gaping eternity ago.

I wrap her into my arms and for once, praise God, she doesn't resist. She sniffs into my shoulder, smears blood onto my t-shirt. The visible sign of this contact – the blood inking into the fabric – delights me, a sign of rekindled closeness, a glimpse of an old dependency, of holding her hair back when she was sick. Blood makes its mark.

## On the New Writing Northwest Fiction Workshop

Jenny Bayliss

Writing fiction is a lonely business. It's just you and your imaginary friends on the page or on your laptop, so it was good to share this usually solo experience in the company of other writers on the Fiction Workshops run by Lancaster Litfest. Not just a writing group, over the course of six weeks of workshops it became almost a self-help group. We were encouraged by our always positive and enthusiastic tutor Yvonne Battle-Felton, a successful author, to develop our fictional characters and bring them to life in settings that readers would be able to see, smell, hear, taste and touch. The hardest part of the sessions? Baring our creative souls and having real people read our work! But this came after we'd become more at ease with each other via several sessions on Zoom. Many of the writers on the course had serious intentions about being published so it was a joy to read works in progress, whether they were from a favourite or unfamiliar genre. As a result, the feedback was not only encouraging and supportive but also useful and eye-opening. Simple things like typos, grammar and changes of tense were quickly picked up but so were issues around clarity and how to tell your story. What a writer may think is obvious might not be so clear to the reader, so this element of the workshops was invaluable. Although the course has ended, we've decided to keep in touch as an ad hoc support group, sharing work, courses, writing competitions and anything else that gets us nearer to publication. Perhaps writing doesn't have to be such a solitary occupation after all.

## Biographical Notes

**Yvonne Battle-Felton** was born in Pennsylvania and raised in New Jersey. In 2017, she won the Northern Writers' Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Words and Women Competition and the Sunderland University Waterstones SunStory Award in 2018. Her debut novel, *Remembered* (2018), was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University and is Lecturer in Creative Writing and Creative Industries at Sheffield Hallam University.

**Loren Cafferty** is a writer and teacher from Cumbria, currently living in the Forest of Bowland. She is working on a historical novel about life at Charlotte Mason college in the Lake District whilst being endlessly distracted by writing about the great outdoors.

**Mary Ainsworth** was born in Wesham, Lancashire in 1959 and grew up near Blackpool. She studied English at Oxford University and works as a freelance copywriter. She recently settled in Lancaster after 37 years in London and is currently writing a romantic novel.

**Jenny Bayliss** is originally from London, but has recently relocated to Lancashire and is currently writing her first novel.

**Philip Cooper** was born in London. After school in Oxford, he attended the Universities of Durham, Exeter and Cardiff. He taught English in Italy and Spain, and worked in education, the probation service and social work. He has published two novels, *Social Work Man* (2013) and *The Errant Boys* (2019).

**Charlotte Morris** was born in Derbyshire. After many years working in Manchester, she currently lives in York, where she studied English Literature for her undergraduate degree. She is working on her first novel, inspired by a true story.

**Marta Pacini** is the pioneering founder of radical independent publisher Disturbance Press. Her first book, the YA novella *The (Un)lawful Killing of Daniel Brown*, is due to be published by Disturbance Press in February 2022. Marta is a roamer who currently lays her hat in Rawtenstall, Lancashire.

**Michele Thasim** was born and bred in Cheshire, and flirted with Creative Arts before she entered the worlds of IT and Open Access publishing. She has now returned to her creative roots and is writing her first novella.

**Emily Winter** grew up in Devon and has lived in Lancaster since 2012. Following a PhD in the sociology of religion, she now works as a researcher in Lancaster University's School of

Computing and Communications. She is currently working on a novel that explores themes of religion, gender and power.

## NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT WRITING

Karen Lloyd

I'm writing this during a thunderstorm; the first of the year. As storms go it's something or nothing; quite far away and short lasting. And hasn't this spring had us all guessing about the world out there? Forget the old adage 'ne'er cast a clout till May is out' – isn't this the new normal? Not knowing what to expect, and when to expect it?

A new group of writers comes together to begin making sense of nature and the environment, and together we work and strive to get things down on paper or on the screen and each Tuesday at 6pm here we all are sharing our thoughts on the world and the work. And it's not easy. The ground shifts under our feet because not everything can be known and because writing is as shifting and ephemeral as the sands of Morecambe Bay. Still, we press on, weaving words and ideas and above all, attempting to make sense of whatever it is out there that snags our attention.

I want to say that I hate Zoom and the world of the screen that Covid has foisted upon us all. That first week I see eight faces in eight different rooms; one familiar face, the rest all unknown. For all I know my students could be at other ends of the Earth. How do we make sense of the world outside when we're fashioned out of nothing more than a few million pixels – give or take a few? But what takes me most by surprise, and what makes me forget the inadequate nature of the screen as the apparatus of teaching, is how in such a short amount of time the group forges such an extraordinarily supportive alliance. Their feedback to each other is gracious and generous; their comments supportive and empathetic – they really get how to do this. On top of this, they engage in the kind of listening I dream of knowing how to do.

And out of all this comes the change in the writing; the shifting up through the gears from tentative, exploratory to self-confident, élan one could say, yet having the ability to express doubt; to know that it's ok – no – necessary sometimes - to say 'I don't know.'

A piece that originates with a toy train found in a wood that segues into our relationship with trees through a carved arborglyph (a new word, that one, for me,) and the ecological destruction being wrought by HS2. A piece on what's wrong with contemporary

nature photography, and why imperfection is what keeps the world alive. A piece on worms. On rain in the desert. On language. On bats and family. On mountains. On surveying birds. A reading that holds us all fast in the spell of the spoken word. And by the end of the course, I realise that the screen has ceased to exist. That all we are is a group of people paying each other close attention as we pay attention to the world out there, to its flaws and our flaws; to our attempts to make sense.

## The Call of the Wild

Michelle Allwood

A walk so far, away, as far away from the people, of dog wailing, ear bleeding screams that seep into my sanguine mood. Ill-timed with those that share my path for freedom, through fields already populated with trapped inhabitants.

I've been forced to abandon the expanse of circular lake, my footprints embedded in the muddied water's edge, where swans, greylags and moorhens approached to share their intentions with another that aired their views. Their London abode has its own private island where dragonflies and damsels are sheltered by weeping willows lending their embrace. How different from the lake's past existence as a pleasure craft Victorian domain, where rowing boats hosted ladies of means, parasols held aloft, dignified, gentrified, respectful to their feathered hosts. But this morning, my senses not quite awake, fragments of sunrise begin to warm the outlines of thoughts of sea and I'm envious of the geese propelling in tandem, their planned escape faultless, their smooth departure is enough to make me want to dive beneath the murky depths and emerge on an island of meaningful company. Instead, I stand my ground, waiting for the interlopers to recede, two people with a dog off the lead that proceeds to enter the lake and shatter a rarity of Egyptian calm. They stand too close, smoking cigarettes they discard into the parched fallen leaves that sit and wait to be ignited by fools, too close, too soon, leave me now.

And so I walk, striding faster than I would like so that I might avoid the less than green spaces. I cross over fat mud that sucks me in, bog that has filled ditches that haven't yet lived, breathing new life into their depths, blackness succeeds where previous greens fought to find an identity with their landscape out of step with modernity.

And then there was you. I'd walked in quiet disbelief through the remains of a wood that still breathed. I was at last alone. At first, I continued with my frantic pace, stepping out to begin my own desire line through nettles, brambles, wayward branches, ivy as thick as rope swings, anything to avoid the intended paths that the crowds may walk along. I'd had enough of not being able to pause for thought, or to listen to a robin's call. So here I was, deep in a thicket of fallen branches, beneath two-hundred-foot-tall renegades soaked in ivy,

hosting scuttling masses of voles, furry critters that scattered into myriad possibilities way ahead of me. How envious I was of their ability of flight, their freedom, of which I could only dream.

And just as I thought I was beyond hope, there you were, where you'd always been for over six hundred years. The only ancient oak sill remaining where once there were hundreds of your kind. We'll never know how you survived the annihilation of all that scattered bark, how your entrails must have felt their demise, their collected cries as their lives were taken by the deprivation of the human mind.

I see whirling streams of metallic marks that have etched their tracks into you, the scream they beseech on entry into flesh, a shining glimpse of survival, etching lithographs upon our respective canvas. I envy your ability for plastering over the cracks in your history, cell renewal of bark. You wait silently, anticipating the evolution of you. Your fattened bark is saturated by the night of downpours, softening your coarseness when I trace the shape of you, inhaling your pungent sweetness that pings through my body, in an arching pool of pendulum plumed pink flesh of your heart.

I want to rest amongst your shades of moss softened bark, as rouged as ghosts with nowhere to go. Your hues of gold and shattered taupe, as original as a volcanic loss. Crusted platelets of your life beat with opportunity, hosting the secret microscopic lives of those who we can only dream, intricacies so vibrant and essential to apothecaries that are yet to live. I scatter my sensibilities long enough to breathe you in, circle your ample girth and rest upon your means, momentarily falling over your thoughts of soaking carbonites to revel in your oxygen. I want to climb your branches of visiting intergalactic mushroomed machines and peer into your ancient chasms of woodpeckered holes, hidden coveted blackness of potent spiced worthy folds. I press my nose to your roughened skin where honeyed webs have spun across your soul, new flesh of wiry pores springs from hidden yields. Are you re-living the green-eyed topiary of your youth of Henry's reign, I wonder how we compare with them?



Fragments  
Nicola Carter

- I If the River Lune was a sculptor, it would be Richard Long, and like him, it would say of its' work:
- My outdoor sculptures are places.  
The material and the idea are of the place;  
sculpture and place are one and the same.  
The place is as far as the eye can see from the  
sculpture. The place for a sculpture is found  
by walking.*
- II Ebb tide. A cold westerly ruffles strands of bladderwrack caught in lines of wire fencing that sink and disappear into the Lune. The river is not just a carver-of-place, but is also a collector-of-things-which-float. These things are subsequently deposited into a broad sweeping line – a sculpted line, drawn chiefly with wood, but also with feathers, deflated footballs, cigarette lighters, leaves, seaweeds, emptied Vodka bottles. And occasionally, after a great storm, it is peppered with hornwrack and the discarded egg-cases of Thornback Ray's.
- III Quiet as a sweep of tidewater I collect a feather from the strandline. Slip it into my pocket like a secret. Stroke my fingertips along its surface. And walk home.
- IV I make this same journey almost every day and see the saltmarsh alive with wildfowl and wading birds. Each time I try to notice traits of the birds I see and hold snapshots of their essence in my mind so that I can identify them later: the long orange-red legs of redshank; the elegance of little egret as their question-mark shaped necks probe the soft mud for invertebrates; the sharp black and white profiles of oystercatcher, that kleep-kelep-kelep-kelep-kelep as they fly low over the marsh in their dozens... Oh, and the geese! There are so many geese. Pink-footed geese,

greylag geese, Canada geese... they flock in thousands. But the river is wide, grey and raging today and the birds are grounded elsewhere.

- V Look! See how the nimbostratus stack and lour over Clougha Pike!
- VI Flood tide. It's faint but I taste salt on my lips. Brackish water comes creeping through the creeks that fissure the virescent saltmarsh grasses. The Lune's waters lift a mixture of silt and peat skyward - offering up shades of raw umber to the cerulean sky. As I walk along the flood embankment I watch golden glints of sunlight crack and flicker across the poppling marsh pools.
- VII En-masse, a group of redshank rise into the air and begin to fly north, calling abruptly and loudly to each other as they cross the river to the banks of Salt Ayre. Moving away they become dots that rise and fall in time, like when swells pass a line of buoys at sea.
- VIII The name Salt Ayre attracts the romantic in me. The word ayre is derived from the Old Norse *eyrr*: a shingle beach or gravelly place. This toponym reveals the strong Nordic influence that was once upon this place. But the name tells us nothing of the truth of this place as it stands today: a mound of rubbish, a landfill drumlin. I'm sure the pebbles and cobbles must remain but they're several layers below.
- IX Like a migrant bird, my partner moved to Lancaster from more northerly-climes, and has settled down to roost.
- X He's kneeling on cold Yorkshire flagstones in our yard, cleaning river cobbles to lay a small patio. The early spring sunshine illuminates his work. As he turns the stones in his hands, I imagine their journeys. I imagine how movement gave form to substance while days tumbled into years, tumbled into centuries, tumbled into millennia; while river waters rolled endlessly to the sea.

- XI His hands are moving quickly, rubbing away at the dark heavy clay that coats the stones; rubbing away at the clay that has coated them for who knows how many tides. I watch his flesh move swiftly over their swollen forms as he works the dirt out of every crevice, every wrinkle, and every imperfection on their otherwise smooth surfaces.
- XII His hands submerged in the bucket of cold water are pink and raw against the blue-grey of the river cobbles. He lifts one clean and dripping from the bucket and feels its heft. Each one distinct. I sense tenderness as he places them carefully on the flagstone where they will dry in the sun. Each form waiting to be sunk, with precision, into the fresh bed of wet concrete.

*from The Writing-glass Key*

an essay by

Geoff Cox

*Newham, East London, early May 1983*

On a warm Spring afternoon it's a real suntrap in the garden. Enclosed on two sides by stark brick gable-ends, a high boundary wall on a third and the glass façade of the Day Centre, it's a space that retains heat and affords little chance for its occupants to escape. Not the prettiest of gardens, mostly lawn with a few flower and vegetable beds, but it's private green space in the middle of Tower Hamlets so I guess it's precious.

I'm kneeling in the dry soil of one of the flower beds, trowel in hand, planting small plants that I've been told are primulas, or was it petunias? I'm no gardener and I find that I'm quick to forget these details. They said that there were enough plants in the tray to fill this bed so I focus on spacing, although I'm having to work around Robert who is sitting on the soil in the middle of the bed, staring intently at a toy soldier. I'm hoping that he's thinking of an answer to the question I asked him a few minutes ago, 'What's the name of the street that the Day Centre is on?'. With Robert it's always hard to tell, maybe he's just playing soldiers in his head?

There are four of us working on this planting job. Besides Robert and me there is Alfred who is an amiable, low-maintenance sort of guy, always immaculately turned-out in clothes that he inherited, like his name, from his grandfather sometime back in the 1930s. And then there's Terry. I suspect that every new guy coming to work at the Scheme gets a stint of looking after Terry. It's a kind of initiation to see if you've 'got what it takes'. Like most of the blokes on the Scheme he's in his fifties, a million disconnected twitches, wild eyed, untamable hair and utterly, dangerously, manic: anything but low maintenance. Yet all this fades into the 'nearly normal' when he opens his mouth. You see, Terry suffers from a condition called echolalia. Never heard of it? Neither had I until I met Terry. It's a

condition that causes the sufferer to repeat everything that they just heard spoken, so if I was stupid enough to say 'What time is it Terry?' he'd keep saying 'time is it Terry, time is it Terry, time is it Terry' until he heard something else then it would be 'something else, something else, something else'. You get the picture?

So Robert's just sitting, Terry's excavating a deep hole, and Alfred and I are planting flowers in the sun. I can switch off a bit, just so long as I don't turn my back on Terry and his spade. I'm sure Robert will be back with his answer soon.

On days like this, any period of reflection seems to start with 'I hate f\*\*\*ing London', but I think this so often that it can hardly be classed as reflection.

I recall the first time I arrived here at the Day Centre, tasked with 'helping re-integrate vulnerable adults back into society', notwithstanding that it was the same society that had locked them up in Institutions for most of their lives. That task seemed almost as pointless and thankless as the challenge that kept me busy the other half of the week. Teaching in a huge comprehensive school was a culture shock in the extreme – 1,800 pupils speaking 62 first languages, and with a level of urban street-wisdom that made me feel exactly what I was: a naive Northener trying hard to summon the authority expected of a teacher. I was hiding behind my accent, a jacket and tie and a vague hope that the four months would end before I really got found out.

I sweep my eyes around the overpowering expanse of yellow-brown bricks, typical of East London, always for me a colour reminiscent of a baby's first shit. No argument about it. I f\*\*\*ing hate London.

## Fragments of Mr Quercus

Jane Corbett

The ancient Oak stands directly next to a compacted forestry footpath, a giant amongst his factory farmed peers. He is surrounded by either, tree stumps from the fallen, or armies of mono cultured spruce soldiers awaiting their fate. They creep through the landscape like cancer, invading and conquering space and light, blocking the path for biodiversity to take root and flourish. Behind the oak are the steep and ghostly remnants of the Ingleby incline railway, a decaying shrine left over from the industrial revolution. Iron ore, mined from the North Yorkshire Moors, made the treacherous one-mile journey down the 1:5 gradient until 1929 when the last wagon descended, and the end of an era faded into the moorland mists. In the distance Teesside spews out toxic waste from her chimneys like a chain smoker as wind turbines on the coast symbolize a more hopeful alternative to man's assault on Mother Nature. An audio backdrop of distant chainsaws, a quad bike revving interlaced with cries from startled pheasants plays on a loop in the background.

*When I rub my hands over his steely-blue lichen covered burrs that bulge from his trunk, little pieces of dead bark drop to the floor like dead skin from an exfoliation. Large sections of beautiful dead wood litter his immediate surroundings. These works of art have been expertly sculptured by the environment, twisted, contorted, weather beaten, gnarled and scalloped creations are speckled with tiny holes chiselled professionally by bark beetles. His knobbly and weather-beaten façade lends itself to a backdrop of strange gargoyle-like faces menacingly protruding from his trunk. Anaemic dead branches, baring the resemblance of deer antlers cling weakly to the life force of the tree.*

I searched the internet in the hope that it would lead me to meet the ideal tree. It began to have the feel of trawling through a dating site, looking for a suitable match. Because of this analogy, I always refer to the Oak as 'he'. His data described him as 'A pendunculate oak (Quercus robur), on Greenhow Bank above Old Sheepfold Farm in Ingleby Greenhow

(County of North Yorkshire.) This hollow oak, on a steep bank, was recorded for the first time in 2007 by Frank Firth for the Ancient Tree Hunt (tree 38805). It was love at first sight, at least it was for me! I have been visiting him each week for 7 months, I have named him Mr Quercus.

108 ANCIENT WOODLANDS ARE UNDER THREAT OF LOSS OR BEING IRREVERSIBLY DAMAGED TO MAKE WAY FOR THE HS2 RAIL LINK. CURRENTLY A TRAIN JOURNEY FROM LEEDS TO LONDON TAKES 133 MINUTES, ON THE HS2 IT WILL TAKE 81 MINUTES, SHAVING OFF A MERE 52 MINUTES IN MAN'S QUEST TO SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY, WORK HARDER, PLAY HARDER, BUY MORE, USE MORE. THE COUNTRYSIDE, IT SEEMS, IS SOMETHING WE FEEL IS OUR RIGHT TO DOMINATE. THE COVID19 PANDEMIC HAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT THE LARGELY UNNECESSARY TRAVEL TO WORK HAMSTER WHEEL MANY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRAPPED ON FOR YEARS. THE REALISATION THAT MANY OF US CAN NOW WORK FROM HOME MAKES THE DESTRUCTION OF SO MANY ANCIENT WOODLANDS EVEN MORE FUTILE. SEEMINGLY, HS2 WILL HAVE THE AIR OF A GHOST TRAIN WHEN IT FINALLY SLIDES OPEN ITS DOORS AS WORKING FROM HOME BECOMES THE NEW NORM AS THE TRAIN SPEEDS THROUGH OUR COUNTRYSIDE AND OVER THE GRAVES OF OUR ANCIENT WOODLANDS.

I've measured Mr Quercus, he is over 28 hugs wide and estimated to be at least 800 years old; some say over a thousand. His centre is hollow, welcoming all those that notice to come closer and listen to the stories he whispers on the breeze. I can walk straight through him as his trunk is split in 3 from the ravages of time, where death and life exist symbiotically. Each of the three splits reveal a different narrative, the smallest split with a gaping crevasse is the perfect foothold for climbing up to sit on his branch, six feet up, and contemplate life from the backdrop of the Cleveland Hills. The second split sits directly opposite the smallest, the last few clusters of dried tan-coloured leaves cling defiantly to a branch, refusing to let go, as they rustle like small paper bags in the cold Spring winds. Sprouts of wispy, whiskery new whips grow from old callouses as a wild honeysuckle has started to crawl up his trunk, like a serpent slowly being charmed from its basket. The third split is the largest and boasts impressive moss-covered burrs and a carpet of crispy, bronzed bracken decaying at his roots.

I can see a 3-dimensional pregnant female, a women's face and a deer all protruding from his trunk.

*As our lives merge, I look back at our pasts and what we have both witnessed, Mr Quercus's 800 plus years entwined with my 51. The plague of London in 1666, Covid 19, 2020. The gun powder plot of 1605, the Twin Towers in 2001, The suffragette movement of 1903, the start of the #MeToo movement in 2006. World War One of 1914, the Falklands War 1982. The cheap labour and appalling working conditions in the British mills in 1800's, Primark opens in 1973 making clothes paying their workers below the minimum wage in overcrowded factories in China and India. History, it seems, has a habit of repeating itself. Does man ever learn from his mistakes?*

I peer into Mr Quercus's many crevices, feeling like Gulliver in Lilliput as my eye scans for signs of life in these secret miniature worlds, an acorn feasting larder, littered with empty shells from the diners, probably squirrels or mice. A spider's home is a tangle of cobwebs in various states of disrepair. A festival of fungus, the beautiful, glistening, orange caps of Velvet Shank gather en masse to dine convivially on Mr Quercus's dead wood, recycling and decomposing the feast before releasing the nutrients back to the soil. The remnants of a moss lined nest, probably a mouse, interwoven with small white feathers and a tangle of dried grasses sits at the base of Mr Quercus. An army of trundling woodlice with the silvery trails of slug or snail graffiti, that look like my childhood attempts of joined up writing, are scribbled on the walls of their base camp.



## Picture Perfect?

Stephen Dunstan

I don't want to see frame filling pictures of birds. Not symmetrical Ospreys diving into aquamarine lakes, talons outstretched ready to strike. Nor Kingfishers kissing their own perfect reflections at the moment the plunge reaches impact. I don't want it to be obvious you were using a photographic hide with habituated subjects. I'll cope with not knowing that your camera equipment cost more than your car, whilst you don't actually own a pair of binoculars or a field guide. I'd rather not know that you used baits and lures to entice the Barn Owl closer, reducing its wild instincts. I'll pass on the description of what manipulation software you used to 'enhance' reality to some kind of technicolor caricature of what was there to see in life.

I want to see pictures that are rough round the edges. Where you have to squint to see if it's an Osprey, a Buzzard or even a young gull. Where there's a tiny turquoise dot on the branch in the middle overhanging the canal that's still unmistakably halcyon. I want to see pictures that show what you experience, the reality of being out in nature and making chance discoveries. I want to see pictures of moments in your life with nature, not stage-managed photo-opportunities.

The vogue in nature photography seems to be to get as close to your wildlife subject as possible. For birds this means head shots, eye shots, even peering down the throat shots. To some extent this reflects the improvements in kit, high quality telephoto lenses bringing the target nearer. But to a large extent it often doesn't. In a time when wildlife faces enough pressures from those who don't care, they are also being killed with kindness by admirers chasing subjects around and stopping them feeding. Like 'twitchers', a slightly disparaging name for such practitioners has quickly evolved – 'toggers'.

Have you seen a really close-up picture of a Cuckoo on social media recently? If you have chances are it was taken on Thursley Common nature reserve in Surrey. That's Colin. He's more easily found than most Cuckoos, in fact for the last seven summers he has generally been surrounded by a paparazzi posse. They transplant their own sticks for him to perch where the light is best or background aesthetically optimal. When individual wild

creatures are Christened with human names something has become imbalanced. And to what end? Facebook and Twitter likes often seem to be the rather shallow answer.

What's wrong with stepping back a bit, looking at things in the round. Animals live in habitats, occupy their niche in a wider ecosystem. An Otter family playing on a barren Shetland shore tells you about the harsh environment they survive in. A Black Redstart singing on a building site reminds us that they colonised Britain on the back of bomb damage in the Blitz. Hen Harriers traversing upland heather moors illustrate a deadly conflict over who or what should eat grouse. Bitterns blending in reedbed backdrops remind us of the importance of camouflage in survival. You can fixate so much on getting up close to your quarry that in a very real sense you lose the bigger picture of what nature actually is.

*from* Thoughts on Trains: Broadwells Wood

Miles Kinsley

Years later I'm exploring another wood, one that I hope to remember more clearly: Broadwells Wood in Warwickshire. It's an ancient woodland located about three miles North of Kenilworth and seven miles South-West of Coventry. On the train journey over I'd learnt that, to qualify as 'ancient', this wood has survived since 1600.

I've made this trip for some fresh air, having spent the last few weeks cooped up inside, revising. The University of Warwick campus is by no means large and certainly can't be considered metropolitan, but I've found I still need moments away from the noise and activity of student life, returning to an environment more similar to that of my home in Yorkshire. Broadwells Wood is the perfect place to escape the stresses of my fast-approaching Final Year exams!

After walking distractedly for some time, I arrive in a copse and pause to properly take in my surroundings. I breathe in the earthy, woody smells I'd wanted: Sweet Birchwood. Damp Moss. A touch of hidden Wild Garlic.

The air is close and thick.

There's a sense of stillness and calm all around me.

I feel completely free and entirely enclosed.

Everything slows down.

The floor is a sea of Hard Ferns. They ripple in the light breeze, each one showcasing a series of leaflets: little, unfurled fingers on a waving hand. Dotted amongst these is a patchwork of Bluebells. It's mid-May, so they're at their most vibrant now; speckles of purple protruding through the emerald carpet. I do my best not to step on any of them, or the lives they conceal.

I look up to see entirely different shades, the sun's beams illuminating the higher plant-life with more success. The dappled canopy is almost fluorescent, absorbing the light beyond, and bathing the already intensely green clearing in a brighter green wash.

Hazels and Downy Birches are closest, with a Sessile Oak on the far side. Their leaves meet to form the roof that reaches over the copse floor and protects the ground-level

vegetation – a community built over hundreds of years. Upon closer inspection, I notice some trees are harbouring Barnacle Lichen: cream-grey crusts which, as their name suggests, look like they belong under the sea. I reach out to touch one, feeling its hard, pock-marked surface; I wonder how long it takes each pimple to form.

I feel like I'm four years old again: excited to explore! It's as though I'm the first human to set foot here in centuries. That is until I spot the wood carving in the bark of the oak opposite. It takes me by surprise at first; there are no other references to human life anywhere. Just this one sign: a single Arborglyph. I make my way over to this unconsented tattoo.

I stroke the scarring and try to guess how much time has passed since the original cut. Twenty years? Twenty-five? The edges have smoothed over, the deeper layers have darkened. It takes a moment for me to discern what's been etched: 'JS♥HP'.

I feel a tinge of anger towards this pair and their decision to declare their love for one another through violation. I'm aware this practice is hundreds of years old, older than the tree stood in front of me. During my university studies, I'd repeatedly found references to the marking of trees in literature. Shakespeare described trees as 'books' for thoughts. Further back, Ovid deemed them 'guards' of names. They serve only as reminders of man's fear of being forgotten. This does not help to soothe the sour taste in my mouth.

Later research would inform me that this practice isn't always as superficial and self-centred as I'd thought. In Australia, the Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri people plan where they carve in their ceremonial trees so as to connect with their ancestors and the Earth beneath. Meanwhile the markings of The Scorpion Tree in California suggest signs of early astronomy from the Chumash people: an attempt to reach up to the stars. There's a deep, spiritual connection between these trees, the people who mark them and the world beyond.

All this fascinating history surrounding tree carvings, and yet I don't believe 'JS+HP' contributed to it knowingly. As I turn from the oak, knowing it will never recover, I think about this couple and whether they fully understood the grandeur of their act: their love will now continue on in the bark of this ancient plant, in a woodland that will survive for hundreds of years.

Old Norse  
*Anne Taylor*

Middlegate, Greensike, Sandwath, High Leases. Your names call out to me – come along, follow, explore.

Last April I walked these footpaths every day, watching the hedges fill out with green, and the wild flowers change from celandines to primroses and bluebells. That was a wonderfully warm dry spring; I'd even taken my sketchbook some mornings, sat in the corner of a field and recorded the lines of an ancient oak.

In the summer I walked through fields on the other side of town, past the old lime kilns and up onto the disused railway line at Rookby Scarth. Curlews and oystercatchers called out their warnings, and swallows darted through the railway cutting ahead of me.

In November, as the days shortened, I decided to go back to my springtime route, but to walk it in reverse – up a short stretch of road, then along High Leases, over Sandwath Bridge to Greensike. At the bottom of Middlegate Lane, only ten minutes from home, I suddenly found myself splashing through running water. No escape route, no dry patches near the wall or under the hedge, and quicker to carry on than turn back. I made a mental note: 'Don't try that again until it dries out.'

Over the winter we had weeks of rain, then deep snow, so of course the lanes filled with mud and field footpaths became impassable. I kept to the small back roads until the weather improved. The tarns in the meadow behind the rugby pitch, barely noticeable in summer, grew large enough to entice ducks away from the river.

I considered those words, *tarn*, *scarth*, and *sike*, then looked at the map and the dictionary; most come from the Old Norse. *Tarn* – a small natural lake or pond; *scarth* – a gap or notch in the land; *sike* – a stream or open field drain, often dry in summer; *leases* – the pastures; *wath* – a ford; *gate* – an alley or road. So Middlegate Lane is the middle alley, the middle way through the fields; adding 'lane' is superfluous. On the map I found a group of fields and a farm called Leases, in a small triangle of land between High Leases Lane, Low Leases Lane and Far Leases Lane. There were other *gates* and *sikes* and *tarns* too: Gilbert Gate, Howgill Sike and Tarnlands. So many names I'd not understood before.

Today, on a bright March morning and encouraged by a week of sunshine and a drying wind, I set out along Middlegate again, with my camera, open eyes and dictionary knowledge. Tarmac at first, up to the new cemetery, then a grassy footpath downhill towards Greensike Lane. Now I see immediately what I've never noticed before – water flowing out from a gap in the wall on my left. A deliberate, man-made gap. The water pours into a sike, recently cleared by the farmer, the dredgings forming a long low ridge between it and the path. Suddenly the sike disappears. With my new awareness of ditches I look for it further down the lane, then in the fields to my right. Sure enough, there is a slight rise in front of me, where a large clay field drain is partly buried. The water runs under the path here, and spills out beyond the hedge into the sike. Then immediately turns a corner, before making straight for the far wall, its deep unnatural line cutting through the pasture, sheep grazing on either side.

I feel absurdly pleased with myself. I must have walked this route perhaps fifty times last year, throughout April and May, unaware of its wider, watery landscape. Now I shall not only look out for hawthorn blossom, hedgerow flowers and nesting curlews, I shall keep an eye on the water level in the sike too.

## Caravan of Love

Tara Vallente

When we bought our family home, we'd no idea that we were moving in with a colony of house martins. Yet now, fifteen years later, we are all literally nestled under one roof.

I feel quite protective of them, even though there is a permanent pile of droppings on the conservatory roof. If I was one of those houseproud women who made everything sparkle, then there wouldn't be a pile of house martin poo. If I was one of those women, I would never have time to write a word, but my windows would shine.

When our neighbours had their roof done, they boxed off their eaves, and their little caravan returned the following spring to find themselves homeless. So, given that house martins always return from Africa to live within a mile of where they fledged; they moved in with us instead.

Our collection of nests has grown to eight. Three of them are beside each other, a little terrace dangling like a string of beads below the roof line. Not surprisingly, the filthiest bit of conservatory is below that spot. There's at least one nest above each bedroom window and our morning silence is broken by the growing brood.

Last week, I saw the familiar swooping above Tewet Tarn and I heard their call. I thought great, they're on their way. But they must have been someone else's birds, because when I got home, our nests were silent.

Yesterday, I saw a bird flying into the middle of the triad and I wondered if that was one of our house martins? Or was it a cheeky house sparrow claiming the nest for its own? They say house martins make the entrance hole to the nest too small for the sparrows to squeeze in. We'll see.

If I was a house martin, I'd be pretty upset to find a squatter in my house. Those fantastic ball shaped nests take up to a thousand hours to build. Each mouthful of muddy puddle is collected in the beak, mixed with spittle and shaped to protect up to five eggs and two adult birds.

You can tell the difference between a swallow and a house martin if you can catch sight of its underbelly, because it's creamy white. I never get close enough, or have eyesight good enough, to make out its feathered blue muddied lace wings. They fly so fast!

You'll find me at sunset sitting on the top step holding my breath as they head towards the fascia boards at break-neck speed. Except they never break their necks, they simply slip inside the house martin shaped hole in the nest.

So what do the house martins think every April when they land? Do they peer through the conservatory and comment on how much we've changed?

Last year, there'd have been plenty to talk about. Firstly, why was everyone at home all the time? Why was Dominic pottering in the vegetable garden? Didn't he have a job to go to?

Why were the boys at home all the time? Don't they go to school? Don't they have any friends?

And why was the road silent? Where was everyone?

And me. They would have wondered about me. Why had I planted hundreds of seeds in the conservatory and why was I gradually disappearing into a self-made inner oasis? Did they notice I was locked inside my thoughts?

Just as the house martins once lived wild and free on cliffs, they now stay close to houses and bridges. Close to humans. Close to us. And we, in 2020, close to them.

From my green glazed sanctuary, I wake with them, I sip coffee as they fire out of the nest, feeding on the wing. I watch as they sit for weeks on their eggs. Then I lie on the floor among my green beans and tomatoes and see them zipping back and forth with food for their young. If the weather is good, as it was in lockdown, the house martins will have another brood. They're almost unique as a species because the older siblings help to feed the next batch of babies.

One afternoon, the baby house martins threw themselves out of the nests onto the slates above the kitchen. It was like watching a series of aborted attempts to fly. One by one they jumped, flapped and landed a metre or so down the slates.

And then as the afternoon light faded, I watched the moon rising over Clough Head, and the whole house martin colony darted back and forth across the sky. Swooping and perfecting their new-found skill. They had learnt to fly. They had survived another year. So had we.



## Biographical Notes

**Karen Lloyd** is an award-winning writer and environmental activist based in Cumbria. Her first book, *The Gathering Tide: A Journey around the Edgelands of Morecambe Bay* (2016) contains writing on land, landscape and memory. *The Blackbird Diaries* (2017), winner of The Lakeland Arts and Literature Award 2018, is an intimate account of the wildlife in Lloyd's edge-of-town garden, the South Lakes landscape, the Solway coast and the Hebridean islands of Mull and Staffa. Her latest book, *Abundance: Nature in Recovery* (Bloomsbury) will be published in September 2021.

**Michelle Allwood** was born in Blackpool, before moving to London. After working for the BBC, she is now at the BFI. She is dyslexic and neuro-diverse and, holds a BA and MA in Literature & Creative Writing. She is currently planning a PhD, focussing on tree intelligence.

**Nicola Carter** was born in Barrow-in-Furness. She graduated from Lancaster University with a degree in Contemporary Art, and later retrained to become an Outdoor Instructor. She is currently working on a collection of non-fiction pieces based around her experiences of walking and climbing in the Lakeland fells.

**Jane Corbett** lives in North Yorkshire and trained in horticulture before embarking on a degree as a mature student. A recent theatre graduate, Jane developed a relationship with an ancient oak tree over the course of a year for her final performance where a great love story unfolded.

**Geoff Cox** is a retired educational designer from Sunderland, now living in the South Lakes. He started writing in 2018 and has successfully experimented with several genres. In 2020, with painter Heather Dawe, he released "Traceless", a book on fell-running and the environment published by Little Peak.

**Stephen Dunstan** was born in Barrow-in-Furness, studied Politics at Lancaster University and lives in Blackpool. He is married to Jane. He has a Masters in Public Administration and works as a Finance Director. A keen birder, he has co-written county avifaunas and bird reports for 30 years.

**Miles Kinsley** grew up in Settle, North Yorkshire. He studied Theatre and Performance at the University of Warwick and is now a professional writer and actor. He is currently working on a performance text that unpacks the devastation HS2 has brought to ancient woodlands across England.

**Anne Taylor** was born in the south and grew up Kenton – John Betjeman’s Metro-land. She studied English and Art at teacher-training college in Warrington then, many years later, graduated with a BA in Archaeology and Anthropology from The University of Cambridge. She now lives and writes in Kirkby Stephen.

**Tara Vallente** grew up in Lancaster where she started her career as a journalist and now lives in the Lake District. She has given two TED talks and raised millions for charity. She works as a producer for BBC Radio Cumbria and is currently working on a novel.

## POETRY

Kim Moore

When I began to plan these workshops, I did not predict how enjoyable they would be for me. To be given the chance to work with eight committed writers and explore in depth topics in poetry such as form, use of white space, repetition and silence felt like the most precious gift. What follows is a very brief summary of just some of the work that the poets I worked with produced during those eight weeks. I would like to offer here my huge admiration for all eight poets, and my thanks for following me down the many poetic rabbit holes that we investigated during our time together.

**Claire Burnett's** work experiments with a wide variety of forms and explores wide-ranging themes including family dynamics and the body. In 'I didn't recognise that pain is a warning' she deploys anaphora deftly to deliver a devastating retelling of what it is like to live in a body where pain is dismissed and words are ignored.

Inherent in all of **Julie Carter's** work is a love of the sound of language. In 'Revision' she incorporates the language of biochemistry and makes it sing. Her final poem 'Going through the change' leaves us with a beautiful last line and an unanswered question: 'And after all this – what will winter's pure white truth make of me?'

**Melissa Davies** is not just writing poems – she is world building, using language as a spell to create rich, evocative work. All three of her poems included here manage to be both grounded in the hardness of island life, whilst shimmering with a touch of strange magic.

**Kelly Davis's** poems concern themselves with narrative, and what is left said and unsaid. This is perhaps most closely apparent in 'Memento', which takes on the devilish form of a specular, telling a painful story and then rewinding it again, whilst 'Notes on my father-in-law's funeral' says as much with white space as it does with language.

Notions of freedom and containment are explored in all three of **Eleanor Denvir's** tightly controlled, pared back poems. Whilst in the first two poems, flight is associated closely with escape and freedom, in 'Stairs', the speaker finds a sense of power and control in cleaning as the vacuum is wielded 'with the pomp of a royal trumpeter'.

**Amelia Loulli** writes powerfully about the body, and particularly the female body in childbirth. Both of her poems included here are full of evocative and clear-eyed imagery,

with sentences that twist and turn until they land exactly where they should and where they need to be.

**Sara Mellen**'s work ranges far and wide in its exploration of form and themes. 'Clapham' is an incantatory hymn in response to the brutal murder of Sarah Everard whilst 'Field Notes on Fear' deploys the list form to explore the many ways fear can manifest during a lifetime. Finally 'At Dawn, the revolution' deploys a sharp humour in writing about the domestic.

**Clare Proctor**'s work is generous, expansive and always open to following where thought and language lead. In '87 Thanington Road' she makes full use of that most obsessive of forms, the sestina to examine trauma and how it is both carried and left behind. This is a haunted, haunting poem which I believe will stay in the mind long after reading.

I hope readers will find much to enjoy here in this varied and exciting selection of work.

## Claire Burnett

### Epiphany

I always looked up to you, even when you said I was too young to use the tweezers and I must just watch you play Operation instead;

I placed my small fingers against the intersection of the old mangle's rollers as instructed, and patiently waited for you to turn the handle;

I believed that one day I would grow as tall as you both, that I might be an equal participant in our games of Piggy in the Middle –

I fetched mugs of tea when you isolated yourselves in teenage man-caves. A grunted acknowledgment kept me interested.

Four decades on, I realise I will never be old enough/tall enough/ you will never accept me as an equal, even when you eat at my table.

### Field notes from a walk to a village churchyard, April 2021

birdsong cascades through blackthorn blossoming hedgerows, along the single-track holloway

a short amble is now an endurance test, as I refasten the leg brace five times in as many minutes

elderly farm collie on her taut chain barks persistently, unseeing eyes cannot perceive we're  
both lame, vulnerable

unmade road by the clear stream is safely beyond the farm's curtilage

blackbird sings joyful Spring

tree bough at the gateway is braced by three forked sticks, crutches to support it above the  
church path

verdant budburst against blue sky

shimmering midday sun

relief is mossy grass beneath unbraced bare-feet, grounded among violets, primroses

acid smoke of a feed-sack burn-up drifts past gravestones

I didn't recognise that pain is a warning  
*after David Tait*

Because the obstetrician decided I was overdue. Because they stored me in an incubator.  
Because they pricked my heel to check my responses. Because they told my mother not to  
breastfeed. Because I went blue in the car when they were bringing me home. Because I  
stopped breathing every night for two months. Because the fireman next-door picked me up  
by the legs like a new-born lamb and swung air into my lungs. Because my father died before  
I could know him. Because my brothers guard their knowledge. Because my mother was  
widowed and orphaned in my early years. Because I was sandwiched in her grief. Because he

wanted a ready-made family. Because he ignored my wish to get changed in private. Because he insisted I took the retch inducing large tablets. Because he clamped my jaw shut and stroked my neck like a dog. Because he wouldn't open the window on nauseating car journeys. Because he wouldn't stop the car when we needed to pee. Because they would not stop tickling me when I said no. Because Mum never said stop. Because they said I cried crocodile tears. Because little girls should be seen and not heard. Because Mum stitched up the tear in my skirt without asking how it happened. Because some men aren't very nice was the entirety of her relationship advice. Because there was Sudden Infant Death. Because of the stiff upper lip. Because Mum's friends saw me selling the Big Issue. Because we were not married when you died. Because the GP would not believe my pain. Because hypomania was a side-effect. Because fear narrows horizons. Because the obstetrician sees sixty vaginas a day. Because she did not seek consent for an internal examination. Because I kept carrying on. Because the orthopaedic doctor carefully asked permission before the anal exam. Because two porters flung aside the privacy curtain at three a.m. Because I got used to acute pain. Because I got used to being unheard. Because I wouldn't believe it when I heard my body scream.

## Julie Carter

### Revision

*Lehninger – Principals of Biochemistry* was always my favourite book  
classy and smooth, smelling of knowledge, every line and equation  
perfectly structured molecular syntax and diction, the narrative  
was out of this world, beyond all blurbs, how extraordinary –  
the peerless genius of a ribosome. The matchless matrix of mitochondria  
which perform a chain of electron transport, stream of consciousness  
the very erudition of it all, everything – substrate, enzyme, life.  
To be is to be catalysed, dissolved, evaporated, solidified.  
*Lehninger* – you gave me everything I needed, that first intimacy  
sitting in silence by the library window. I was so taken, like a salvation.

### On Clapham Common

*after Sarah Everard*

Watch her run / such a natural / she could run / without ever stopping / Watch her lightly /  
landing almost flying / Watch the touch / foot to ground / Watch – it's not /  
shins or thighs/ or anything which / could be named / as a body-part / except the heart /  
Watch my words / I said soul / Watch for that / can you see? / her soft-centre /  
redly-hotly running / from porous skin / the searching gleam / shining from her /  
eyes she's watching /you Watch her / look how fast / she gets away / how slowly/  
she / gets caught.



## Going through the change

I was a wispy thing once, thin in a half-promised spring, so easily whipped by the wind.  
I was sappy and young with an insatiable appetite for light, a photosynthetic glutton.

Blooming, blossoming, fragrant, fecund, fruitful, Summer always yearns  
to feel eternal. Until equinox, and the sky sinks into Tupperware filtered days.

Look at me now, how my leaves shine, yellow as the sun and not as dangerous,  
I am the light source, you can stare straight at me, the brightest one in all the day,

bolder than the green of youth, brazen golden-glory tree in autumn's fading dream.  
And after all this – what will winter's pure white truth make of me?

Melissa Davies

Vanishing act

*after David Morley*

How can you know what it is like to lose  
your magic? When surviving here was an act  
set up by fishermen with no view beyond sea.  
Their rope frays between your fingers  
until a single thread holds your whole animal  
reason to continue. You row your knuckles raw  
at midnight, daylight or anytime your children alight  
on the quay their great-grandfather built,  
simply to keep them coming back, and listening.  
How can you know when it's time to accept  
they were never listening? They can't believe  
in sea monsters or boys hidden in stones—  
only dry skins swinging from cod-racks in wind  
where once they gathered dried flesh for food.  
These stories of sunfish are pulled from hats  
of salt-dumb old men while their fingers  
finger rings from crab pots and your children disappear.  
How can you know what you will feel  
when it's over? Grief as the last spectator leaves,  
relief that your son will never learn to make one skrei  
feed four children when only half the shoal reappear.  
Your eagle's eyrie is a pile of sticks  
every needle bone must be collected before they bend,  
while you can still see whole animal bodies.  
How can you know who will stay on this island

without you? The bird ate her children before returning  
to the mainland. You should eat your children  
if it would make your magic stronger,  
bring the sheen back to your velvet sea  
and shoals dazzling like sequins under limelight.  
But when dry wind blows across your open palm  
all you can taste is bone dust.

## Fiskebruk

He's explaining the *fiskebruk*  
but all I can think about is the fisherman's  
filleting knife slipping under my epidermis  
flicking individual bones out in experienced  
exquisite rhythm.

## Field notes on island life by the only resident

Yesterday they burnt a boat damaged by storms,  
fibreglass smoke billowing past seagull screams  
signalled across the strait.

I stood beside Magne's bridge to smell dark grey waste,  
hear the boat's story trickle through shingle  
between their foreign words and music I felt in my gut.

Tomorrow they'll catch a ferry  
leaving sandpipers picking crumbs of plastic from fire pits.

An eider will try to nest in remnant heat while tar  
sticks her chicks to the feathers I wait all year to collect,  
“The king of Norway sleeps in a duvet of *Fleinvær* down!”  
Their engine devours my voice.

## Kelly Davis

### Memento

Indifferent to human folly,  
wearied by its travels,  
the green onyx egg rests on her desk  
in a house on the Cumbrian coast.  
When she rubs its smooth surface  
it takes her back to Italy in the seventies.  
A fug of incense and dope,  
stealing kisses in the olive groves,  
the year they stayed in a Tuscan villa.  
Giggling in a car, on a winding mountain road,  
hearts pounding, the world opening.  
On the terrace round a Ouija board:  
they put their fingers on the glass, laughing.  
Someone fainted – fear slapped them round the face.  
A year later one of those boys was dead,  
slumped against the wheel of his first car.  
He took the bend too fast  
and the tree was there, waiting.

And the tree was there, waiting –  
he took the bend too fast.  
Slumped against the wheel of his first car  
a year later, one of those boys was dead.  
Someone fainted, fear slapped them round the face.  
They put their fingers on the glass, laughing  
on the terrace round a Ouija board,

hearts pounding. The world opening,  
giggling in a car, on a winding mountain road.  
The year they stayed in a Tuscan villa –  
stealing kisses in the olive groves,  
a fug of incense and dope.  
It takes her back to Italy in the seventies  
when she rubs its smooth surface  
in a house on the Cumbrian coast.  
The green onyx egg rests on her desk,  
wearied by its travels,  
indifferent to human folly.

### Notes on my father-in-law's funeral

At the crematorium she was trembling but composed,  
gripping her daughter's arm.

He'd never been a believer,  
he just wanted music – no prayers, no fuss.

Seven of us sat on the wooden bench  
listening to Beethoven's String Quartet in C-sharp minor.

They'd been married 45 years.  
She reached after the coffin as it slowly slid away.

His ashes were buried on Binsey Fell  
in a tobacco tin.

She could see the fell from the kitchen window  
when she washed the dishes.

She would tell him about the day's events  
before she went to sleep, on her side of the bed.

## Sheep philosophy

Walking up the path  
I saw sheep grazing.  
Some standing, some lying –  
going about their sheep lives.

The rams' horns curled  
flat against their heads,  
their soft ears poked out  
through the brownish whorls.

Some had creamy fleeces,  
others looked dirty  
with shaggy, brown bits  
dangling behind.

Yet they co-existed  
peacefully.  
No apparent conflict,  
no jealousy.

I caught a ewe's yellow gaze.

She stood motionless,

staring back at me.

What did she see?

And what must it be like

to lead a blameless life,

knowing only milk, grass,

sun, rain, birth, death?



## Eleanor Denvir

### Bolted

He used to secure the doors  
with a series of bolts, chains,  
lever locks, to separate  
the chaos outside from within.

As soon as we moved in  
he set about the fixtures  
on the door, a barricade,  
a ritual of turns and clicks.

Even the lids of jars  
screwed down so tight -  
peanut butter, miso, barley.  
No gooey mush or dried flake  
could get out.

But on a clear day, the window's frame  
hung over the city's shape  
paused to claim the cathedral block,  
swooped the Mersey, called the mountains

so this heart, unlocked,  
could fly out.

## Clipped

Give me back the space  
I knew before the beginning.  
Give me back the sun,  
the warmth that spreads,  
that you took away.  
Give me back the distance  
of the voyager  
travelling star lengths  
across this stretch.  
Give me back the smell  
of the beech wood  
below the mountain,  
the wrap of wool,  
the wooden walls.  
Give me back my flight,  
open winged, to see it all.

## Stairs

The cat hair, dust, detritus collect too fast  
for my hold on this humble castle  
to remain queenly.

I grip the metal tube, my sceptre,  
then bend to rake the cushioned dirt,  
the machine behind me wheezing  
and applauding my attitude.

I am working my way up  
servant and queen in one,  
wielding this instrument  
with the pomp of a royal trumpeter.

At the top step, I am met  
by a burst of light  
from my son's bedroom,  
bouncing off the orange wall  
we painted together,  
setting my hair to a golden crown.

Amelia Loulli

Self-portrait of birth with birds

Two days before, two starlings broke into our home.  
They insisted on staying in the room she would be born in.  
Long tailed and larger than expected, they slept in corners,  
or headbutted the mirrors. During the labour, impossibly fast,  
they thrummed their wings at the window we left open  
to let them go, and I shivered as her shoulders stayed stuck.  
Walking from my bed to lean over my desk,  
I listened to their wings, as though made from thin steel,  
insistent as a heartbeat against the screen of outside,  
and the spaces between things only grew, the distance  
between one place and another, one wing and the sky.  
Gripping the back of my chair, I closed my eyes.  
A bird can live two days trapped in a fireplace,  
how long in a room? Their claws scratching smooth  
frames like clock hands, I reached down to touch her head,  
resting my arm against my body, open as a window.

## Until you

Until you have been made sick with blessings,  
until you have retched your own sustenance up and out  
of your tired, busy mouth, until you have stretched  
your insides to make more room, like an eager, bright  
birthday balloon, until you have run out of out breaths,  
held yourself in like a diver heading to the darkest deep,  
until you have watched a clock, a calendar, like a life-support  
machine, until you have counted days and weeks  
like crimes, until you have held love with empty hands,  
been desperate but unable to say, *I love you too*,  
breath still held, skin turning blue, until you have chosen  
a method to be raked out by, spread thin like topsoil,  
until then, tell me how you can know what I should have done  
with myself. Tell me how you can know what I meant.

Sara Mellen

Clapham

*after Sarah Everard*

and when she didn't make it home  
we knew exactly what this meant  
and when they searched the woods and fields  
we knew the fear she must have felt

and when they showed her photograph  
we knew. Our hearts began to fail  
and when the cops said 'body found'  
we knew he had not left her whole

and when the cops said, 'stay at home'  
we knew this wouldn't keep us safe  
and when the women told their truths  
we knew the world would have to change

and when the women came to stand  
we knew that we would hold her name  
and when the day turned into dusk  
we knew we'd still walk home alone

## Field notes on fear

- 1 At primary school, I cheeked the headmaster. I thought we were friends, and it wa okay. It wasn't.
- 2 The dark corridor outside my bedroom. Spiders big enough for boots. Sometimes, things more frightening than spiders.
- 3 Moving gracefully out of his way, in case of eruption. Making it look like an accident.
- 4 The lovely tremble on the stage steps – this is going to happen.
- 5 They're late home. This can only mean one thing. I plan funerals, pick flowers. Weep.
- 6 Being picked. Not being picked.
- 7 The small mistake that blossoms, blooms, takes all the available space. I sack myself, in my head. There was no mistake, it turns out.
- 8 The way the teacup Pomeranian views the pitbull, shivering.
- 9 Idiot boy, dark blue Beemer, far too close and far too fast. My father's voice in my ear, 'they're just metal killing machines, cars'.
- 10 Her birth family arrive, all smiles. She buckles herself into the back seat, waves, is gone.
- 11 Hearing how another woman was hurt. Checking my body in the same places. And always the heart.
- 12 Not knowing what I did wrong.
- 13 At the end of an argument, you lifted your arm to pick up the butter, and I flinched. You looked astonished.
- 14 Adrenalin hit from police dramas. Someone else is in trouble. It isn't even real trouble.
- 15 A feeling in every millimetre of skin. Hairs taut with waiting. Let it be over.
- 16 Imposter syndrome. This will be the day they find me out.

At dawn, the revolution

I took the eggs from their secret place  
and beheaded them, one sharp shot, on the rim of the bowl.

They still argued in the pan, spitting occasionally,  
then were subdued by the heat. Their eyes grew dull and filmy.

The beans left a coded greeting, after two minutes on high power -  
one warm breath, whispered behind the microwave door.

Coffee steamed, oblivious, rich and superior,  
and the brown sauce guarded the cutlery.

while the cruet left its dusty largesse  
on the table, beside my plate.



## Clare Proctor

### To weed

*after Elizabeth-Jane Burnett*

To remove unwanted plants from an area of ground. To eliminate as unsuitable or unwanted. To untether them from their moorings. To unthread from the earth. To understand persistence.

To care about the outward appearance of things. To value one plant/leaf/bloom/petal/shade more than another. To rate properties of beauty or nutrition or seasonal interest. To label something as common. To consider society's expectations.

To make a decision. To unwind time. To understand that mark making is temporary. To know you can never reach deep enough. To understand that the job is never finished.

To leave your mind at the door. To be at peace. To follow in your mother's footsteps.

To be connected to a fork, paint fading under your hands. To be the sun watching your body from afar. To understand distance.

To be aware of small movements. To uncover pink-brown bodies, full of earth. To identify larvae. To be in service to a Robin. To be in awe of ants.

To work on your knees. To wear gloves and use a mat. To accept that still, your skin will be imprinted by stone, that soil will dig its way into the curve of your fingernails.

To be willing to kill. To kill without thinking. To be meticulous. To be merciless. To feel nothing for the heap of bodies wilting in a bucket. To decide that some lives are less important than others.

To think of nothing. To see movement as meditation. To know patience is prayer. To face the earth. To know your time will come.

## 87 Thanington Road

I cannot carry his voice anymore.  
I think of someone saying 'leave it at the door'  
as if it were just a matter of my hands  
letting go, as if there had never been that climb  
of its timbre into my mind, his lies  
nestled like living things, condensation on a window.

The voice belongs to another time, a house where each window  
would sit ajar like a question. Not anymore.  
I learned to lock and unlock, and lock, as if locks were lies  
that could unravel at any time, as if doors  
could open by themselves, inviting the climb  
upstairs, the bannister smooth under his hand.

I picture his claw-like hands,  
note their desperation, opening and closing like windows.  
They move monstrously, obscene spiders that climb  
into the corners of rooms, multiple eyes wide. They can't see me anymore.  
I am the body that has pushed the door  
closed. I am the binding web, using his own lies

as thread. I think of all his lies,  
how river-easy they ran, certain of their destination. He hands  
them out like a canvasser, pushes them through doors,

plasters them on billboards, posts them in windows,  
dropping letters like stains till nothing is clean anymore,  
soiled sinking sand from which no-one can climb.

It has taken me all of this time to climb  
out of the body he branded. That body now lies  
in the past, can't feel pain anymore,  
a crime scene cleaned of fingerprints, hands  
folded together as if in prayer. And the window,  
unlatched to let in fresh air, and the door

wide open, a stream of sunlight. These words are a door  
that I walk through, a staircase that I climb,  
traveller in an old country. I reach the window,  
know it as a pilgrim knows their destination, lies  
down at their arrival, bone tired, hands  
whitened by the weight of the burden they don't need to carry anymore.

Window, welcome me for this last time. Door,  
any more open and you'll be a sky into which I'll climb,  
lies transformed, weightless as blossom, falling from my hands.

## Biographical Notes

**Dr Kim Moore** is one of the founders of Kendal Poetry Festival. Her first full-length collection, *The Art of Falling* (Seren, 2015), won the 2016 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. She was one of the judges for the 2018 National Poetry Competition and the 2020 Forward Prizes for Poetry. She recently completed her doctorate on poetry and everyday sexism at Manchester Metropolitan University and her second collection, *All The Men I Never Married*, is due from Seren in October 2021.

**Claire Burnett** was born in Walsall, and studied Creative Writing and Literature with the Open University. She later swapped Exmoor for the Dales national park, and now lives in Lancaster. She finds herself mystified by the Anthropocene. She is currently completing a Masters in Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

**Julie Carter** grew up in Sunderland and was a climbing instructor before spending twenty years working as a medical doctor. She is now studying for an MA at Lancaster University and her work includes the books "Running the Red Line" and "Is It Serious". You can find her at [www.mindfell.co.uk](http://www.mindfell.co.uk).

**Kelly Davis** was born in London and moved to West Cumbria in 1989. She works as a freelance editor and her poetry has been published in magazines including *Mslexia*, *Southlight* and *Shooter*. In 2021, she was selected for *Best New British and Irish Poets 2019–2021* (Black Spring Press).

**Melissa Davies** was born on the Solway Coast and graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from Newcastle University in 2017. She then spent five months running a creative retreat on Norway's arctic coast. Melissa is currently working on her first collection, inspired by the landscape and people of those islands.

**Eleanor Denvir** grew up in London, travelling to Beijing in 1989. After studying philosophy at Liverpool University, she started sharing her poetry in spoken word performance. She works on cross-cultural community projects, teaches ESOL, practises Aikido and is currently writing on the theme of borders.

**Amelia Loulli** is a poet living in Cumbria. Her work was selected for *Primers Volume Four* (Nine Arches Press, 2019) and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize three times. She is currently doing an MA in poetry at Newcastle and working on a first collection and a book of essays.

**Sara Mellen** was born in Suffolk, and has slowly travelled North in increments. She studied Creative Writing, before training and practising as a social worker. Now working in student mental health, she has returned to her love of poetry and is working on a pamphlet – working title: ‘Body of Work’.

**Clare Proctor** attained a BA Literature and MA in Modern Poetry before moving to Cumbria where she now teaches English. Her poetry has appeared in publications including the *Handstand Press Anthology of New Cumbrian Writing*, and she came second in the Ware competition 2021. She is working on her first pamphlet.

## TRANSLATION

Daniel Hahn

This spring I had the pleasure of leading a series of literary translation workshops for Lancaster Litfest. Five translators – working from French, German, Spanish and Polish – each brought along a short text they were working on, for us to examine as a group. Four were extracts from book-length works of prose fiction, the fifth a scene from a play. The four prose pieces had some bits of thematic common ground, but were stylistically very different indeed.

(Though by odd coincidence, three of the four featured characters drinking unbranded ‘cola’, hence some bonding over the translation challenges posed by that precise phenomenon. Not something I’ve ever encountered in a workshop before, I confess.)

The starting point for each translation was very good. It’s important to say that, I think. But as any editor will tell you – and much of our work was essentially editorial work – even a good piece can be made better. And made better sometimes through the tiniest of changes.

We spent about an hour on each text. The translator read their work aloud to the group, then the rest of us asked them questions about whatever we’d observed. Because our group was variously multilingual, in most cases we had no access to the source language the translator was translating from, so our response to each piece was not about how well it represented the original, but interrogating how this new piece of *English writing* worked. That focus – leaving the original to the translator, and focusing on the translation itself (again, like an editor, usually) also allowed us to develop how we read – we need to be hyper-alert to the English prose, and figure out how to articulate what we find in it in such a way as to be useful to its translator. *What is it* about this word that bothers us? How *exactly* does the voice seem inconsistent at this point? I know I’d prefer this sentence without the comma there, but *why*?

The changes that were made to the work the translators shared with us were tiny, for the most part – yes, the occasional sentence restructure, but more often just swapping in a new word, or very subtly re-punctuating. But all writing earns its effect from an accumulation of the smallest things – a syllable here, a comma there – and every one of these five texts is the better for the attentiveness that this group of translators brought to

it. The beauty of this method, for a workshop leader, is that once the group has got used to what is expected of them, you have very little work to do yourself; just sit and watch them help each other to improve. And that was certainly the case with this group, who were all shrewd readers, and generous with their thoughts and enthusiasm.

So these are the five extracts in their post-workshopping state, from Jo, Kasia, Rebecca, Lise and Louie (and their authors). All of them leave me wishing I could read more. I hope you feel the same.

Ulrike Draesner

*from The Channel Swimmer*

Translated from the German by Rebecca Braun

*He has 'been living too safely': this is what Charles realises in his early sixties, shortly before retirement. When his wife Maude announces she wants another man to share their home from now on, his first response is to turn to his own dream: to swim across the English Channel. The water – strong, tempting, dangerous – changes Charles's perspective on his life: on those three summers of love in the seventies, on human passions, and on failed utopias. In the following passage we get a first flavour of Charles's undertaking.*

White horses: the wind blowing smack against the tide, visible waves, their crests lightly beaten froth.

Through the mist the rising sun shimmered round. Silver-edged tufts of cloud hung low in the sky, but still high over the Channel. Green and grey, constantly stirring up sand, the water threw the falling light back out into a sky that was gradually turning blue. Charles did his stretches on the cliff-top and the world rose easily into the day before him.

Sea swell, type one: the wind blowing with the tide, over the water, pushing the waves out in long lines. Brendan, Charles's life insurance, the ship's captain and an officially recognised source of information on this shimmering sheet, deemed such perfect weather an 'improbability'. The reality was type three: choppy seas. The wind was blowing side-on against the tidal current, significant swell, freak waves, sea-sickness. Oh yes, for the swimmer too. Particularly for the swimmer. *Do you mind?*

06:30 a.m. The cliff-top restaurant was serving instant coffee and soggy toast. Britain. This was where it began, this was where it ended.

'I don't think you should take whitener,' said the old man to the older of his two female companions.

All three were sitting at the wooden table diagonally across from Charles. The one with the lilac pullover, walking stick, and a view out onto the watery Channel said, 'My teeth are excellent', and dipped her oat biscuit into the hot drink. 'White horses today, the sea!'



At this time of day only seagulls, old people and swimmers were awake. The birds, creatures whose veins coursed with blood, not tea, had hidden themselves in crannies in the cliff but were still making the usual racket. Barely perceptible vertical streaks were hanging between the water and the sky: a loneliness dashed with rivulets.

The path down to the beach started at the benches. Charles put his phone into his coat pocket so as to fall more easily into a stride. According to the Real-Life-Crossing app, Brendan's ship, the 'Henry', was heading back into Dover Port after that night's successful swim. The next candidate on the list was him. Throw up, shiver, carry on front-crawl – be a swimmer. A swimmer amongst mega-tankers, ferries, yachts, cruise-ships in the world's busiest waterway. A swimmer wearing nothing more than trunks, goggles and a cap, a head gasping for air, directed and fed by an accompanying boat for the fourteen or seventeen or twenty-five hours it would take to cross the strait, the Channel, that passage of water.

To the left and right of him the vertical cliffs stood stubbornly in their surroundings, gigantic chalk walls pushed together like boards. England's end, England's beginning. A home for you too, Maude had said. He jogged sure-footedly over the stony ground between the empty expanses. Should he send his wife a piece of chalk before he swam out? Black veins of flint between the crumbly white lumps, his final letter! How beautifully pathetic. The piece that came away when he knocked the edge of his hand a couple of times against the cliff looked like a mole's snout. Blind in all its whiteness.

The chunk of chalk bounced away down the steep, stony path, out of sight. The crossings from that morning popped up one after the other on the websites of the two Channel-crossing clubs. He would be fed from a rod, like a zoo animal. They would open and attach a tube of energy gel to the gripper, pineapple or lemon flavour. Pineapple makes your lips sticky straight away. Last year, a swimmer had merrily injected the stuff down his throat with an oversized syringe. It was such a harmlessly ridiculous image that this summer's set of hopefuls couldn't stop talking about it on the beach. The syringe grew with every telling; we are by the sea here, after all.

Finally.

At last. Or whatever this Channel was.

Under no circumstances was the candidate allowed to touch the feeding rod.

Charles had chosen strawberry, peach, vanilla.

His pilot would pack flat cola for his stomach, ginger biscuits, peppermint tea. The majority of crossings failed either because of the weather or the food. Each feed shouldn't take longer than one minute; over the length of the crossing that still added up to forty-five minutes of lost time. He had no interest in breaking any records. He wanted to make it – swim – onto land.

Three quarters of an hour: thanks to tidal drift, you can increase that to one and a half to two hours in the freezing cold, swimming against the current.

It's the current against manpower and wind, said Brendan, and – above all – your mind.

Ultimately, or, in the end, or, at the end of all things: the sea. Fish, already caught, grew between your hands here, the waters and the skies mysteriously filled up with shadowy shapes, a rushing sound pushed through the air, its whisperings sadly unfathomable. Even at this early hour a family had already set up camp in the sandy bay of the otherwise pebbly beach. Two adults in hoodies and blankets were feeling their short night. Their two toddlers, half naked and still so small that they hadn't yet forgotten what swimming was, were feeling and hearing God knows what.

Tomorrow he wanted to be on his way by the time the sun was this high in the sky, tomorrow, or at the very latest the day after tomorrow, preferably right now. He had been training for over a year, following a strict plan of cold-water winter swims in the river to toughen up and then swimming every weekend from May onwards in the port of Dover. Now, in the middle of August, the Channel had reached its maximum temperature: 17.2 degrees Celsius.

The Channel, the soup, the filthy brew.

He almost tripped over the boy in the teddy bear suit who was poking around in a pile of seaweed and gleefully shouting out 'Easter egg!' as he held a piece of plastic tight with both hands. A fat little face, dirty mouth. Charles fell into a trot. Children didn't look for shells anymore. They wanted to scratch polystyrene, chew pieces of foil. The clouds were dangling from the sky like laughing fleecy coats torn from the sea. Artificial fur, foam. Reality kept changing every second.

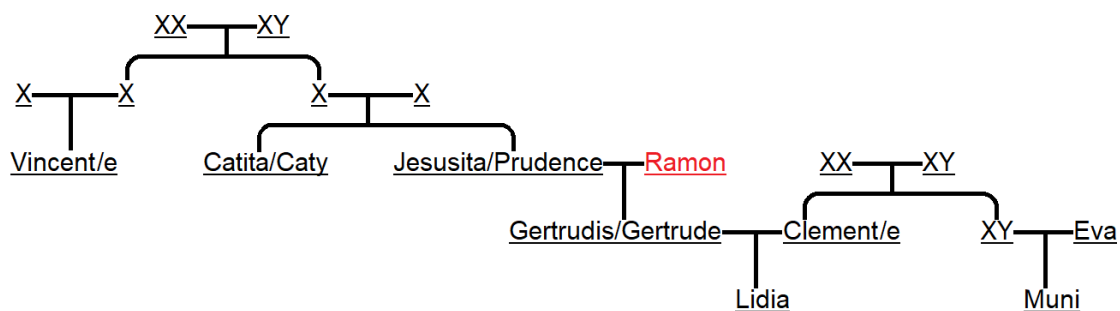
(Extract from Ulrike Draesner *Der Kanalschwimmer* © 2019 by Mareverlag, Hamburg. Reprinted by permission.)

Elena Garro  
 from *A Solid Home*

Translated from the Spanish by Louie Ariza

*This play is set in Mexico in the late 1950s. What becomes apparent at the start of the play is that all the characters are dead and the play is taking place in a family tomb where they await Judgement Day. It explores themes of life, loneliness, belonging and fulfilment, mixing comedy and poignancy to make for an exciting read, and indeed watch. Below I have included a cast list as well as a family tree for the reader's reference. The characters have just heard movement above them and so are expecting a new addition to the family.*

- Character (age):
- CLEMENT (60) – died after Prudence
  - Doña GERTRUDE (40) – died fourth (1930s)
  - Mama PRUDENCE (80) – died after Gertrude
  - CATY (5) – died first (around 1865)
  - VINCENT (23) – died second (between 1861–67)
  - MUNI (28) – died late 1940s
  - EVA, foreigner (20) – died third (1920s)
  - LIDIA (32) – died last (mid-late 1950s)



PRUDENCE: Shut it, Vincent! Now is not the time for singing. Look at those boorish undertakers. In my day people announced themselves before barging in for a visit. There was more respect. Now then, let's see who they're bringing us, some interloper or other who married one of our girls! 'God forsakes the humble!', as poor old Ramon used to say, may God rest his soul...

VINCENT: You never changed for the better, did you, Prudence? There's always a 'but' with you. You used to be so cheerful, the only thing you thought about was dancing the polka. *(He hums 'Jesusita en Chihuahua' and dances a few steps from it)* Do you remember how we danced together at that carnival? *(he continues dancing)* Your pink dress twirled and twirled, and your neck was so close to my lips...

PRUDENCE: For God's sake, Cousin Vincent, don't remind me of that foolishness.

VINCENT *(laughing)*: What would Ramon say if he were here now? And him so jealous. You and me here together, while he rots alone in the Dolores Cemetery.

GERTRUDE: Oh do shut up, Uncle Vincent or you'll cause an argument!

CLEMENT *(alarmed)*: I've already explained to you, Doña Prudence, we just didn't have the money to move him at the time!

PRUDENCE: And the girls, why haven't they brought him over yet? Don't give me excuses. You, Sir, were always lacking in finesse.

*An even louder thud is heard.*

CATY: I saw light! *(rays of light shine down on them)* I saw a sabre. Again, Saint Michael is coming to visit us! Look at his lance!

VINCENT: Are we all here? Righty-oh then, order, everyone up!

CLEMENT: Muni and my sister-in-law aren't here.

PRUDENCE: These foreigners, always disappearing away from the rest of us!

GERTRUDE: Muni! Muni! Someone's coming; with any luck it'll be one of your cousins.

Wouldn't that be nice, sweetheart? You will be able to play and laugh with them again. Let's see if that puts a smile on your face.

*Enter EVA; blond, tall, sad, very young and in travelling clothes from 1920.*

EVA: Muni was here a moment ago. Muni, my baby! Can you hear that crashing? That's how the sea crashed down against the rocks below my house... none of you knew it... it was at the top of a cliff, tall, just out of reach of the waves. Battered by the wind that lulled us to sleep at night, swirls of salt covered the windows in maritime stars; the quicklime in the kitchen gilded by my father's solar hands... at night, the elementals of wind, of water, of fire and of salt, came in through the chimney, they huddled together in the flames, they sang in the drip of the tap... drip! drop! drip! drip! drip! drop! And the iodine spread through the house like sleep... a resplendent dolphin's tail announced the day to us. Like this, with this light of fish scales and coral!

*EVA, on saying the last sentence, lifts her arm to indicate the ray of light entering the crypt as the first slabs are separated above. The chamber is illuminated by sunlight. Inside the tomb their luxurious outfits are dusty and their faces pale. The little girl Catalina jumps for joy.*

CATY: Look, Prudence! Someone's coming! Who do you think is bringing them, Prudence? Mrs Diphtheria or Saint Michael?

PRUDENCE: Wait, my girl, we'll see now.

CATY: Well, it was Mrs Diphtheria who brought me. Do you remember her? She had cotton fingers and she wouldn't let me breath. Did it scare you, Prudence?

PRUDENCE: It did, dear sister. I remember they took you away and the whole patio was left strewn in violet petals. Mother cried so much and so did we.

CATY: You silly-billy! Didn't you know that you'd be coming here to play with me in the end? That day Saint Michael sat himself down next to me and wrote it in the air above me with his lance of fire. I didn't even know how to read... but I read it. Was the Misses Simsons' school pretty?

PRUDENCE: Very pretty, Caty. Mother sent us in wearing black ribbons...

CATY: And did you learn your letters? That's why Mother was going to send me there...

*Enter Muni, in pyjamas, with a pale blue face and blond hair.*

MUNI: Who will it be?

*Via a gap in the slabs above, the sky opens up, the feet of a woman can be seen suspended in a circle of light.*

GERTRUDE: Clement, Clement! They're Lidia's feet. Oh joy, my daughter, what luck you've died so young!

*Everyone falls silent. Lidia starts her descent, suspended by rope. She arrives stiff and in a white dress, her arms crossed over her chest, her fingers interlocked, her head stooped. Her eyes are closed.*

(Extract from Elena Garro: *Teatro completo*, pp. 8ff

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Elitza Gueorguieva

*from* Cosmonauts Come and Go

Translated from the French by Lise Tannahill

*These are the first two chapters from Cosmonauts Come and Go by Elitza Gueorguieva, a Bulgarian writer and filmmaker living in France. The novel is set in Bulgaria in the 1980s and 1990s. It depicts the final years of the communist era and the transition to parliamentary democracy and a market-based economy, through the eyes of the young narrator. The book has been published in French and Bulgarian: following its original French publication, Gueorguieva was awarded the 2016 SGDL Dubreuil First Novel Prize.*

## 1 Racing to Space

The two of you are standing in front of a mass of tiny, colourful stones, which don't look like anything in particular. But your mum seems very emotional, so you know this is something important.

Your mum tells you that this, *this* is Yuri Gagarin, and that when she was your age (several centuries ago, at least), she herself saw him plant trees along the path to this very building. This is where you'll be going to school, and we're signing you up today, your mum says, lighting her nineteenth cigarette of the day.

You turn your head and notice nervous-looking children of all ages carrying giant schoolbags, clinging to their mothers, walking to and fro in the huge schoolyard flooded with orange light. You grip your mother's arm automatically and adopt a menacing expression, just in case anyone dares look at you: you flare your nostrils, you puff out your cheeks until they turn purple, and waggle your ears. Your mum is still talking, as if nothing were happening. Now she's talking about space travel. You're not sure you know this word, 'space'. You presume that it's something special, something glorious, something good whichever way you look at it. Something closely linked with the planting of the trees. Since you don't yet know exactly how the two are related, and because you want to avoid getting the wrong idea of the precise definition of the word 'space', you decide to concentrate on

what your eyes perceive at that very moment: the mass of tiny, colourful stones, which don't look like anything in particular.

Things become clearer an hour later. You turn round as you're leaving the schoolyard and see the same image from a distance. The tiny colourful stones which don't look like anything in particular are what your mum calls a mosaic, a bit like in your bathroom but not quite the same. The one in your bathroom is an array of green, grey and black pieces which don't depict anything; the one in the schoolyard is something else. You see a man who looks young, handsome and brave. His mouth is half-open and his eyes are looking towards the horizon, against a background that is entirely black, but yellow and red too; futuristic in style, but with realist details. In fact, it's Yuri Gagarin, travelling in what must be 'space'. You'd like to stop a while and look at it a bit more, but it's getting late and your mum says that's enough.

## 2 The First Man in Space

Your dad, restlessly chewing a toothpick, tells you that he's not an expert on cosmonauts. You understand then that nobody in your family is taking your investigation into Gagarin — which you've been conducting for days — very seriously. You feel very annoyed. You decide to get your revenge by hiding the box of toothpicks behind the fridge, but your dad catches you in the act and asks you to explain yourself. You tell him, while putting the box of toothpicks back where it was, that you'd like to investigate the history of 'space travel', and in order to do that you need to ask him a few questions:

1. What is it?
2. Where is 'space', exactly?
3. How can you get involved?

A few days later you're invited round for a drink of Ko-op Kola by your grandad, who's a highly-respected Communist. He tells you that from now on he'll be the one helping you with your investigation into Yuri Gagarin, and you're relieved that your work is finally being taken seriously. After a bit of the usual small talk, he sits you down in front of what he solemnly calls 'a Soviet film'.



The picture is in shades of grey; the music is strident. Men run to and fro shouting in a language that's unknown to you, but sounds a bit familiar: it's Russian, says your grandad the highly-respected Communist, drinking right out of your glass of Ko-op Kola. Something explodes; buildings collapse onto the dark ground. And in the middle of this chaos, a man with a radiant smile looks to the camera: Yuri! His head is inserted into a transparent ball and then all of him is placed in a metal sphere with a tiny porthole — that's a Vostok, explains your grandad the Communist. The Vostok is then placed inside a rocket which shoots decisively skywards.

Поехали!, exclaims Yuri — 'Here we go!', as translated by your grandad, who has apparently decided to commentate on every shot. You can see Yuri's tonsils at the back of his throat. You think of your own, which were recently removed without anaesthetic: the operation was the hardest thing you've ever done in your life. You're glad that Yuri still has his, because he's having a hard enough time as it is: going up higher and higher, he's having trouble breathing and his heart is beating harder and harder, its rhythm emphasised by the military music in the background. His veins bulge and it's clear that he's not feeling well, but since he's a good-natured sort he keeps making jokes which amuse both the excited people on earth and your grandad beside you, who's been seized by an excessive fit of laughter which seems most unlike him. Yuri never loses his cool, his way with words, or his love for the Motherland, says your grandad, the highly-respected Communist. You wonder if you could get your glass of Ko-op Kola back before he finishes it. Yuri transmits some data and some mysterious numbers, and he concludes that the Earth is, in fact, orange — something you've always suspected. At that moment, the camera shows something that looks like a cardboard circle lit by a bedside lamp and shot through a small hole. Aha! cries your grandad, looking to you for a sign of approval, but you're not sure yet what's happening.

(Extract from Elitza Gueorguieva: *Les cosmonautes ne font que passer* © Editions Gallimard, 2016. Reprinted by permission.)

Matthias Jügler  
from *The Forsaken*

Translated from the German by Jo Heinrich

*The Forsaken is the story of a lost childhood in the shadow of the former East Germany. The following excerpt is from the first chapter, which opens with the narrator, Johannes, then fourteen, reminiscing about the last day he spent with his father.*

We drove to a Chinese restaurant in Ammendorf and had lunch, with Coke too. I had expected my father to carry on talking during the meal. He didn't. We were the only customers, and we ate in silence, and I didn't know why. I didn't know why I wasn't in school that day, nor why he'd taken me to that restaurant. It wasn't like him. I looked at him as we were being served our desserts. I was still angry. I wanted to ask what was up. But he beat me to it, asking, 'What is it? Don't you like it?' The question made no sense as I hadn't touched my dessert yet; even he realised it, and we laughed, although it wasn't that funny, only a bit – but it felt good to be able to laugh with him, and I noticed my anger had died down. Suddenly my question seemed unreasonable. What's the big deal, I thought, why not skip work and school and have a good time, just for once? So I said nothing. We ate up, he paid, and we left.

Father had sometimes seemed odd to me, for example when he'd sit in the kitchen after work, doing nothing for hours on end. He always looked as if he was waiting for someone, but no one ever came. On those evenings, I'd go into the kitchen, we'd nod to each other, and I'd say something like 'I fancy a chocolate milkshake,' or 'I'm still hungry,' because I felt the need to explain myself, and then he'd say something like, 'Yes, why not?' or 'Yes, good idea.'

We parked outside my grandmother's apartment, in the south of the city, in a five-storey building with windows I thought were much too small. Even in the summer, my grandmother's apartment was so dark you had to put the light on. She didn't seem at all surprised to see us. She hugged me first, and then my father. I'd already taken off my shoes and was waiting for him to do the same, so we could go and sit in the living room as usual, drink a coffee and a chocolate milkshake, watch some TV and have a chat. But my father

didn't take his shoes off. He stood there by the front door, looking at me in a way I didn't like. My grandmother went into the living room and closed the door behind her.

'Come here,' Father said, still by the door. When I got close enough, he pulled me, briefly and tightly, into an embrace, and then he pushed me back a little and held me by the shoulders. His eyes unsettled me, although I didn't know why.

'Take care, my boy.'

He went down the stairs, and I heard the main door slam shut. The TV was on in the living room. I waited for a minute, or maybe two, my eyes fixed on the doormat in front of me. Eventually my grandmother came out of the living room. She didn't say a word about my father going, but she was holding a bag of sweets. Twice previously, I'd been in hospital: a broken arm when I was eight, and a fractured kneecap just a few months later. Both times, when my grandmother came to visit me, she'd put a big bag of sweets on the bedside table, to make me feel better, she'd said. When I saw her then, with the bag in her hand and a pitying look in her eyes, that was the moment I realised he wasn't coming back. I began to cry. I would much rather have been angry, angry with my father, as angry as I'd been in the morning. But I wasn't.

It was only hours later that I composed myself. I got under my grandmother's covers. She gave me a sandwich and afterwards a handful of sweets, then she made some tea, the sort she drank to help her sleep. I asked her where he was and when he was coming back. She said he had to go away for a while, but he'd be back soon. She looked over my shoulder as she spoke. It wasn't hard to tell she was lying. But I said nothing; I drank my tea and ate a few sweets, just to please my grandmother, as they really didn't taste good this time. It was still light outside when I fell asleep.

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Daniel Odija

*from* The Sawmill

Translated from the Polish by Kasia Beresford

*This is the opening passage of The Sawmill by Daniel Odija. The novel is set in provincial Poland in the early 1990s, a period of transformation from the communist regime to a free-market economy. The Sawmill was nominated for the NIKE, Poland's most prestigious literary prize, and reached the final shortlist of seven books. It has been translated into French, German and Ukrainian, and I think it deserves to be translated into English.*

The Air (and more)

Not so long ago, we had a storm here. It came late in the evening. The shadows cast by the clouds hastened the fall of night. No-one could remember a storm like it. Poor memory was not to blame, rather the mighty fury which engulfed the world. Plumes of smoke kept rising from the nearby trees, immediately doused by torrents of rain. Lightning flashes snapped at the high-voltage cables, and at times sparks exploded like a feather headdress. It was like the fireworks on New Year's Eve, only the sparks were more intensely yellow. This was fire, not some parochial glitz. And the noise! Thunderclaps resounded as if an unimaginable force, somewhere up high, were flexing an enormous sheet of stainless steel.

After an hour, it calmed down a little: the thunder passed, but the flashes continued, and the water still drummed. Józef tried not to look anybody in the face, as the one time he did had coincided with a lightning flash. That moment was terrifying! He saw his wife's face with her eyes sunk into the shadow of their sockets, her teeth bared too far beyond her lips. She had been exposed by the cadaverous light. She had probably wanted to tell him something. And those teeth somehow protruded too far. His face, too, must have shown something hard to bear, because she got no further than opening her mouth. All she managed was a floundering 'uh...uh...'. And at that moment, Józef was struck by the thought that the face we see in the light of day always conceals a second face underneath — the one later hidden by the lid of a coffin.

In the town, the streets were flooded. The manhole covers of the sewage system were popping like champagne corks and turds were floating up to the surface. The water reached higher than the tops of the cars. Road signs were submerged and bent out of shape. Cellars were flooded. People were trapped in their homes. Fortunately, it only lasted a few hours, so there weren't many fatalities. One man was apparently electrocuted while talking on the phone, and three others died of heart attacks. Their future must have seemed too alarming.

The muck carried by the water gave people rashes, yet the risk of an epidemic was dismissed. The TV seemed to take a sadistic pleasure in showing, ad nauseam, men tearfully claiming they'd lost everything, lock, stock and barrel. What they stood in was all they had left, they said. The women just ranted and raved.

Here, the water did not cause us any damage as the earth absorbed it all; however the lightning flashes — those filled us with fear. But fear only lasts a moment, and, if not intense enough to infect the soul, it is soon forgotten.

Once the storm passed, the air seemed to become more transparent. Breathing returned to normal. You could go back to not thinking about anything, just observing what was around you.

### The Sawmill (and more)

Here, the houses stand some way apart from each other. From the first house you can't see the second, nor from the second can you spy the third, and there is no line of sight from the third to the first. People live in these houses, though not many people, and they rarely meet. Evidently, they don't feel the need.

Nearly all the land has been bought up by Józef Myśliwski. He hasn't always owned it; he acquired it through hard work. Not everybody wanted to work, but Myśliwski didn't mind.

He was a newcomer in the area, but was the first to get his own tractor. He also had another vehicle, an old Żuk pick-up truck, and the guts to borrow money to buy cages. The foxes he imprisoned in the cages howled piercingly. He kept them for their pelts, which would be sewn into fluffy coats.

He got up at dawn, day in, day out, as the animals had to be fed. He stirred powdered vitamins into their minced fish. He drove his pick-up all the way to the town to get the feed. He cultivated a field as well. Nothing much: a little rye, some potatoes. It fed a few pigs he kept for feast days and his scant herd of cows, which gave milk. He always managed to put a bit aside to sell.

He worked like a Trojan. He paid off his debt and began accumulating money. It didn't gain him any friends. He'd barely arrived, but already he was here, there and everywhere like a foul smell in the pants. Besides, a man who had money had to be a thief.

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## Biographical Notes

**Daniel Hahn** is a writer, editor and translator. His translations (from Portuguese, Spanish and French) include fiction from Europe, Africa and the Americas, and non-fiction by writers ranging from Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago to Brazilian footballer Pelé. His work has won him the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and the International Dublin Literary Award. A former chair of the Translators Association and the Society of Authors and national programme director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, he has also been a judge for the Man Booker International Prize.

**Louie Ariza** was born in Liverpool. He had a passion for literature and language from a young age and took this passion to Lancaster University. He spent a year in Mexico where he was introduced to some amazing Latino authors which inspired his Masters and kindled his interest in translation.

**Kasia Beresford** was born in London and grew up bilingual and bicultural. Following a language degree, she worked in business intelligence. Now based in Manchester she works as an interpreter and literary translator from Polish. She is a founder member of the ITI Polish Network and co-hosts its book club.

**Rebecca Braun** was born in Cork and grew up in Tipperary, obtaining a DPhil in Modern German literature from New College, Oxford. She has taught at the Universities of Liverpool, Manchester and Lancaster, and is currently Executive Dean of the College of Arts at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

**Jo Heinrich** translates from French and German, and she lives just outside Bristol with her family. Her first literary translation will be published by Peirene Press in February 2022. She was shortlisted for the Austrian Cultural Forum London Translation Prize 2020 and the 2019 John Dryden Translation Competition.

**Lise Tannahill** was born in Glasgow. She graduated with a PhD in French from the University of Glasgow in 2016, and has been working in Higher Education for several years. She is currently working on completing her first novel-length translation.