



THE

NOT ABOUT NOW

A Writing Squad Anthology



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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020 the Poet Laureate Simon Armitage contacted the Writing Squad to offer the support of the TS Eliot Foundation to 'do something that will benefit poetry.'

In any time, the best way to do something for writers is to give them money. March 2020 was no ordinary time and we were already seeing the effects of lockdown on Writing Squad poets who were freelance, and especially on those who had just recently made that big step of beginning a freelance or portfolio career.

Throughout lockdown we ran weekly minigoals sessions for our writers – we commissioned two poems each from those supporting each other in the poets' group. As every arts organisation seemed to be offering 'response' commissions, we made clear there was no need to write about the current situation. We also asked them to work in pairs, editing and in some cases influencing each other's poems.

We shared the results in the room that is Zoom on the 17th June 2020 and hope that you enjoy the poems now.

STEVE DEARDEN

Director, The Writing Squad July 2021



Harold

He picked us up when it seemed that nobody would. Let us lie side by side, exhausted, in the back of his van. Let us tell our story then pretended that we never had. Shared with us the blueprints of unteachable experience: how to ask for love under the strange light of the moon, to sing in tune, the offside rule and the doctrines of eternal hell. I don't know how he understood us so well or if he even knew that he did. There are Gods with no idea of their power. If we ever meet again I'd want him to see how good our life is now even though it isn't, to pay back the money he gave us in the town where he was visiting his lawyer and we staggered, drunk on our own luck, into the square where people were doing normal things, which to us seemed incredible, then never saw him again. Just to know exactly how it was for us. How long we waited. How we must have willed him into existence.

22 Yards

he'll have to be quick

he'll have to be (q) Quick

And the finger goes UUUUUUUPPPPPP

evening parch soil with sun daggers

the heat stripping everything melting

Look at the eyes the concentration my socks

I'm gliding on turf as islands go up in smoke (it cut back at him!) the puff of a war flute blowing bone dust filed against my nails, YES HE'S GONE! I am a young Andy Roberts on a beach playing to put the sunset on a heavy roller

He's gone fishing out there!

to catch dinner in the surf swalling oiled fingers whole. my fingers curled around the seam cutting breath in halveslike butterflies.

my fingertips coated in leather resin, fresh blood on my school whites, playing

callously

PACE LIKE FIRE

Wickets cartwheeling/toy soldiers dancing in perfect symmetry/collection of chipped sternums tally of slanted stumps/names in brail and bleeding memories running my hands over the ball

KILLER INSTINCT FLOORS NO ONE KNOWS YOU BATSMAN LIKE I DO

HUFFING

KOOKOBURA

On the batsman's ribcage

RINGS INTO

When was the last time you saw a bowler with an afro pick? We could start a forest fire, a rolling story, a perfectly pitched bouncer aaand HE'S FEATHERED THE OUTSIDE EDGE

If You Believe: Swimming Pool

After Hannah Lowe

If you believe I saw Marion Barnes in spring at the end of her garden path, that slope she shuffled up, if you believe we stood, her front door

gaping while I touched the rotting handrail and then her sleeve, that grease that comes from hairy jumpers. If you believe I looked at a smear of foundation on her face

as we agreed we'd see each other soon, the door still hanging, in the air a hint of heat, a hint of exhaust from the car just parked; in my mouth, the tang from her stewed earl grey

and the ulcer I'd given myself. She was too tired for a walk so we'd sat in the living room instead, those very upright chairs with the head supports, the carpet underneath full of crumbs.

If you believe I got over my awkwardness there on the pavement to tell her I loved her, if you believe she said the same, then you may as well believe that the moment she reached

the top of the slope she straightened her back, and, with the air of shrugging off a cardigan, gracefully shed the last two decades – her eyes cleared, the gashes vanished

from her legs, we left Oakley Road for the swimming pool that is no longer rubble, both clad in blue costumes, and she was there for me at the bottom of the slide, water lapping at her waist, she was there ready, smiling, her arms outstretched.

April Notebook

I dream you lie down on a bed and there's no room for me.

The room is full of other people. It is a night of casual touch,

your arm, your lower back. You dream you are holding me.

I dream we are on a platform in a tree and have to speak

through convoluted metal pipes to hear each other. It distorts

our voices. You dream I have a girlfriend and didn't tell you.

You dream I have a Spotify EP. I dream you are singing to me.

I can hear all the words. You dream we are editing a poem.

It's very sexy. You dream you come to visit me and

I have so many flatmates who are there all the time,

but I order cookie dough, which arrives in a little van. We talk till late, then you dream we hold hands, talk some more.

I dream we are at a party. Your mum is there. She tells me,

as the three of us clasp hands, I have an exciting time ahead.

I am sceptical, and ask, how can you know?

She says, because your life is a blessing for my daughter.

one

nothing is a secret the quantum physicist says to her lover having measured every particle on the inside of a body and discovered one irrefutable law:

we are lying still and therefore spinning both ways at the same time

and there are ways I can't see you with eyes because there is not enough elastic in light

and the only true things are the triangles that repeat on the face of your skin

and love is a point in space too small to know how to crack open

and it circles about us like a breath inside a person

and this moment is made of invisible things

and the answer is unknown

and the meaning is exact

and I have split you open and I have found no science

except the space

between zero

and one

The goodness of beans

You told me I should eat the beans embedded in the pot of rice.

I don't remember if they were kidney, gungo or black eyed? But I remember making my plain white rice red with ketchup, laughing at the dinner table with cousins, conversation hidden behind plumes of smoke, the time warping into a boxed off room, snippets together.

Waiting Room

After Julia Webb

we is at the doctors i brought my stet-to-tope to show the man before he hurt me the toys smell funny are sticky clean in my hands mummy says its against the rules to stare but the lady has wheels up her bottom and a long speg-ett-ee on her nose its awesome mummy says i can have sweeties if im good its hot here i want to go home its really hard not to look at the lady i do but not really in case thats against the rules as well the man is kind before he ouches me i get a moana sticker even after crying its part of the rules you can cry in the alone room but in the big room you lose the game if you show ouchiness to strangers

With a Sugar Star On Top

My father is a mouse in a shoebox. If he is ever sick, I'll feed him rice pudding and coffee until he recovers. I'll know he's better when the shoebox grows mushrooms. When he brings me the mushrooms and bones and twigs and scurries into the shed to make sawdust and more mushrooms. The sawdust my father makes fills up his nose so his whiskers twitch and he sneezes and it fills up his ears so he can't hear my mother. If my father is a dormouse, round and fat and silent, then my mother is cutting off Holofernes' head and parading it through the house. I keep thinking I have to rescue him. From a house cat or from the shed or his shoebox where he is putting a piece of ebony onto the lathe. Trimming it down. My father is sometimes a carpenter and sometimes I turn into him. Usually when I'm in line at Pret and I bring a friend hot chocolate and a biscuit. The one with the sugar star on top. I say, it's fine. I've got it. No, please.

I should be stepping off a train at Central Station

Instead I sip chayee in my flat. My fingers hold each other around the glass. A travel mug watches from the kitchen counter, comforted by a blanket of dust. Sundrops reach in and pat my thigh.

Clouds meander. I squint at the cumulus and in their shapes I see the trowel I know is cradled in my mother's hands, the silver tool submerging and emerging in and from the earth.

Last summer, standing under a mackerel sky, we spotted dolphins dancing along the North East coast. I think of the thrill of finding them amongst the grey, how quickly she snapped her binoculars to look.

Today she kneels in the grass. Her hands browned, mud speckling her fingers, inspecting row upon row of new beginnings – tomatoes, raspberries, mint. Constellations of freekles blossom on her shoulders.

I ask the sky to give her shade and hope that, 150 miles south east, clouds will spread their wings to shield her as she transplants her first spring shoots from rusted pot to soil.

She makes a mental note to tell me, next time she calls, of this – the new life born from her hands. I sense her success, settle back into black cracked leather and drink the tea she taught me to make the last time we spoke.

Parallax

Ten years on grief still weaponises
memory against the body
Only this morning I lay on the sofa
my stomach tangled
a fluttering spool of film wrapped
round itself – On my TV I watched
a young dinosaur's dad die – the boy
propelled out into the world
to confront his fears and come home – Its a lot
to do in only an hour and a half run-time –

The word only doubles
every time I hear it – It has
only been ten years – it has only
been ten years – it has only been
ten years since I last heard his voice
down the telephone – I was eating
buttered crumpets and watching Rush Hour 3
me yeahing my way through
the conversation – I've spent weeks trapped
by myself in different cinemas

watching my dad eat a whole head of lettuce straight from the salad bowl watching him smash a wheel off his computer chair watching him paint my bedroom tangerine In his house there were few VHSs we watched them so often each frame started warping – scenes where actors' faces ripple out of shape briefly or freeze Ten years on Grief cuts together a film of me watching the playback

Trauma Tattoos

Web sketched skin; scales of nights etched onto arms
Ink seeping out from inside only visible in scars.
Decorate yourself in wounds to tell us what he did.
Break your body into a piece of performance art
Try express how he grasps your throat through creation
Paint his damage all over the insides of your thighs
You cut for us, slice yourself, score the paper of your arms.
We are the audience. Recreate his pulse by freeing yours.
Theatre in education of a crime impossible to replicate.
Every night at ten the same second act begins
Spelling the truth out in scarlet; and in silence, the lies.

The cat hops down from the helicopter

and says, I think this is the place.
It is white with a black patch like a pirate.
I have never seen it before
though I have seen other cats.
I don't say anything. I stand still.
I let it make its choice.
It walks into the lobby, pads up one flight of stairs.
Stops to lick a paw.
I'm a tom, he says. I nod.

He stretches, continues.
I let him into my corridor, my flat.
I hold the door open for him to leave if he wants to.
I have to be passive.
Being desperate
makes cats get back in their helicopters and go.
Ginger, tortoiseshell, grey, black, tabby,
they got to various points before leaving.
This one sits on my swivelly chair.

Do you like white and black cats? he says. I shrug. I don't care, I tell him. Please, just stay. He curls up. He seems content enough. I hold my breath and hold and hold it – then I hear the thrumming get smaller and smaller and further and the helicopter is gone and I reach out and touch him

and I rub his head and I call him Jack and I thank him for staying.

Then I get slowly up,
back slowly away and, finally, turn,
reach for a clean bowl from the stack,
find food in the ever-stocked fridge door,
and think, this is it.
Keep breathing.

When I return, Jack is sleeping.

Badger

Devon, Spring 2020

They have to skirt around it: the monochrome fur opened violently to red and brown and white, an intimacy of organs, the glimpse of a small spine, curving.

She had never seen a badger in the flesh before, but now she has seen too much: meat and muscle, the inner workings displaying themselves like clumsy pornography.

Days later it is still there, collecting the anticipated cloud of flies, which rise, disturbed, as he steers her past, instructs her to use a sleeve to cover mouth and nose while still downwind.

No one touches the corpse: instead, it collects tyre tracks from passing farmers' trucks which flatten it tenderly by degrees, revealing more secret animal mechanics.

Even after it has rained, the parts continue to stink, stuck to the tarmac like so much old chewing gum, slowly spreading. *Let's go a different way today*, he says, but the views prove inferior

and out of sight isn't really out of mind: the body can't be denied as it draws out its unhurried disappearing act. Months pass; the stench remains long after the carcass is gone.

The Badger is a Metaphor

I'm writing a poem about a dead badger I say over dinner 'Oh yes I know exactly which one you're talking about' says my future mother-in law reaching

for the peas 'in the lane down by that row of whitewashed houses the ones on the left

as you come down the hill' yeah that one I say it's been there for weeks stinking 'yes I know'

she says 'I know exactly which one you mean'

'It's definitely the best thing you've written in lockdown' my sister says on video chat yes but

do you think the metaphor is strong enough I say you know the bit where they

cover up their mouths and noses with their sleeves does that image resonate clearly

and anyway am I missing a trick by not being more explicitly political 'dunno' she says 'don't spell it out you should really make the reader do the work'

My mum wants to know why the badger has been there for so long in the first place why

on earth it's been allowed to decompose so publicly so I ask my fiancé and he explains that usually

someone would call the local Council to have it removed but because of the national crisis there's probably no one in the office to answer the phones

'Oh' says my mum 'I see how awful'

'We passed a single deer's leg on our walk this morning' says my sister just one leg I say

'yeah it was fucking creepy' where was the rest of the deer I say 'you know I've been

wondering the same thing all day and then you emailed over your

- draft and I was like
- that's such weird timing' maybe a fox or something got hold of the leg and moved it
- 'yeah' my screen freezes for a moment 'yeah maybe' she says pixellated
- Someone in my writing group suggests I read a series of pieces about dead badgers
- by this famous poet 'They're amazing' she says and I say oh wicked I'll go check them out but
- of course I don't because I'm terrified to discover I have nothing original or interesting
- to offer about dead badgers that hasn't already been expressed dozens of times before
- 'Don't ask me' says the badger 'you're the writer aren't you'
- And later when my fiancé and I go out for our daily state-sanctioned walk we get to that row
- of whitewashed houses as we come down the hill and I can't avoid it it's just there
- what's left of the badger spread across the road decomposing staring at us with its
- blind eyes and its overwhelming stink just waiting for me to write about it

Sunshine house

A home that looks out on the world, across the smoke filled planes of Grimesthorpe,
Page Hall, Firth Park,
rows of sunshine houses
for steel workers, pressed
back to back against the cold.

Home to artefacts, lace tablecloths, prayer plaques, the mismatched photo frames of grandchildren, voices and chatter between rooms, the crackle of news on the telly, hymns sung while cooking, the firm arms that work batter into cake.

Light streams through windows catches dust in the air from the land, uprooted for new builds, the sunshine house inhabitants disperse, weightless as smoke.

Fab

Alone in my room and eating unnecessarily (initially a chicken salad sandwich but then hula hoops, watermelon, a Fab) I wonder if you can buy cigarettes on Amazon. I think about my good clean lungs and wish I were a smoker, wanting the company of that dirty heat between my fingers, its little flare. I buy gin on Amazon to avoid the teeth-gritting checkout where the cashier tries to guess my age: that small moment of reckoning in which either conclusion is slightly offensive, that moment of seeking *permission* to drink myself into an altered being. Fuck permission.

Imagine all the things I could do if I were less timid. I could queue jump. Or not reply to messages. I could stride into a supermarket and take a bottle in each hand, complete with security tag, and head for the doors. Welcome the hands that would land on me, sit in fascination in a dingy room with a police officer. Have you ever been brave enough to scream? Really scream, and not care who hears you? When I was ten my mother left to drive my father to work and when I heard her key in the door I played dead on the carpet. Now I am afraid to make a sound if I hear neighbours beneath my flung window. I check Amazon Pantry and find only two Nicorette products and a pop-up

DO YOU NEED HELP? I touch my greasy hair and remember the local council web page about domestic abuse and the big red button which said CLICK HERE TO LEAVE THIS SITE QUICKLY. I imagine them sitting in a meeting and coming up with this idea, congratulating each other. I bite into the side of the Fab and reveal the join, its pursed-lipped cling to the lolly stick, those little shards of ice like creases in skin. I look out

at my small cul-de-sac and picture the homes as doll's houses, walls folding and rooves lifting to unveil discrete pieces of theatre.

My mind jumps to the next street and the next, the blocks of flats, this area of the city, the whole city, the county, jump jump jump. I wonder who drinks in the morning, who wakes up full of fear, who can't stop eating. I go for an angry walk and return with damp underarms. It is 15:14 and this time yesterday I was not sober. Life is just a collection of small achievements. It's writing 'have a shower' on a to-do list and drawing a box. It's finding enjoyment in the sound the biro makes as you draw a hard, tight tick.

The goslings

This May, my life has been reshaped, around goslings, whether one or fifty, spilling yellow-brown fluff into the canal at Ancoats or New Islington Marina. They may even brave our murky slice of river, now marginally less polluted and a solitary goose sighted. Wherever a hatching occurs, I intend to be there.

I track these events through other people's outdoor lives, their videos, or each day ticking forward from the night I saw two nesting geese, huddled in their own softness: one within the bounds of a gated community – wise, the other among scattered beer cans under a bridge – maybe not the best location, I would have advised.

I am not their estate agent, however, so instead I bake muffins, try to be open to any signal from a sky pulsing blue heat, lime, peach, or grey cloud stripes. I count gosling time through my own body growing, losing eggs and blood – or not, and wondering why. I will see them. I have to. I will get this spring right.

The Secret Party

My love has sent news she is coming, but not when – and I am waiting. I am working for Taylor Swift. She and I drive around in a carriage. She asks when my love will be here. I say I don't know. In the meantime, we walk hedgerows in the spring. Taylor is really into flowers. She picks and presses, writes their names in silver gel pen. She gives me a scrapbook she has made and I realise I could kiss her if I wanted to. She waits outside the phonebox when my mother tells me she can't see me for three years, and doesn't seem to care. I am desperate. Taylor and I go to a party. Everyone lies on the floor in the dark, because it is a secret party. I can feel their bodies breathing all around me, close enough to touch.

'One day we will be oak trees'

For Nikita

In a place we get to call our neck of the woods there will be tree rings under our eyes; peeled bark like a scattering of leaves; every word we ever meant. People will make boats from our ribs and sail to the lands our roots began, thread together the mystery of how we ended up a cackling scrawl on a school desk:

273 days to go.

Children will hang from our branches like pocket watches; count them out. They know every breath is a brief kiss on their cheek; a reminder of what it means to be impermanent, that one day my hair will knot, fall into acorns and roll across the forest floor like dice. Yours will too when our time is up. Oak trees, I guess, we've always thought ourselves deciduous; arms interlocked; a promise we kept all this time.

Bouquet

Midmorning and I am pouring coffee beans into the grinder sounding like LEGO scooped from the floor and dropped back into the box

There is so little precision in my life but I weighed out those coffee beans and I measured out the water too – There is something of cut grass

to freshly ground coffee – A smell made brighter by the breaking down of the bean – as if free the aroma can finally rise to meet you – Surely the only true thing

is that we grow toward the sun – the shrub that bears the coffee fruit – the aroma once roasted – the caffeine – all rises – I've never liked coffee

though I have made it many times in the past from tins or jars – the body long gone the heaped teaspoon emptied and ringing off the mug

Midmorning and I am pouring boiling water in soft circles This is to bloom the coffee in the filter – the liquid dissolves the oils – pulls the coffee back down to a drip that falls

black – translucent – There are people surviving in this droplet everyday – waking and filling their cups drinking with their eyes firmly closed

I wipe down the kitchen countertop In the next room a boy spreads LEGO bricks across the carpet – cute in all his frustrations

Furious that he can't build any circles

with these blocks – He takes the coffee from the table – He pours the liquid

into the LEGO mug he's made – Furious that no matter how hard he presses the bricks together they won't hold

Hot coffee seeps through the gaps Midmorning and the boy cries out his thigh quickly turning red

Q3 – How would you describe the experience of being a student nurse?

Always a footstep on a broken shoe; the taste of iron in my throat.

Anger compressed to raw fibres in my head Suppressed into sarcasm and textbook phrases. I am saving best I can with a broken net Exhaust myself trying to fill in the gaps.

Tired of the fading outlines of my sight ringing unnoticed in my ringing ears.

A calloused cog in a broken machine; jammed tight into giving a shit – unable to turn anyone over to be helped.

Twenty-One

Being twenty-one makes me feel old.

I think it's because my life expectancy doesn't include any more milestones which is kind of a buzz kill.

The morning of, dread hatched like goslings inside me – but instead of cuteness all I saw were old, fat birds honking at my ankles.

Being twenty-one doesn't feel like a rite of passage. It feels like luck.

For every one of me there's an orphaned mother wishing the coroner was wrong.

I'm a pile of branches waiting in the drought of summer.

zero

When I asked where the whole world came from, mum said maybe it is always coming. always falling off empty air like a sycamore seed and spinning so fast that it splits through senses. maybe it slips down into space through a hole in the centre of its bed like you do when you are about to dream. maybe it is diving and can feel breeze blasted under its skin in a continuous rapid gust. maybe it is under a parachute that is swelling too slow to catch and maybe it will land like a butterfly on water. then a ripple. then the first string

of a faint song will unravel the black like a spark and open and open until there is something.

mum said

I don't know

maybe we float

because we can't tell

if we are falling.

Harvest in spring

Why pull up the mint now when we could have mojitos all summer? Comments like that make me smile. This garden is alive with sunlight. I see a calm fire in so many things: tomatoes, raspberries, magnolia flowers dripping from the dry branches of the tree.

When I'm offered a plucked snowdrop I decline: I cannot take it to die in my house, when I know it could survive, bursting through ice. The whole, hazy afternoon is owned by death, objects being passed down. There is this calm fire: an apocalypse and all that comes with it.

I say goodbye to the happiness of learning to name flowers. I have the same dream again: we're on holiday and I leave you. I board a train, heavy with luggage and look out of the window. I see you standing on the platform, with petals drifting like snow.

Dearly beloved

When you are gathered here, one day, accept this codicil. I hope by now my chattels will have been distributed – yes, I hear my bangles singing on your wrist. I wish to split my greatest gift: the miracle that is my body, my soulcage, me. Will my executor please step forward? These limbs, this skin is my estate. I leave behind no bricks or mortar. I just have this – the mountain ranges of my body. Swan arms, legs of willow. Inherit me.

I'll let the court of protection take it from here, but know my spirit will be sitting in a theatre seat as the troupe of scrubs pluck organs like bulbs from my body.

I will cheer when the scalpel slices my skin and the first kidney is squelched from within. Know I'll throw roses at the sight of my secrets sitting in a row of blue boxes. Distribute them in the night.

Leave my heart for last. Alas, beloved – proof it exists!

Now give it to a girl bound with tubes to a hospital bed.

Silence the machines beeping her funeral march.

Give her my encore: I will beat in her chest.

Burn my residue. Leave me my eyes. I know they'll bubble, break from my face when the fire takes hold - but I am afraid of the dark. Return half my bones to my father's land, so I can straddle the worlds I couldn't bridge with my flesh. I want to be scattered at the Caspian Sea, to see the sun rise as I dissolve into oblivion. I want to fall as snow in Tehran, to melt into mountain streams and nurse the burning feet of babies shrouded in the shade.

I want my other half to rest; my hair, my smile, my hands. Bury what's left in the alcove where my grandparents lie. I'll mix with their memories, ash and ash. Dust sharing space. In pieces we will spend eternity counting the stars above our heads in the town that birthed us all.

Beloved, please visit.
Bring me marigolds on my birthday. Take time.
Blanket my plaque in petals. Kneel.
Wipe the rust from my lettering.
Tell me about your day. I want to meet your children.
I want to stay.

After life

When I am finished I will not keep anything. I am already trying to say goodbye to attachments that have gathered like ash in the corner

of an ashtray. You told me you'd want to be buried *Just in case*. I laughed. I'm sorry for that.

I said Yeah, when you die I will slip you a knife, your wallet, a few old coins, an animal perhaps. You will be a pharaoh when the earth turns inside out. Not me. I could be anywhere, what's still me singing separate, lost. Not meant to be found.

When I signed my body away, my mother cried. Just don't let them take your eyes!

I crossed them off the list. Each time I blink I think of it: how black it will be

as doctors work each part of me away from what I was in life. I wonder what they'll leave

to be taken in by heat and broken down to dust. I imagine settling on the leaves of fruit trees. See, I'm not all practical. Take me to the place I knew love: the end of summer, overgrown fields of ferns, berries, rough heather. Scatter me there.

Do not come to find me, pulsing with life in another's pre-loved cage of bone.

Now I am bigger than I ever was alone. If the spirit does exist in cells, I will mix my memories with theirs. I will learn to love and live the life I have.

Do not see me as trapped. My body was always the best gift I never kept. I loaned it out again and again. So when I tell you that I'm sorry please believe me. When I say I'm gone, imagine autumn: the night we spent making pink roses

into confetti. Taking rows of petals, gathering them into voile bags to pass around the party of guests the next day. How we gave them to the breeze.

Beloved, when you say you miss me, don't imagine I'll call back. I will be in pieces.

A Poem as The Goddesses Playing Mini Golf, and Pausing in Their Backswing to Look to Me and Say

"Every action in this ceremony must be performed silently and backwards for only thus do we begin to walk the paths of the dead" – Paul Huson, Mastering Witchcraft

you wanna speak to the dead, kiddo? go ask your mother she's by hole 15, throwing whale bones into the plastic lake and arguing with your father about bitumen.

everyone's counting on you to dream him back into the room, easy peasy.

a few drops of the operator's blood. you'll conjure an uncle who's also a magician,

dream of an eagle, dream of a candle. how can a family be running towards a death all its own? your mother, salting the door against the ghosts of abusers. do you dare open it?

the madness is you think you can do it. poetry as this. line break

as god, this dark madness satin and crow feathers like walking round a golf course backwards and silent,

the sun rising in the west.

the body houses its bones. the smallest ossuary you know. you're not writing the dead back to life you're just fighting with the way your face is an obituary.

spend thirteen days and nights in prayer. or watch him spring to life on Youtube, where the mouse is a little callous planchette or Edison's necrophone.

I'm still one over par, by the way (they disqualified you for walking backwards).

there's vervain and honey in your teeth. you've been eating your ingredients again. bad witch; time out.

once, the dead swam freely like whales, lapping on the shore of your mother's mind, then they got sent away. you've spoken to every damn thing that'd listen but

the dead won't visit you,

so poetry's the gods' landline so you're reaching an answerphone so you're playing mini golf. but he won't appear here,

watch

The Jane Austen Apocalypse

At the end of the world there is Jane Austen inexplicably in control of everything.

It wouldn't be your first choice of genre for the apocalypse, but you play the game.

Much time is spent making the time pass. You wear one dress all week without washing

and feel yourself becoming a character existing only in moments of strange moral clarity

or in the act of dialogue. At the end of the world we have only the words that Jane has written into us

which are not enough, so we say them in new ways like reinventing liturgy. You have nothing to say

about marriage. You want to say I am not one of Jane's girls, or something equally dramatic.

At night, Jane is there, like a heavy blanket. You dream of breaking the fourth wall

like smashing the glass door to heaven, of sex with another woman. You dream of being

a tree in winter in a past life, reaching upwards like a child still hoping to be carried.





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grew up in Oxford and has since lived in Melbourne, York and Edinburgh. They have poems in *Poetry Birmingham*, *Magma* and *The Rialto* and recently completed their MA dissertation on butch poetics. They were specially commended in the 2020 Queen Mary Wasafiri New Writing Prize. T: @ poetrypritch

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ABOUT THE WRITING SQUAD

The Writing Squad exists to create the next generation of writers in the north.

Our free two year programme is for writers aged 16–21 who live, work or study in the North of England. After that we continue to offer them support as they begin their careers.

We help them establish themselves as individual artists, collectives and start up companies. We link writers and activists with the literature industry and independent sector, while encouraging them to produce and distribute work themselves.

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