Dearest readers,

As the days grow shorter, and the wheel of the year keeps turning, I once again find myself blessed with a fantastic collection of poems. We actually had so many submissions in this period – and ones of such a high standard – that I ran out of room to accept everything. For this I can only give my thanks. Every single submissions period you beautiful poets cause me to work to the bone, and I couldn’t be happier about it.

This note will be much shorter than usual (hooray!) – I didn't find the submissions window to have many growing pains this time around, and so I won’t be making any changes to the submissions process or website.

I mostly just wanted to thank the contributors, those who submitted even more widely, and everyone who’s been interacting with the twitter account this submissions period! Although I haven’t settled on a theme for the next issue yet, I will be announcing it shortly, and I am so, so excited to see what you all bring to the table next time.

Blessed Equinox to all! May your autumns be prosperous and your winters be surrounded by warmth.

CTM
x
CONTRIBUTORS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

MARIE-LOUISE EYRES – BEWARE, BEWARE
Marie-Louise has an MFA from MMU. Recent poems in Stand, Agenda, Portland Review & Bind Collective as well as the Siren edition of Ink Drinkers Poetry. Twitter: @MaidenPoetry

PALACES – CULT CLASSIC
Palaces is Editor-in-Chief of Wrongdoing Magazine. She is the author of EROTECAY (LUPERCALIA Press, 2021) and FOLKTALES FOR THE DISEASED INDIVIDUAL (2021) and has work featured in Eclectica Magazine, Juked Magazine, Gingerbread House Magazine, BlazeVOX, Maudlin House, and many others. She has a BAH from Queen’s University. Site: pascalepotvin.com | Twitter: @pascalepalaces | Instagram @pascale.francoise

LORELEI BACHT – LORE
Lorelei Bacht (she/they) has traveled from the dark woods of Northern Europe to the monsoon forest. Her recent writing has appeared and/or is forthcoming in Feral, Anti-Heroin Chic, Abridged, Odd Magazine, PROEM, SWWIM, Strukturriss, The Inflectionist Review, Hecate, and others. Twitter: @bachtlorelei | Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer

JANE AYRES – WHEN YOU ARE DEAD WE WILL STILL BE OLD
UK based neurodivergent writer Jane Ayres completed a Creative Writing MA at the University of Kent in 2019 aged 57. She is fascinated by hybrid poetry/prose experimental forms and has work in Dissonance, Confluence, Ink Drinkers Poetry, Lighthouse, Streetcake, The North, The Poetry Village, Door is a Jar, Kissing Dynamite, (mac)ro(mic), Versification, Crow & Cross Keys, Ample Remains, Sledgehammer and The Forge. Twitter: @workingwords50

ELLEN HUANG – INTIMACY WITH WHITE SNAKE
Ellen Huang (she/her) is an ace writer of fantasy. She reads for Whale Road Review and holds a BA in Writing + Theatre minor from Point Loma Nazarene University, a school by the sea. Her poems "Aromantic Jesus" (miniskirt magazine) and "Split Attraction" (warning lines mag) have both been nominated for Best of the Net 2021. Other publications include Full House Lit, The Kiwi Collective, VIBE, Lucent Dreaming, Wrongdoing Magazine, The Sock...
Drawer, and Next Door Villain, among others. She lives in San Diego with her pan roommate, guarded by their neighbor Totoro in a moving castle.
Site: worrydollsandfloatinglights.wordpress.com | Twitter: @nocturnalxlight

ALBERT KIRK JUNIOR – THE ARRIVAL OF THE FOURTH KING
Albert Kirk Jr is from Ayrshire, Scotland. He is querying his debut novel and has been writing poetry since 2020.
Twitter: @AlbertKirkJr

SLOANE ANGELOU – OMA IDOKO
Sloane Angelou is a storyteller & writer of West African origin; passionate about learning of human existence by interrogating human experiences. They exist in liminal spaces.
Twitter: @MsSloaneAngelou

RICK HOLLON – LOVE AMONG THE WEE MEN (VILLANELLE)
Rick Hollon (they/them or fey/fem) is a nonbinary, intersex, bi/queer writer, editor, and parent from the American Midwest. Their work has appeared or is forthcoming in perhappened, Whale Road Review, Moss Puppy Mag, (mac)ro(mic), and other small-press publications.
Twitter: @SailorTheia

DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN – MY DAUGHTER QUESTIONS THE STORY OF THE FISHER KING
Twitter: @Rossakatum

KEVIN A. RISNER – BREADCRUMBS
Kevin A. Risner is an Ohioan. He’s the author of Do Us a Favor (Variant Literature, 2021).
Twitter: @mr_december | Instagram: @kevinarisner

KIRI DELANDE – ALTAR PLATE
Kiri DeLande (she/her) is a queer writer and witch from New England. In her spare time, you can find her buried in a book, casting spells, lighting candles, or gazing at the full moon.
ERICH VON HUNGEN – THE WINGS OF ROC
Twitter: @PoetryForcce

SARA L. UCKELMAN – ARTIO BRINGS A BLESSING
Dr. Sara L. Uckelman is an assistant professor of logic and philosophy of language at Durham University. Her short stories and poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies. She is also the co-founder of the reviews site SFFReviews.com, and founder of the small press Ellipsis Imprints.
Twitter: @SaraLUckelman

JODY RAE - ADAM AND EVE LEAVE THE GARDEN SEPARATELY
Jody Rae's creative nonfiction essays appear in The Avalon Literary Review, The Good Life Review, From Whispers to Roars, and Red Fez. Her short story, “Beautiful Mother” was a finalist in the Phoebe Journal 2021 Spring Fiction Contest. She was the first prize winner of the 2019 Winning Writers Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest for her poem, "Failure to Triangulate". She has pieces forthcoming in Sledgehammer Lit, RESURRECTION magazine, and Change Seven Magazine.
Twitter @JodyRae_ | Instagram: @criminy_sakes_alive | Site: www.criminysakesalive.com.

EMILY J HELEN – SUNDAY POEM (DAY OF WORSHIP)
Emily J Helen is an English Literature student, writer and poet. Appointed as Young Poet Laureate for Coventry and Warwickshire in 2017, she is presently creating and compiling poetry for her first collection. Recently, she was featured as the ‘chosen poet’ for Marble Poetry Magazine’s broadsheet; her work has also been published in Turnsol Editions’ anthology Florilegium. Emily also works alongside a fellow poet in the U.S. to run an online community ‘Wait, This Is Poetry’, a poetry platform for experimental creatives.
Twitter @emilyjhelen | Instagram @emjanehelen | Instagram Community @wait.thisispoetry
WREN DONOVAN – HYMN FOR CAILLEACH
Wren Donovan’s writing appears or is upcoming in The Mark Literary Review, The Dillydoun Review, Cauldron Anthology, Hecate Magazine, Survivor Lit, Tattie Zine, Minison Zine, and Luna Luna Magazine. She is also a Tarot reader and meditative dancer who tends to hide in plain sight but likes to wear things that jingle. She is fond of history books and often talks to cats. Wren studied literature, Classics, folklore, and psychology at Millsaps College, UNC-Chapel Hill, and University of Southern Mississippi. She lives in Tennessee among many trees.
Twitter: @WrenDonovan

MARINA SOFIA - HERITAGE
Marina Sofia is a global nomad, writer, literary translator, reviewer and co-founder of Corylus Books. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Poetry Breakfast, Galway Review, Cerasus Magazine, The Bangor Literary Review and Culture Matters.
Twitter: @MarinaSofia8 | Blog: http://findingtimetowrite.wordpress.com

CAROLINE ANJALI RITCHIE – URBAN LEGENDS
Caroline Anjali Ritchie is a poet and researcher based in London. She is currently completing a PhD on the poetry and art of William Blake. Previously her work has appeared in 'The Isis,' 'Culture Matters' and 'Beyond Words' (forthcoming). She is an editor of 'N-Zine,' a community zine based in Hackney/Islington.

RODNEY WOOD – NOTES ON TRADITION
Rodney Wood lives in Farnborough. He’s been published in various magazines and is co-host of a monthly open mic.

SARAH WALLIS – FOLK TALE OF THE SEASHORE CASTLE
Sarah Wallis is a poet & playwright based in Scotland, UK. Recent work is at Beir Bua, The Madrigal, Wine Cellar and Spectra. A chapbook, Medusa Retold, is available from @fly_press, with Quietus Makes an Eerie available for pre orders at Dancing Girl Press and How to Love the Hat Thrower due next year from @SelcouthStation.
Twitter: @wordweave | Site: www.sarahwallis.net

MICHAEL BLACK – UNDER THE HAT WORKS IN STOCKPORT
Michael Black studied English literature at the University of Dundee followed by masters and PhD at the University of Glasgow. Besides, he has reviewed
poetry books for SPAM Plaza and Osmosis Press. His poems have been included in Adjacent Pineapple, Re-Side, -algia, and Beir Bua.

Twitter: @beakyblack

SARAH DIXON – THE LEAD-BOILERS PRACTICE ALCHEMY
Sarah L Dixon was born in Stockport and is based in a Huddersfield valley. She has had recent acceptances for ‘Strix’, ‘Spelt’, ‘Prole and ‘The Journal’. Her books are ‘The sky is cracked’ (Half Moon Press, 2017), ‘Adding wax patterns to Wednesday’ (Three Drops Press, 2018) and ‘Aardvark Wisdom’ (Kazvina Press, 2021). Sarah’s inspiration comes from beer gardens, being by/in water and towpath and moor adventures with her son, Frank (11).

Twitter: @quietcomperemcr | Site: www.thequietcompere.co.uk

WARREN CZAPA - JONAH READS HIS OWN MYTH
Warren Czapa lives and works in London. His poems have been published by Magma, Poetry Bus, Burning House Press, Black Bough, Verve and Babel Tower Notice Board. His work has been longlisted for the Troubadour International Poetry Prize and commended in the Verve Festival Poetry competition. He recently completed an MA in poetry at Royal Holloway University.

Twitter: @WCzapa | Facebook: Warren Czapa

PATRICIA M OSBORNE – SACRED TREE
Patricia M Osborne is married with grown-up children and grandchildren. In 2019 she graduated with an MA in Creative Writing (University of Brighton). Patricia is a published novelist, poet and short fiction writer. She has been published in various literary magazines and anthologies. Poetry pamphlets, Taxus Baccata and The Montefiore Bride, were published by The Hedgehog Poetry Press in 2020. She has a successful blog at Whitewingsbooks.com featuring other writers. When Patricia isn’t working on her own writing, she enjoys sharing her knowledge, acting as a mentor to fellow writers.

Twitter: @PMOsborneWriter

LIA BURGE – MULCH MEDITATION
Lia Burge is an actress, poet, sea-chuck-herself-inner, and sometime dancer of the Argentine Tango. Originally from London, she now lives in Brighton where the salt water is closer and the land comes up to meet her. Lia is a 2021 Hammer & Tongue National Poetry Slam Finalist.

Twitter: @LiaBurge

ABIGAIL FLINT - SLICK
Abigail Flint is a heritage researcher based in South Yorkshire. Her poetry has appeared in Popshot Quarterly, The Ekphrastic Review, 192 Magazine, Route 57, Consilience, and About Larkin, along with project anthologies and websites. In 2019, her poem ‘Coasting’ came second in the East Riding Festival of Words Poetry competition.
Twitter: @constantunusual

**ANNA MILAN – GENERIC WOMAN**
Currently living in Hertfordshire, UK, Anna Milan’s poems have appeared in publications such as Under the Radar, Eye Flash Poetry, Black Bough Poetry and Ink Sweat & Tears.
Twitter: @annamilanwrites

**KIM WHYSALL-HAMMOND - WAYLAND**
Site: https://thecheesesellerswife.wordpress.com/

**ANNA ROSE JAMES - RUMPLED**
Anna (she/her) is a queer, bisexual actor-writer of mixed British and Asian heritage, based in North Yorkshire. As well as poetry, she writes short stories, fiction, memoir and scripts for stage and screen. Her existing works include Unknown (Stairwell Books, 2021); Little Irritants (Analog Submission Press); Love, Alberta; Wayside; 100 Friggin’ Poems; It's OK To Fall For Camp Boys (self-published). Her work has also been featured at The Best New British and Irish Poets Anthology 2019-2021 (The Black Spring Press Group), Writing East Midlands Writers’ Conference 2021, Alpha Female Society, Dissonance, Enclave, Mookychick, Prismatic and Thirst Aid Kit podcast.
Twitter: @annaonscreen | Instagram: @annaonthepage

**LYDIA WIST – LORE UP NORTH**
Lydia Wist is a native Northerner who makes art alongside writing and living. She loves to experiment with media and genre blending. She is not a fan of the narrow-minded Small Boxes Categorisation Technique still in popular use abreast careers today. She has a great time not finishing books and magazines. Her favourite colour is red.
Twitter: @Lydiawist | Instagram and Facebook: lydiawistcreative
**DANI SALVADORI – RED SHOES**
Dani Salvadori is a poet, photographer and video maker based in London. She became obsessed with plague myths during lockdown.
Twitter: @danisalvadori | Instagram: @danisalvadori

**LAURA MCKEE – THE LEGEND OF THE BARNACLE GOOSE**
Laura McKee's poems have appeared in various journals in print and online including Crannóg, Under the Radar, The Rialto, Molly Bloom, Ink Sweat & Tears, and anthologised by Emma Press and Smith|Doorstop. She was a winner in the Guernsey International Poetry Competition.
Twitter: @LauraMcKee_fyeh

**MARY MULHOLLAND – MY RED SHOES LEAD ME HOME**
Mary Mulholland’s poems have been published most recently in Snakeskin, Perverse, London Grip, AMBIT and Under the Radar. She’s been shortlisted/commended in Aesthetica, Winchester, Artlyst, among other awards and twice been a winner in the Poetry Society Members’ Competition.
Twitter: @marymulhol

**AJ PFEFFER – AMERICA’S LATEST HEIRLOOM**
AJ Pfeffer (he/him) is a young trans & Jewish writer currently hiding away in the northeastern United States. He promises he is not Usually as cocky as this poem might imply.
Twitter: @Pfeffington

**REGINA JADE – TELL ME THE STORY**
Regina Jade is an Asian American writer and poet. She loves chocolate, custard tarts, and cats. In her spare time, she can be found trawling the depths of libraries for new books to add to the to-be-read pile, which never seems to get any smaller. Her recent work appears in Eucalyptus & Rose Literary Magazine, A Coup of Owls, Warning Lines Mag, and Havok, and is also featured in an anthology titled “Imaginary Creatures” from Carnation Books.
Twitter: @thereginajade
Beware, Beware

Beware the Sleep-Thief
    he takes on many shapes
    from suckling child
    to beast with horns

He sneaks in with drafts
    through ill-fit slates
    or slides through cracks
    in wooden floors

His nocturnal dance
    around your bed
    makes circling shadows
    of shifting light

You know his scent
    he reeks of wine
    of spicy sweetmeats
    garlic, cream

You can’t escape
    his stealing ways
    with valerian root
    or lavender oils

Resign yourself
    to dream-spilled nights
    skulking into your days
    like meat-starved wolves
I’ve never been in a cult, but I’ve been in an improv troupe, and those are the same. Once you are in, you cannot say no. You stand flammable before your crowd, and you must go along.

As they watch us, spectators one by one become foxes and fish, squirming in their seats. You are still above me and inside of me, hence a God—hence, you make everything possible for them.

One cannot rewrite the Bible, but there is nothing written about improv.

By the Second Act—there were no Acts on the playbill when everyone came in—I am but your Old Testament, and it is time that I give birth to the New. Feeling our cue, the crowd mocks and mocks me. It mocks me until the fetus is degraded cleanly out.

I die of laughter, though not my own, and there is another long intermission.
Lore

Call of the black forest: ancestresses investigate the undergrowth, home of the woodlouse, millipede. We are looking for the sprouting bodies of spores, the silent garlands of white fruits, the bulbous crimson flames.

The rain has stopped – quick, quick! Pick. Pick. In the wicker basket it goes. Who knows what bitter miracle,

remedial wine against the undesired aggregate of blood in the red wife’s pockets these mushrooms will become?
when you are dead we will still be old

we three
moon-clad
brittle broken skin

criss-crossed cracks
clotting grief
frosting fruitflies

our heart was cut
these shallow desires
slither

a necessary indulgence
at home with trees
the autmnness of it

the winterness of
shapes
shifting

we are old
older than
seeds

roots
soil
bones

we are tree
& there is
no exit
Intimacy with White Snake

after the Chinese fairy tale “Lady White Snake”

I will always be both my selves.
driven by desire for warmth, I writhe
shed the scales and the tiny moons that once danced with my body
peel away the old skin and come into warm sun of the new.

When I make a promise, I wrap myself around it, in entirety.
I am human, I am woman, I am here and alive for the taking.
But Man, as I take you in my emerging arms, you must know
even upon loving and becoming, my heart,
my blood cannot be drained away to feed the soil.

Know this: I am whole and cannot be emptied.
I cannot crush the serpent, for she is my being
I cannot burn the witch, for she is my soul
I cannot whiten my birthmarked skin. O Man,
my promise under heaven is infinite
I'd crawl to the dust at the edge of the world, die for you—
but I cannot disappear for you.

Previously published in Rhythm & Bones Lit.
The Arrival of the Fourth King

"A cold coming we had of it..."

Hindered by blizzards and squabbling aides,
a desolate manger greeted my call;
slighted, I summoned the innkeeper's boy,
needing my audience, needing my hour.

They've gone, he whispered, reluctant to share,
my presence condemned by his misery,
grieving no doubt for some victim he knew
who Herod decreed must perish impaled;

And clusters of erstwhile mothers denied
me my status and struck me with silence;
they sobbed in the dirt and raked at their dugs,
the teats regretting the suck of their babes:

These women bereaved, their infants destroyed,
the fathers nurturing shoots of revenge...
the child that I missed, if rumours are true,
would know full well that His coming had risks,
yet still still He came.

I gave my gift to the lad: his brother
was merely the first and won't be the last;
and homeward I scuttled to cling steadfast
to my ancient laws and moribund gods.
oma idoko

i am a breathing sacrifice
beloved of my father my father my father
i am a breathing sacrifice

bury me alive
set my people on fire
nine slaves beside me
we turn the enemy away
an illusion of defeat
a facade of peace
i am a breathing beloved buried thing

ega - a statue cannot honor me
where are the engravings of those who lay besides me underground
nine of them ten of us sent under at the shore
ega - a statue cannot honor me
a marketplace
your daughters bear my name in vain
the slaves unpronounced like my mother's love
ega - a statue cannot honor me

on the seventh day my father not God accepted my offering of death
a saving grace for my people
a destruction of my father my father my father - his peace
o kings learn from me
if you give birth to a god you must be ready to have your heart scattered in pieces
on unmarked burial ground
o kings learn from me
if you give birth to a god you must be ready to let go of your peace
o kings learn from me
if you give birth to a god you must be ready to bear the weight a crushing love -
a heavy betrayal
a god belongs to the people - a people belong to a god
at the bank of the river let your love rest there
the waves of the sea will sail my bones home

i am a breathing sacrifice
beloved of my father my father my father
i am a breathing sacrifice

a dead thing accompanied by other dead things into the next life and the next life
and the next life

your daughters bear my name in vain.
Love Among the Wee Men (Villanelle)

Way down among the reeds at Carterhaugh
I went to walk alone at close of day.
I fell in love—a little faerie man.

His eyes were kind and brown, without a flaw.
He held my hand—"Away, with me!" We played
Way down among the reeds at Carterhaugh.

My steps were light, a dance of thorn and haw.
A ball he held beneath the rocky brae,
I fell in love, a little faerie man!

A band of wings and strings, the wind our song
In gilded company we gripped and swayed
Way down among the reeds at Carterhaugh.

His beard was soft, his arms so gentle strong—
In glittered shadows shared our secret names.
I fell in love, a little faerie man.

But magic cannot hold back time for long.
I found myself above the ground by day.
Way down among the reeds at Carterhaugh
I fell in love—a little faerie man.
DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN

My Daughter Questions the Story of The Fisher King

If everything was okay on the water, why’d he ever come to shore?
Why didn’t the Grail heal the King and the land just by being there?
So the King made a fool of himself when he was a kid, and he had to live
in horrible pain for the rest of time, except when he was fishing?
If he was such a mess, how come he’s the one who’s in charge of the Grail?

Imagine him prince-born where sun, seasons, and stones
still spoke precisely to each other once each year, summoning
the dead from their mingled ashes in basins on the passage floor,
awaiting the birth of light in the death of the year.

When he ran off into the forest, did the Forest want him there?

Imagine him young, spoiled-sure the land was his to feed upon.
Imagine him question-consumed, even as he ate and ate, feeding lengthening
bones:

Why the already-ashed dead must wait for winter Solstice,
how the year’s wealth and victories
depend on the Solstice? Why he had to wait
for his part in the rites, his part of power?

Denied, he will have taken his new hungers and tempers
away to the forest and fishing.
Imagine he let himself know he sought
the Salmon of Wisdom. We will never know.

But the Salmon surely came willing, knowing all that would follow:
How the boy’s hands shivered around the gutting knife,
how the first cut taught the fish shards of knowledge she’d not owned—
how it felt to cross the planes, to watch life slip from her own belly,
how the boy pulled her flesh from the fire bare-handed,
how his seared hands dropped the burning between his gangling legs
and the fishskin singed his thighs, its bones pierced the groin.

How he tried to touch his scalded groin with his scalded hands
until at last he’d sleep and, waking, he’d eaten the cold fish,
too hungry to refuse even dangerous food, how he cried out.

See: knowledge the fish’s flesh still bore rode his tear-raw throat. He cried out again. Imagine he knew his father died the moment his knife slid into the fish’s belly.

If it had been me, much younger, I might have cut the throat of the chief priest, who would have known words to heal. The people and the other priests? No choice but to make him king. It was the way. Or they believed the wound would heal in its time. Burns are slow, always slow to heal. They were frightened.

For decades, then, the wound wept—neither healing, nor increasing. He found ease only on living water, line in the water, vague hopes whispering between each eased breath: “Please, let another Wisdom come to my hook so that I heal, so that I ask forgiveness.” And while he was on the water, solaced, every winter solstice clouded over, and the ashes of the dead remained unblessed.

So no one took care of his kingdom? Why did the land depend on the King’s health?

A new god came. His people, knowing the Fisher King desired nothing beyond his small boat and the river, gave their treasures into his keeping. Perhaps they believed he might recognize their god, whose sign was Fish.

I understand wanting more than you’re ready to handle. We all do that, don’t we? I even understand the mysterious processions the Grail caused—the lights, the singing, the food the King couldn’t eat. Religions like processions and feasts.

I guess I understand weird-folk banqueting every night while the starving, bleeding King watches—pain separates the pained, right? And they weren’t exactly human, either? Stuck in between worlds and hungry to be one thing or the other?
So he got saved by a fool with nice manners who was looking for the Grail so his uncle wouldn't think he was a fool?

The King, being both human and other-than, could not heal himself.
The land, being the body of the King, could not heal itself.
The Grail, having touched the lips of God, could no longer be a cup.
The Salmon, knowing the fading away of old gods, would not choose to save herself.
The fool, consumed by his own parching, knew only to ask about thirst.

He bled for so long. Did he get to finally die after he was healed?

Returned, stiff with pain he belied, he will have found his father dead, laid on the pyre before the great passage mound, the Solstice passed.
To follow a trail for what feels like miles...
The reward is in the journey but also what’s found,
The breadcrumbs fresher than an 8 a.m. bakery,
So whoever was here was here only minutes before.

I’ll find them. Just another curve and just another
Bend. Deeper into the forest,
And the hidden nook will swell like rosebushes in June.
I’ve cast a net for the first swarm. And I’m going

To find whoever rained manna from a basket.
I’ve stooped to crawling along, smudging my knees
Collecting earth in clumps like a geologist.
The early evening gloam has a sentience.

A breath here, a breath there, but none from me.
I hold it longer than my mother’s hand.
It’s just the wind, even when the leaves are still
As death. I’ll find the one who lured me here.

To wherever the pathway ends. This is a narrative
I tell myself daily. In my brain. I’ll find it.
And there’s no one else ahead. A person with a basket
To drop what I need to survive. A few pieces.

Nothing else but a hoot, a hint, an inkling
That there’s something else even when I can’t see
Anything. I know it has to happen eventually.
With one more step, with one more breath, with
Altar Plate

I spent my life covered in kerosene, rubbing oil in my palms, tempting flames.

Who knew a kiss could be a match?  
When he kisses me, I ignite; my body is a pyre for him; Joan of Arc would be jealous at how beautifully I burn.

He pulls me close near the beach’s shoreline and butterflies whirl wickedly in my chest;  
His lips on mine are Zeus’ lightning, electrifying me, striking me down, filling me with a divine desire for him, for more of him. Call me devoted, call me a believer: I speak in tongues for him; his tongue in my mouth is a drug I can’t give up.

I want to worship at the altar of him; I turn my body into a cornucopia for his consumption.  
His teeth cleave my flesh, spilling raspberry wine down my neck, ‘cross my shoulders, his tongue tasting honey in my sweetest of spots. He is a grateful god; he wastes not a drop.

Boysenberry bruises blossom on my neck; my skin the canvas for his art; an explosion of wine-red stars illuminating the dark night of my skin.

I am rendered helpless when he looks down at me, tenderly touches me with his thoughts: You’re so pretty.  
I call him hot and I am embarrassed by my uninspired word choice; I should’ve said what I was thinking: o god, you are gorgeous. When you bat your dash lashes at me, I understand how an artist can gaze at a body and call him a muse; some people are just that beautiful.
When we part, he speaks of Murphy’s law;
I tell him a vulnerable truth: *I’m not going anywhere.*
But what I want to say is

FUCK Murphy and his dumbfuck law; there were no laws
in that room except the ones we made ourselves.
We are our own gods and our own parishioners;
if you call on me to worship, I’ll come running.
Erich von Hungen

The Wings of Roc

"The Roc is a huge, mythical bird and, according to ancient mythology, is the largest bird ever to have existed. Legend has it that this monstrous creature would pick up and feed on humans; it would often rip its prey apart and take it back to its nest to feed its young." From Mythology.net

There is a gray bird, 
wings outstretched forever, 
silver and black tipped, 
that holds and slows in its flight, 
that finds me suddenly 
and squares me to its sight, 
that hovers, 
dropping low -- 
closer, ever closer.

Its eyes are yellow, unremitting, 
hard as if cast in brass. 
Its razor talons unfold and stretch. 
Its beak, like twin scimitars, opens 
as if to calibrate a catch.

It drifts back, to the left and up, 
then down again, 
wielding the shadow of a falling ax. 
Closer, closer, 
on and on, 
it hovers and it tracks.

*****

And this gray bird, 
this new day, this hungry, watchful flight, 
comes with bright talons 
and finalizing beak -- 
a shining, gaping sun of sorts. 
And lies up and over me. 
Weighing, weighing, weighing --
prepared and ready to bite.

So hard beneath that gaze,  
but what is left, what would there be  
without this expanse of wings,  
this flight of days?

What  
without these dark feathers:  
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,  
their leaden press,  
their shining threat?

What without this arched, horned beak of sun  
screaming, screaming,  
screaming through voracious time?

Day comes and takes a part of me.  
It is the only way.
Artio Brings a Blessing

I am too big,
Here in this place
built for slim lithe figures,
breakable branches,
I am too loud.
I am too earnest in my desires,
and I speak too much.
I am not one of the trees.

I come crashing through your forest,
Bear skull on my skull,
Bear bones in my hands,
You crack,
You break beneath my feet,
Snapping like twigs
I am neither one thing nor the other,
And you do not know what to do with me.

You are too closeted in your churches,
Too bound by your gods.
I am bound by nothing but the earth and the stars.
I will speak for you.
I will speak where you cannot speak.
I will protect you,
Put my bones around your bones,
Build you up and strengthen you,
Until you are strong
As a tree should be.
Adam and Eve Leave the Garden Separately

Whenever she caught him staring
he jerked his head so violently
it must have hurt
like the longing in his eyes.
She remembers feeling blissful and alone with him
together, in those moments.
When he finally reached for her hand
the thrill obscured any suspicion
that he might let go someday.

A car like his passed hers on the road, but it wasn’t him
chasing her down to declare anything. Not even goodbye.
She was surprised to arrive in a new town
and he wasn’t there.
Still. She wants his goodbye, but it isn’t coming. Not ever.

She dreamt of him again last night:

They sneaked into the mini-golf course, closed for the season, where they once posed for engagement photos.
They scrambled from one snow-sparkling scene to the next, laughing
stumbling in drifts.
Resting on a wooden sled to catch their breath
he peeled off his shirt, and she tried to look away. Impossible.
She wanted to see, and she didn’t want to see.
He kissed her belly and she wanted him to go further, but he kept pulling away
and coming close again
like the longing in his eyes.

Awake, she wonders if he ever pulls her name up on his phone;
if he taps a message and,
between those seconds when he doesn’t press send, if he feels a rush;
if his cursor hovers over a comment box — that brief hesitation, before continuing to scroll.
She wonders if their dreams are the only place
they’ll make eye contact again: a memento stored in slumber.
What she wants is for him to remember her sometimes. Still. She wants good things for him. She wishes they could have good things together. Impossible. That would require both to give up their most important things. Still. She wishes he could see what she has become since then. She doesn't think it would dismay him. But so many other things about her might.
Sunday poem (day of worship)

*referencing Sylvia Plath*

I made a magic circle
losing the minutes,
slipped my fingers
through the salt and
stroked your hair
in my sleep,

found a dandelion,
losing the hours
wishing on it
I knew
with teeth-clenching
conviction,

that I was
falling into delusion,
a soft and blurry feeling
losing the day with
starless on repeat,
in your voice
everything unveils,
the arbitrary blackness
sweetened by peach juice saliva,
the eternal summer
on your lips
Hymn for Cailleach

Blue-skinned veiled one, Queen of Wind and Winter
Bringer of snow-thunder and protector of the hungry wolves,
she comes unbidden wrapped in robes with button-skulls and fur trim,
takes the wand of Ruler from the Autumn Crone and turns
her one-eyed wrinkled face upon the rocky land to summon
snow and exhale icy lace upon the window panes that rattle.
Her gift is Cold that steals your toes blackens nose and
fingertips and earlobes leaves you burning numb
and yet her subtle mercy grants you one last warmth
beneath her blanket white beside her blue shore.

Cailleach, we do not call you but we praise you
fear you thank you for the rest you bring to earth, time
for bears to sleep, for freezing ponds that carry frogs
to springtime. For candlelight on glitter-snow
for blood on white for Holly gift of Helle
and for your breath the blizzard, grey grandmother's touch
that tells us Close your coat and Draw your cloak around you
as she recounts the tale of death and beauty, seed and stone.
Heritage

I come from a long line
of peasant women, plodding uphill
on the hottest of days, tilling soil
hand-harvesting potatoes, coaxing metal buckets
out of the well, dropping babies by the side
of the cornfields, then back to work.

*Men have gone to war on fronts left and right, cattle rounded up for troops, we make do with bone stew, cornmeal pap, nettle soup and pumpkin plump. Don’t cross the threshold with your left foot first, don’t whistle inside the house. If you walk about with only one shoe on, you know your mother will die.*

My inheritance: stoics expecting
no respite from labour,
they spit and curse their mistress, work,
love is brief and no one
owes anyone happiness.
They gather like a murder of crows
in sweat-soaked widows’ garb,
gaps in their teeth, grey plaits firmly coiled
under flowery kerchiefs.

*Food is fuel for our bending and plucking, but for our children it’s gift from our hands, just like the scratch-worsted socks with the woollen skeins of love. If your right palm is itching, you’ll be losing money soon. Your eye twitches from all the village gossip.*
Urban Legends

Once met this ancient punk
called Blake a city pigeon
cooed remembrances of one passerby
skipped over pavement cracks
opened into London’s underground
slipped under the surveillance grid
trapped one less soul
became a panoptic prism
refracted neon signs
flashed ‘DANGER’
lurked behind mirror-glass
reflected back sightless eyes
saw only their own blankness
blacked still a few words
called out the would-be activists
didn’t go to the demo because of the rain
fell on both sides of the fence
cordoned off our causes
flaked away like dead skin
littered the city
failed again to be a geometric grid
couldn’t hold the citizens
exchanged urban legends
gave urban life a pulse
flickered through noisy streets
stood still for thirty seconds
were enough for a vision
became an earthly utopia
became a map of pigeon paths
became a rorschach puddle
conjured up the future
felt possible
Notes on Tradition

We'll dress like idiots, go to the pub, sing & drink too much. After that to the orchard, slop cider over roots so they'll be a good harvest. Then we'll form a circle round a tree & fire a shotgun to scare evil spirits. If that doesn't scare 'em this will. I'll recite a poem

Old Apple tree, old apple tree;
We've come to wassail thee;
To bear & to bow apples enow;
Hats full, caps full, three bushel bags full;
Barn floors full
and a little heap under the stairs.

People love these old timey customs. England. Roots. Belonging. We'll have a bit of fun. Say we have pissing contests to bring good luck. For some reason tourists leave but are happy they've captured everything. Well, not quite, we still have a secret, impaling a piece of toast on a branch.* Those daft buggers will come back for more year after year & bless us with money.

* to feed the robins who represent the good spirits of the tree.
Folk Tale of the Seashore Castle

Common Piddock shell shut in his rock rattling around in worm cast rooms, creating a hagstone, a hagstone for future fertility see through see the future shut in, shut in, like the recalcitrant women walled up, walled up in ancient castle rooms, dungeons and nunneries, asylums and temples and slums all for dis-obedience, recklessness in thighs and in thoughts men needing
ridding them
purging them
cleansing them,
killing them...

once Vestals,
virgin and
pure, admired,
pedestalled,
now mere
vessels of
obstinate
ways with
their runes,
speaking in
tongues in
their rooms,
their tongues
sparking fire
to ruins, once
castled and
proud, their
runes, we are
left reading
runes, here they
were left,
abandoned
with shells,
shut in,
shut in
and left reading
empty, the rock,
walled in the
empty room
Rats remember rants
moments of truth for rats
and rags trusted ill increments
lush under brickside tokenism old
industry loving sunshined
river rats beneath stone help

I seemed to want everyone
to think I had been mugged
into being remade as the pied piper
under the hat works in Stockport
like having a cameo in Ratatouille
without the Pixar lamp light

It was not this I love you yet
nor citizenry much but
recurring whispers
beckoned by cheeky shits
to shift a rat on a quiet day

We all stand rash within
down up L.S. Lowry
loops to teach typography
by classic shapely letters

in the rare funeral, rats make
a gift horse of power maché
in scribbled ink because modernism
is the twenty-first century as a blue plaque
navigating which half of anything
is older than its other heartiness
The lead-boilers practice alchemy

We have blown on it, placed it in a cauldron and encouraged the North wind to ripple the surface.

We have heated it with our hands with a flame with the glare of midday sun in June.

We have buried it in loam, under millstone grit, we have sprinkled sand upon it.

We have let the rain at it, the river run over it, soaked it rock-pools.

Lead is a common, imperfect blend of the elements. Nothing changes it into gold.

We have tested elements. By applying heat, light, air and recording our failures to alter form we have forged a way.

We have been changed through the testing. We have earthed ourselves in trial and error.
We have wept frustrated tears, 
sweated until we were less water.

We have lain on moss 
and looked to the air for answers, 
contemplated the darting flight 
of a kingfisher 
and the clunky landings of mallards.

We have burnt with knowledge, 
our anger has flared 
and we have seen our ideas 
turn to embers, then ash.

We have learnt much, 
yet, the lead 
has still refused 
to become gold.
Jonah Reads His Own Myth

& in the sea of selves; static on a beach

i – a stone, surrounded by stones
refracting sapphire & ink the same

eager for salt

*light is the life of water,* & –
starfish leave no bones

what would soil say
if it knew of intention, would it sift
false from true, how would you –

Carried into mountains
Carried by birds through pampas grass, waving

Drawing soil about our shoulders
Dismantle, outline & echo & –

this was a dream of perfumed dark
i dream the dream of fish: The sea bones

Gone. Dry on dry sand. Loose bone
eager for milk with eager bones dry again

where am i are we to come, again &
Sacred Tree

In a subtle seduction,
Oak welcomes
Mistletoe’s seed.

Evening reddens
the sky as drums beat
to a crescendo.

Entering the grove of oaks,
wreath-crowned druids process
in gold, white, red,
clutching staffs.

One trails, bent,
a stringy silver beard falls
to his knees. He rings a bell.

Seers surround
the sun-god tree,
ivory candles ignite
one by one,
flames flit
in the breeze,
shadows flutter.

Drums mute.
Crickets chirp.
A snowy owl screeches
from a distant trunk.
Heads rise.
Deep breaths echo.

_Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen_
_Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen_

Priest, in white, ascends
the oak, unsheathes
the golden sickle strapped
to his back,
lops the stem
bearing milk berries.

Brothers clothed in gold catch
the twig in a cloak.

*Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen
Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen*

Drums pulsate,
beasts bellow,
eyes focus
on two white bulls
led by the horns.

A red-robed butcher
grips his blade, slits
one bull’s throat
and then the other.
Crimson gore spurts
into the vessels,
metallic stench rises.

Drums cease.

*Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen
Ah-oo-wen Ah-oo-wen*

Mistletoe glazed
with bulls’ blood
is blessed, offered
before the altar.

Sun-god’s gift of semen
is embraced
by the earth goddess.
**Mulch Meditation**

You are not greater
Than the sweet fat of this land.
It will eat you one day and you will be clay
The magic of this land will rot you away
And live
And live
And live again.

In the forest, an army of ants pull flecks of bracken over fallen trees.
The trees that are standing have been standing for some time
Living
Probably since at least our great great grandfather’s time.
Grandmother
Great great Grandmother’s time.

The earth is composed of decomposition;
Mulch;
Mushrooms from last summer,
children’s piss, dead deer, dead bodies.
No one knows what these dead bodies famously said
Or very much about the lives they lead
They’re just soil, tangled with roots,
Small ferns and earthworms.

A podgy blonde man is sitting in a dark wood office feeling very, very
pleased with himself There are statuettes of dead kings sitting on the
shelf
The white cliffs of Dover tower over the sea.

A bird’s nest falls out of a tree and all the babies die
A woman dives into the sea and feels incandescent happiness for a moment and
on the heath this evening
No one can see the nightjars

A man feels ashamed and drinks a bottle of whiskey to himself
An enormous forest is consumed by flames.

The nightjars are so loud
No one can see the nightjars.
A squirrel has buried nuts under your picnic spot
A man is sitting on the pavement and you hear his voice saying
Thank you
To the woman with the pearls around her neck.

A little girl's pulled out her first milk tooth and she can't stop sticking her
tongue into the gap My grandmother's bones are buried in UK postcode
SO41
Her mother’s bones are buried in Versailles, New York.

We are not greater
Than the sweet fat of this land.
It will eat us one day and we will be clay
The magic of this land will rot us away
And live
And live
And live again.
Slick

Back then, I was my own weasel brother
born from a rooster’s egg
hatched by a toad. I wintered

as snow and listened to the shadows
of hedgerows, the quiet companionship
of soil. Even the worms have their hymns.

That smear of almost-blood on my bib
is just the whip of my body tearing strips
through the stubble field, it is not

a spell of my making. My weasel-self
whispers me down Bogeyman Lane
to where the village slips

into the slick of the canal
where two summers ago
I swam with the other boys

wearing only my pelt. He dares me
to clear its pitchy waters and
like the closing in of a sea fret

I see myself
returned in a thousand mirrored scales
an eel maiden
more slick than any boy I know.
Generic woman

When she was a child
her mother taught her
   to sleep only on the limestone bluff
   safe where the music of owls comes out.

In the city she learned how to zip her difference
away under heavy clothes
   to swallow movement in stillness
   until the precise time she has chosen.

These days she knows how to stand smiling
on a balcony and wait for day to pass
   to grip the iron railing
   and pretend that gravity scares her too

   to hear the city noises
   as distant warning, or call to arms.
Wayland

Giant’s child, familiar with misery’s bitter taste
hamstrung at the forge, enslaved
in a cruelty cold as winter.
Wayland dreams revenge
while mourning the loss of his love
fair Hervör, her ring given to a spoilt princess.
Sorrow and longing companion him.

Yet he does not fly
escape, wreak revenge
the Smith stands strong, man as he is
forever forging, through eternity.
See in the depth of winter
Wayland strikes sparks, makes heat
on rolling chalk downs, foreign to him.
Come stranger and bring your steed.
A Godsmith slave will shoe it.

Commentary:

Wayland’s Smithy is the name given to a Neolithic tomb on the Ridgeway path, high up on the old Berkshire Downs. Local folklore tells us that it is the home of Wayland, the Saxon god of metal working. He has been captured and hamstrung so that he cannot leave. If you leave a horse that needs new shoes at the tomb overnight, it will have new shoes in the morning. As a child, I met a man whose father once did this, and who was very shaken to find that it worked.

My poem weaves this folklore with Norse sagas, where Hervör was a Valkyrie loved and lost by Wayland, her ring stolen as a trinket for a Norse princess. The poems style is that of a Saga.
Content warnings: allusions to domestic abuse, racism, classism

Commentary: Rumpled is a modern revisionist reading of Rumplestiltskin, in which a privileged young woman takes advantage of a marginalised man. While in her employ, he becomes the father of her child, but she keeps him alienated from the family and refuses even to compensate him for his labour. This is one of a series of reckonings with popular folk and fairy tales intended to spotlight the subtleties of damage that mainstream stories can perpetuate.

Rumpled

First published in Gingerbread House Lit on 31/01/2021

fumbling in wet-dark
my fingers are rotting:
to give the girl gold and gold and gold

because I can't speak
like Will or Petrarch,
she tells everyone that I threatened her child

a girl of fresh pearl-cheek
I could not have made
with these calloused hands, with these dark hollow eyes

they spy me, threadbare
think, there's one in need;
he must have done evil to end up like that

it began with a phonecall
at three in the morning
she was crying again, I knew I was needed

spin harder, give more
turn our yarn into truth
we'll give you fair payment, just not yet, not yet
out in the night
to fix all her wrongs
I leave my sheets rumpled, and hope to return

the invites are rare these days
sparse, cold and brief
like foxes in snowdrifts, I take what I can

so I go to work for her
summon a house
of straw and of stone and of tall castle peaks

a white winter hymnal
accompany me
my hands and their voices spinning fresh songs

now her need has waned and
I drink the spilt milk
in hope of the honour to see her grow up

it ends with a message
a voicemail left dry
she’s keeping her daughter, and I’m done, I’m done
Lore Up North

sky moody and clouds boisterous, they struggle to hold all of us and exactly like the first second

raindrop to fall we parachute down to meet those already churning in the Sea of Local Culture

headless airman at Burtonwood Base
If he, his fortunes kinder formed, and head and voice remained in place, would not have been there mutely stretching arm towards

three banshees on a nearby roof
wailing out warnings of future chemical disasters

Ann Jackson of Dial Street: Fortune Teller Extraordinaire!
who, after our payment securely secured, warns us of the witch Ann Platt round back; massive falling-out the women had and as we pass the clothes line that started it all Ann cautions:

beware the special wolves
were heard piercing the night with shuddering beys of utter despair, lament for the rugby game postponed, so out of frustration or mere habit the call’s put out to turn more mortals for their team, sanctioned by Old Stinker no doubt, who hangs with

Big Black Shuck
a favoured past time of theirs involves observing through fire-red lenses the funeral procession for Sir Piers Legh at Lyme Park; the other woman - Blanche - forever mourning metres behind Legh in only white

Blanche,
who haunts a secondary realm - main house, long gallery - and up and down the boards she races out her grief

Ann Platt grievous
for the life she once had, spits out Jackson’s taunts with malice only a person severely wronged can muster
boggarts

are a complex breed, they may clean your home, they may destroy your soul
consider, before a forest walk up north, if they mean to invade your home, and
if you seem to be invading their own

DANI SALVADORI

Red shoes

her own pandemic therapy has been to dance [....] in the kitchen, lit by a disco
light she bought online.

In Strasbourg in 1518 there was an outbreak of uncontrollable dancing that went
on for months. Hundreds of dancers were taken to a shrine dedicated to St Vitus
where their bloodied feet were placed into red shoes.

In our first lesson she told me that I could dance
I didn’t need rhythm I just needed to run with the wind
we ran and ran and ran and I couldn’t catch her
until she jumped and I leapt too.
She said the wind was with me she felt it rush past her.

She said now I had danced my first dance
I was a member of the danse club joyeuse
I could turn the music up high and buy a glitterball for the kitchen
then I’d have protection against the danse club macabre
she said that was for people who had lost all joy.

She said it could happen to anyone
and you would know if you were a member of that club
because skeletons would invade your dancing dreams
if we weren’t careful there would be more of them than of us
and despair would outwit joy.

I thought it was important to spread the word
she said the agents were on to it
but that I could play my part by dancing
especially if I wore red shoes.
The legend of the barnacle goose

He came in on driftwood.
And just when you were thinking

he's gone
he's gone for good,

he was only holding on underwater.
His beak drew from the sap of the wood,

from the salt of the sea.
A secret and most wonderful process of alimentation.

As if he were under a spell and the shells cocooned him.
He would stay until feathers grew.
My red shoes lead me home

*after George Meredith Frampton, Marguerite Kelsey, 1928*

I’m hiding myself in the folds of my gown
as he positions me: this trusted psychiatrist,
my red shoes tapping to take me home.

No jewellery, I wear, just a slight smile,
I’m beige as his wall, stiff with lies, sit on his lap,
hiding myself in the folds of my gown,

as I stare into space. I’ve lost my tongue,
stop my thoughts leaking through my eyes,
long for my red shoes to dance me home.

I’m starting to float, leaving physical form.
*Return to your safe place: I hear his anxious advice,*
*you’ve hidden yourself in the folds of your gown.*

But what is safe from harm in this life
if passion and longing turns into vice? I can hear
my red shoes drumming, dancing me home,

but for now play his game, return to his room,
placate him with lies, toss his drugs to the skies.
I’m safely hidden in the folds of my gown,
soon my red shoes will whirl and twirl me home.
once upon a time there was a boy who picked up a knife
and carved himself into the score of a nation.
i am my own prewritten epitaph; i am the elegy of choice,
of what they might have made this place,

the story goes like this. i pick up the blade. i whittle the world
until the memories of us are gone. i fade before i can set it down.
(the story goes like this. a medic picks up the blade. i am whittled
down into something less painful. i burst forth, a symphony.)

my heart beats the unwritten tradition. yours the drum of antiquity.
i have the makings of mythology, you say, and it’s true; we need
a new heirloom. i bare my teeth at what is, rip until we are all remade.
grant me my wish; i’ll play monster, myth, monsoon, main attraction.

once upon a time, a boy put his knife in the hands of another,
fingers kissing at the contact. leaned in, shadows conjoining on the
wall, a new tale for an old cave. whispered: write me into the lexicon.
i want my silhouette on the back of their eyes.
Dear Mother,
Tell me the story again.

Tell me about the jade rabbit
Pounding the elixir of life on the moon.
Tell me about the white snake
Using magic to turn into a human.
Tell me about the lord archer
Who shot down nine suns to save the earth.
Tell me about the mortal cowherd
Who fell in love with the immortal weaver.

Tell me the scary stories, Mother.
About the Nian
Who came down from the mountains
To feast upon people.

Tell me the beautiful stories, Mother.
About the dragons
Who rose up from the oceans
To bring rain to the people.

Tell me the story
So that I can tell my daughter
And she can tell hers.
Just as your mother told you
And her mother told her.

Tell me the story again,
Dear Mother.