

EIGHTEEN



Contemporary women's
voices to celebrate
International Working Women's Day
8th March, 2019

Edited by
Jane Burn
and Fran Lock

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I am not free while any woman is unfree
— Audre Lorde

CULTURE  **MATTERS**

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Top left to right: Angela Topping, Julie Hogg, Catherine Ayres, Amy Acre, Jackie Hagan, Deborah Alma

Middle row left to right: Joelle Taylor, Fran Lock, Hannah Lowe, Wendy Pratt, Pauline Seawards, Sogul Sur

Row underneath left to right: Jane Commane, Joanne Key, Jane Burn, Lisa Matthews, Clare Shaw, Nadia Drews

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Foreword

by Jane Burn

*We factory lasses have but little time,
So I hope you will pardon my bad written rhyme.*

These lines come from a poem written by a working woman known only as *E.H., a factory girl of Stalybridge*. It was published in *The Northern Star* in 1839. The poem is a brave attempt to speak out against the social, educational and economic deprivation she was so acutely aware of.

Following in E.H.'s footsteps, this collection of 36 poems and pieces of writing by 18 contemporary working women poets demonstrates that we are still very much aware of social imbalances, oppressions and inequalities, and that we are prepared to use our voices to fight against them.

This collection of poems, curated by Fran Lock and myself for **Culture Matters** in support of International Working Women's Day 2019, shows just how mighty words can be. How we will not be silenced. How we are not afraid to speak. How we own our subject matter and believe that nothing is off limits.

How the fight very much continues today.

March 2019

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Introduction

by Fran Lock

I've got to admit that "balance for better", the official theme of International Working Women's Day 2019, didn't exactly grab me. A friend of mine suggested that the reason was mainly semantic: "balance" sounds conciliatory, moderate and moderating; I'm militant and marginal, compelled by life's extremes.

There's probably some truth in this. On a very basic level the word itself is irksome, implicated as it is in all of those coercive late-capitalist commonplaces, such as the dreaded "work-life balance", the "balanced diet", the "balanced mind". Or the "unbalanced mind".

I've been told I possess an "unbalanced mind", that I am "unbalanced", "hysterical", "deranged", that I'm not being reasonable, that I'm not making sense, that my anger is inappropriate, or symptomatic of mental dysfunction. A lot of women have heard this; it is supremely tactical: create the conditions that drive us to boiling, spitting fury, then use that same rage to invalidate our testimonies.

Calm Down Dear Syndrome, I call it. It's nauseating. I tend to assume that this golden mean of ideal even-temperedness is, at worst, a strategic fiction, at best a luxury only those in positions of power and privilege can afford. So when I contemplate "balance", I'm immediately sensitised to its historical complicity in the control of women, our bodies and behaviours.

You can over think these things. And semantic quibbling seems divisive and petty, even to me. Obviously, we should be striving towards parity of pay and representation for women in business, and equality of opportunity across the professions. Still, "balance is not a gender issue, it's a business issue", is a disturbing slogan. I don't know how on-board I am with this recalibrated vision of gender representation being sold as the mechanism by which inherently exploitative business models are enabled to operate more smoothly.

I understand we have to live in the world, and the world as it is, not the queer syndicalist utopia that exists mainly in my head. We are all, to a greater or lesser degree, enmeshed in the economic and social structures of western capitalism. We're all compromised, just trying to negotiate our route through the minefield as best we can. Women exist in this system, it's the medium we move through, so of course we should have equality of access, of course we should be equally compensated for our labour. Even so, the notion that an even distribution of xx chromosomes somehow fixes the worst excesses of structurally toxic paradigms is verging on the blinkered.

None of this is the IWW campaign's fault, it's just the reductive way the rhetoric has been boiled down and disseminated. It happens every year, and it's enormously frustrating. To counter this trend, I've been trying to think about how feminism can more productively engage with the notion of balance. This has initiated in me a period of reflection about what feminism is and what it's for, and how it can give a better account of itself, without re-inscribing the unequal power relationships present across every other level of capitalist society.

This reflection, as it often is, is stimulated and driven by my reading of black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, whose compassionate and fiercely responsible feminism is more relevant today than it has ever been. Writing in 1981, Lorde writes:

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of colour remains chained.

Lorde's vision of feminism is not one of personal empowerment, but of collective liberation. It is a feminism of mutual responsibility, of duty and of care. Imagine the generosity of spirit and the moral courage present in those words: to recognise and account for the particularities of oppression; to want even the white feminists who discount and invisibilise her to be free from all that besets them. To want this freedom for all women, irrespective of whether they call themselves "feminist". In the face of indifference, in the face of hostility, to keep working for a future that benefits us all, not just one specific group. And this notion is so simple, yet it's radical and provocative even now. Scratch that. Especially now.

Over the last decade identity politics has rendered feminism's discursive spaces increasingly polarised and contentious. Black feminism, white feminism, queer feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, fat feminism, working-class feminism. What we do well is articulate for our own, attest to the particular oppressions with which we struggle, and argue with passion and intelligence for their importance within wider conversations surrounding women's rights.

What we have become less adept at is recognising our affinities with other forms or modes of feminism; less adept at building a network of affective solidarities with other feminists across the myriad borders of age, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. There's a problem with perception here: feminism is touted as a discourse or a dogma, and not a tool, not a practice, not a militant methodology. As long as "feminist" is seen as something you are and not something you do, it will continue to be tied to essentialist ideas about identity. We will continue to say to each other "my feminism is right, yours is wrong", or worse, "you are not deserving of feminism".

Enough of this. Imagine instead, what if these feminisms were approaches or methods of engagement? Alternative routes into the same problem, chipping away at different facets of the same edifice until pressure builds, the cracks appear, the monolith falls? Sometimes we get things wrong. Sometimes we get things wrong. We forget each other. We forget the world, and assume our own little enclave is the default position." Listen and learn, adapt and evolve. This is hard. I forget sometimes too. Others, I don't particularly want to remember. I lack Lorde's courage. But I bite my tongue. I bite my tongue because the idea that we are not free until we are all free is not just a rhetorical flourish, it's not just a metaphor for some obscure emotional condition. While one woman is in chains the deep structural inequalities that beset us all survive. We have failed, the enemy stands, it has just shifted its weight, donned a new disguise.

Unless we are working together we will not, literally cannot be free. And this is where I am with "balance", and the notion of representation: that to achieve those things in the world, feminism must first achieve them within itself, acknowledging and celebrating difference, while working toward one common goal. In the boardroom, in the classroom, in the living-room, on the halting site, on the picket line, the bread line, the street. In the bedroom, on the stage, on protests and in playgroups. In the

self and in the other. Together. As one.

I hope the poems collected here in honour of IWWD 2019 reflect this vision. They speak to the particularity and diversity of female experience. There's anger here, and joy. They're lyrical, observant, subtle and declarative by turns. They perform in their various ways the work of testimony. Some are explicitly political, others are intimate documents of consciousness; all are diligently crafted.

It has long been my feeling that beauty is also a form of protest; that care, attention and artistry are also methods of resistance. To be heard, to hear each other, to acknowledge ourselves as makers, and account for ourselves in a spirit of creative community. That's a radical beginning.

March 2019

Jane Burn

So, I Grabbed Ahold of My Own Cunt

Better that than under the thumb of the wrong man.
The one that shits a brick cos your hemline's above the knee,
the one who sights a level with your breasts.
Come, you upskirters,
 gropers,
 fiddlers.
Roll up, roll up to where we're stuck,
behind our desk, our till, our bar, our counter top, our stall.
Come,
with moisture on your smacking lips, rub keen palms
on greasy fabric thighs.
Bless us and our pursefuls of pin money, shackled
to your trouser pocket rummaging for change,
your come-to-bed conversation, leaning that bit over,
catch
a sneaky treat of tit, a clue of cleft. *Here*, you say,
as we kneel to stack a shelf. *While you're down there, pet.*
Look how we break the day around our babies,
bite our tongues
or get the boot.
Look how the bags-for-life have swung
their weighted lacerations on our skin.
Watch us
check behind before we bend, sense you fix the open target,
thrust with the intrusion of your eyes.
Look at the glass ceiling, how we drown beneath it,
ice over a pond.
How you fear the witch that bleeds five days
and doesn't die,
how we'll only mutter on about *down below*, ask for time off
when our kids are ill. How we'll only cry.

Look how my hand closes a fist, opens like a rose.
Look how we stop going out cos we're sick
of midnight coercion whining up our legs, sniffing out the hole,
the pissed-up booze fumes tongued along our necks.
Listen to your songs — your *I know you want it*,
your justification of *blurred lines*.

I do not want the feel of you inside of me
and so I grabbed ahold of my own cunt
to save you a job,
to save me having to run.

[Lyrics taken from 'Blurred Lines' sung by Robin Thicke].

The Tale is Already Between our Legs

With thanks to Margaret Atwood

Her daughter is clocking my tattooed arm — she looks young.
See? Says her mother. *Common.* As if I'm not there.
She is teaching her kid that I am beneath her — teaching her
to sift through women she does not know. To make assumptions.

Another one makes me a cautionary tale — *this is where
you'll end up, if you don't pull your socks up at school.*
She catches my face. *No offence.* I could press extra hard
on their boxes of eggs, put fingernails into the skin of their veg

but that would just help them think they are right —
that we are no better than we deserve to be. Women, dividing
themselves up — portions of better-than, worse-thans,
have or have nots. Diamonds No. 1 does not answer my *hello.*

Just plonks her bags somewhere near my head, waits to be served.
Flourishes her card. Does not say thanks. I could go sour,
begin to hate each gem-daubed, blow-dried one
but Diamonds No. 2 is sweet, wilts against her demanding kin,

asks me, *are they all like this?* When I give her change, she grasps
my hand. We are all a prisoner of something — already hung
from the walls of our own lives. The woman from the posh car
with the bichon in her lap — I saw her fella's rage. I could not see

her sunglassed eyes. The woman with knuckles so rheumy
I had to help her open her purse. The one with the flared dress,
swings like an opening bud. Every day here is a premonition.
They are fingering oranges — forming orderly queues

Joanne Key

*“There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.
I Don’t Know Why She Swallowed a Fly...”*

I do. The trick is to start small
and work your way up. All my life

I’ve seen women forced
to stomach terrible things,

go trudging through their lives,
black-eyed and swollen, lungs

full of woofs and whistles, horrors
piling up inside. As a girl, I learnt

a woman could swallow anything
and keep on going even though

she was bloated with widows and crows.
Women full of horses were bridled.

Broken. I saw them lying on old sofas
in smoky front rooms, furring over

and climbing the walls, soaked
in their own sweat and urine.

Women like my gran visited them,
to wash and hush, sprinkle talc

like ant powder over abdomens
covered in purple webs, the darkness

that was spreading up their legs
from their ankles. Five years after she died

she came back to visit me, sat by my side,
cooing and soothing as they forced me to swallow

the gastroscope, so it could snake its way
through me, searching for all the terrible things.

Our Lady of Malaise

Forgive my knots and maladies,
the litany of bad days.

And praise the sheepdog mind
that twitches awake
at two a.m. to round up
stray words into a pen.

Bless the woman who understands
the cascade of events,
the language of pain:
every knife attack,
shark bite
and crashing wave.

Give thanks for the one
who understands the canyon
of fatigue, its sheer drop
and tumbling rocks.

And bless the brain
like a phone that can't hold its charge.

The calls that can't be made.
And when another winter
of the soul brings me again
to the shrine at Tether's End,
I know I am not alone
for thou art with me, there,
waiting at the window
in a dirty nightshirt, so tired
you could cry, haloed
in a streetlamp's gold,
watching over the lost women
struggling home through the snow,
and those who walk in circles below.

Monster

Midnight, the woman strips and steps out
of herself. That's when she kicks off her hooves,
all the time looking at you in utter disgust.

You blush because you disappoint her.
She hates your baby face, the scars,
your clumsy attempts at camouflage.

A curse on anything more child than wild,
more girl than bird. She puts her teeth in
the drawer with the fingernails and hair.

All the strips she tore off you are stuffed
in there, dried into fistfuls of pink ribbons.
Manicuring dirty claws, she spends hours

trying to file away stains, softening scales.
You lay out her fur, careful to watch your step.
No one walks all over her. Her head goes

in the hat box with the black veil,
antlers placed safely on the dressing table.
When you grow up these heirlooms

will be passed on to you, useful as tools,
weapons, stands for your jewelry —
all your dark charms and little hearts,

somewhere to hang the locket
full of lovers crumbled to dust.

Hannah Lowe

A Girl Like You

The last place you'd expect
to find yourself trapped in a toilet stall
with a boy you've only just met,
his frame blocking the door,
his eyes gleaming with intent,
and who, you've realised, isn't gay,
is a gay club in Clapham North
where every Saturday the dance floor
teems with men in tight denims
and white T shirts dancing
in a mesh of rainbow light
and always the same mermaid
drag queen smoking at the bar
and while the bass pulses
through the sticky sparkly walls,
he asks again what a pretty girl
like you wants with all these gays,
and your friends, your gentle friends
are clinking shots of goldschlager
in a corner booth, and singing,
you can almost hear them,
it's raining men, hallelujah

[First published in *The Rialto*].

Milked

When Christine speaks of Milton, blind, composing
his poem by night, and in the morning, waiting
for a scribe to 'milk' his words, I think of the week
I left you darling — you were six months old —
to fly to Kuala Lumpa, my breasts engorged
for fourteen airborne hours, Simon waiting
at the gate, an hour's drive to his penthouse flat,
then finally, the guest room, a breast pump, relief.

Except the motorised suck is nothing like
a baby's skilful mouth, more like a message
to the breast that it should keep on making milk,
a charge the left one heard far louder than
the right, long days and nights of leak and thud
and quietening the nipples' dripping tap
with cubes of ice and sanitary pads.

Next door, Si had a local girl, three decades
younger and who, at his age, could refuse
the nimble body of a teenager?
Those evenings, while I siphoned in the darkness
and poured away my milk, they were naked
at the mirror — a blade, cocaine and chemical smoke.

That girl was territorial and scared
of me, and in my head, I told her, look,
my left breast is a hedge fund manager
with a pricey wife and kids at Charterhouse
whose epic fraud will soon be found; my right breast

is a train driver who hasn't slept in days
speeding down the track toward a chancy bend.
It was dawn when I came back, and climbed the stairs
to find you sleeping in our bed, your bottle

on the pillows, drained, your dad's exhausted face.
We had rats and climbing damp, and in my case,
six thousand pounds. It wasn't what you think.

I sat, took off my shirt, my soaking bra —
held you to my chest to make you drink.

[First published in *Poetry Review*].

Deborah Alma

Glass Bangles

Auntie Rafia buys me glass bangles, at the Bhorī Bazaar
which stretches into the heat haze on both sides
of the Raja Ghazanfar Ali Road —
and she will not let me wear red, because *Debbie*,
these are for married women,

*and she says don't wear too many silver bangles
they will sound like the clanging of pots and pans
and bangles should slip along the arm
with a sound like a pretty woman's laugh
gentle on the man's ear, and he will know
from the walking music you make how you will
be as a wife.*

I have never seen anything so beautiful, these caves of treasure
in the Bhorī Bazaar, one after another, stalls high to the ceiling
with colour, and the men who crawl over the stacks of bangles
of glass, smooth as snakes, careful not to break them
to search out the colours, saffron, pink, orange
to pass them down to me, white girl, tourist.

*You are a good girl, I can see, not like the others
from the West. You are good girl and wear headscarf,
shlawar chemise; the men on the stalls grin, pass
me stacks of glittering glass bangles, so that I can be beautiful
for one man one day, when I am married.*

Auntie loves to haggle, although they are cheap as chips,
we move away, seducing the men with our money
so that the price comes down and down
and go back to the stall where we started and part with the rupees.
And then they are tinkling in paper bags,
like the laugh of a pretty girl wrapped in paper

and we are happy back to the car but unseen,
in the crush, almost like a magic trick it is so swift,
a hand pushes hard up between my legs and hard
and rough against the bone, and another hand
squeezes my breast beneath my rupatta,
my respectful, hide my shape scarf
and pinches and twists hard, and I hear *randi* and *ghora*

and I don't want to ask my lovely Auntie
what those words mean.

Tortoiseshell

I spent the three days of Christmas,
the boys with their dad,
in an over-warm office, poised,
rehearsing my script, ready to answer the phone,
to reassure animal lovers, with time on their hands,
and concerns and complaints of that festive ad,
the one with the tortoise, slowly ridiculous,
creeping forwards with a *diet-coke* can stuck to the shell.

I had a crib-sheet to follow, about the glue they used,
about the tortoise's well-being and the hours
it worked with that weight on its back; and how it felt
to be carrying a load like that.
No-one called.

Angela Topping

The Bastards

They tried to stop me by saying I was too young and ignorant
They tried to stop me with you're too old
They tried to stop me by saying I was at that age
They tried to stop me by giving me too much homework
They tried to stop me because I was doing it all wrong
They tried to stop me by asking me to make all the beds
They tried to stop me by saying people like me couldn't
They tried to stop me by letting me then stopping me
They tried to stop me by hanging me upside down by my toes
They tried to stop me by making me watch Disney films until I was sick
They tried to stop me by forcing me outside and saying I didn't live there now
They tried to stop me by giving me dolly mixtures and Smarties
They tried to stop me by changing my name
They tried to stop me by locking me out of the library
They tried to stop me by pretending to show me how
They tried to stop me with go on then show us how it's done
They tried to stop me by unravelling my knitting and giving the yarn to Oxfam
They tried to stop me by exorcising the house
They tried to stop me by giving me praise for doing what they wanted
They tried to stop me by tracing a finger on my mantelpiece and showing
me the dirt
They tried to stop me by sending me to the shop on a message
They tried to stop me by going la la la when I talked
They tried to stop me by burying me in a pit and saying I was a bear

They tried to stop me until they ran out of ideas and held a meeting
They tried to stop me by dropping me down the agenda
but only half way down so I would know my place
They tried to stop me by binding me with silver, driving a stake through
my heart

[First published in *The Fat Damsel*].

Rye St Anthony Summer School 1971

Books, pencils, even stones, crashed in
through the high window of the practice room,
stung my hands as I grappled with Chopin.
They'd giggle and run away, their footsteps
pattering though polished corridors.
Where are they now, those girls
who shattered my afternoon solace?

No-one mentioned it, not a flicker,
though they commented *don't you sweep well*.
I skivvied while they skived.
They were destined for higher things,
but chose to spend summer pretending work
at boarding school, not home with distant parents,
no local friends to bitch with.

I stuck it out a week, then handed in my notice.
*When headmistress said I've never heard of anyone
being prejudiced against southerners*
I told her these precious little madams
had hounded, belittled and excluded me.
Her eyes went wide when I told her she,
in all her tweedy arrogance, had let it happen.
Why don't you teach them some manners?
I hope I said, before leaving to catch my train
back Up North to A levels, university,
my hard-won future, while she gaped after me.

Catherine Ayres

The truth

All these years of patience —
what's left of me is frightened-bold.

My tongue grows fat,
the old words wither in their skins.

Translations of silence
are imprecise:

There are houses made of eggshells.
There are kingdoms of blinks in closed rooms.

The women who would leave are tired.
The women who would leave paint their smiles just right.

This is the truth.

You can't have weeping in a poem

Sometimes on a Friday I work late,
padding the corridor like a forgotten queen,
the classrooms ragged and empty,
my filthy kingdom laid to waste.
How beautiful, at the photocopier,
to feel us breathe in sync,
worksheets placed cruciform,
a movement so small
the fancy lights go out,
and suddenly the sky, knitted pink.

Sometime when I leave work
late on a Friday night —
the school a hollow behind me,
birdsong echoing at the moon —
my car looks so small
in the streetlight's glare
it makes me think of radar —
those tiny blips that crawl through space,
or lichen, faint and luminous,
circling stone —
and I'm too tired,
too tired to cry.

Joelle Taylor

Songs My Enemy Taught Me (Extract)

(i)

silence was a song my enemy taught me.

(ii)

the bed is cold, and my teeth are abandoned buildings
and somewhere there is the smell of something burning
a book. a flag. a letter.

In my room at the top of the seaside hotel
there is a single bed with a white sheet.
I cannot think of anything to write on it.
The bed is a slowly developing photograph:

Here's us around the dinner table
we are smiling like carved meat;
no one notices that the daughter is eating herself.

Here's you walking home from school
your shadow walks behind you as if ashamed
even the trees whisper about you
you have embarrassed the wind.

Here's him. And him. And him.
A family portrait. Successful. Double folding their uniforms and ironing
their smiles,

catching children delivered from the conveyor belt of their wives' wombs
and holding them up to the bare light bulb to bless.

It's okay. They are boys.

Here are the stairs

and here, the long corridor you are afraid to walk along
perhaps it is your

o

(iii)

my womb is a war zone after everything is taken.

after the soldiers have left

spitting into the palms of their hands,

after the shelves have been emptied and only sell nothing,

after the nothing gathers in great mountains at the sides of the streets,

after the streets are running with hungry ghosts,

after women's skins are slung from washing lines,

after children write their names in the dust that was once their fathers

I carry the war in my womb.

Perhaps this is what happened:

someone said my hymen was a door behind which rebels were making plans

and they kicked it in paced the room and filled their pockets with valuables

my mother's wedding ring. my first tooth. a bright blue hair bobble. your

address. this.

They wanted to know where I was hidden. I am the corner of the room.

I am a crime scene

an invaded land an oil rich country.
between nations.

I will be divided equally

(iv)

12 years old. There are small bodies washed up on the shores of my eyes.
When my photograph is taken another girl's face appears instead of mine.

(v)

There are men seated quietly at municipal Formica desks at the neck of my womb.

*You do not look like your face they say please state the purpose of your visit
Did you pack these bags yourself?*

My sandbag hips.

My barbed wire hill.

Many will die defending it,

others will drown in the sediment of a trench whose walls are always caving in.

My cunt is a bomb crater the villagers gather around the edge of and peer into. Sometimes smoke rises from deep within. These are my ghosts. These are messages in a lost language. Capture them in jars. Display them on suburban mantelpieces. In memes. On t-shirts. Smile. Women are crucified on hashtags across the dark hills.

(vi)

when you are impregnated by war you give birth to bullets. Name them.
Show them his scent.

The palm of my small right hand is a creased map to safety. I am stopped at the border. I cannot remember my name in your language.

My skin is a white flag. I am waving it now. I am holding my skin above my head.

Stop shooting. Stop shooting. Stop shouting. War is an unexploded kiss, buried. The battle ground is the bedroom in which two people stand in opposing trenches behind sandbag pillows saying I Love You wrong. That's not how you say it. *This is how you say it.*

My skin is partitioned.

This bit is yours.

Parts of my body speak different languages;
after the war I was colonised.

Use my blood to power your generators
dig deep in me for your gemstones
harvest my hair and eyelashes, these
drips of words on my chin.

And you:

you I give my womb to.

Feed it well. Walk it when needed.

Listen at night to its curling song.

(vii)

the girl whose eyes are shallow graves beneath suburban patios goes
to school and rows of heavy wooden lidded desks are filled with the
smiling dead. When the world ended nobody noticed. The sun has
eaten itself. Skeleton birds mutter bone songs.

Her mother and father tell jokes about her
everybody laughs the girl whose eyes are fox holes laughs the teacher
laughs children gathered like litter around the stairwell laugh the
social worker laughs. the policeman man laughs. the doctor laughs the
psychiatrist giggles
the world ends.

(viii)

I remember how silence was a choir.
there's you in the kitchen, vibrato.
there's you at the back of the class, soprano.
there's you walking home, tenor;
your solo silences are everywhere.

(ix)

For Christmas I give my mother an uncomfortable truth.
She wears it when I visit.

[Extract of poem published in collection, *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* (Out-Spoken Press, 2017)].

poetry reading

(trauma: the opera)

and for you, my darling/ my high priest of pious pornography/ poetry
pimp/ you may fuck my Soho-pink sacred heart// I want to write a book
in which I live/ a story where the girl gets the girl/ and the girl is herself/
a novel where I return/ to find a six year old child opening a bedroom
door/ and I shotgun, *don't do that/* stop all that opera/ there is still so
much to learn/ but how do I write/ that if *war is God's way of teaching
Americans geography'* then maybe this 'this'/ this oh god/ o-god/ is
God's way of teaching woman history/ how do I ask her to lift the skin/
organise the dust/ pin back the night/ excavate/ glue// I know that/
if you press your ear against my shell/ you will hear Bangkok/ my Koh

¹ Ambrose Bierce

San Road/ or the itch of Moss Side pavements/ the call of corner boys/
slouching, with bees in their mouths/ tonight you will hear reindeer
over Rotherham/ children/ my mother's funeral laugh/ you will hear
black women/ teaching/ scratching chalk outlines on blackboard skin/
unpicking acronyms by candlelight/ my shell sings the sirens of Mount
Sinjara/ my song seduces war/ listen/ can you hear a child ticking/ the
slow-dance of bones beside Phnom Penn brothels/ my dropped vase/
kintsugi cunt;/ paint all the scars in Poundshop glitter, girl// are all
women/ inside other women?// & how do I write/ that you are there
too/ pretty dust girl/ curled deep in your cave of remarkable horror/
inside yourself/ uroboros/ smiling a no/ putting your headphones on/
staring into your hands/ taking off your fists// every time you/ open
your mouth/ a white man jumps out/ and eats you// if *war is God's way
of teaching Americans geography*¹/ then maybe rape is God's way of
teaching women/ Woman// how do I write that/ there is a grave at the
grave meeting of my legs/ & no one goes there after dark/ except with
nets to catch all these beautiful ghosts/ pinning them to novels/ pages
plucked/ vajazzled/ and while we are at it/ how should I write that/ I
had all your ghost babies. They live together at the edge of the woods/
and don't write home anymore.

thank you for listening. lay a wreath where the two roads pleat.
photocopy my photograph. return to me once a year. tell them a story.

make me live.

Lisa Matthews

Aviary can't take your call right now

Aviary sets the spoon on the counter. Outside the sprinklers putter, the dog tied and close to dying dreams of chasing one more cat under a parked-up Roadster. The feeling starts deep in the roots of her teeth as the water arcs and makes rainbows. It's all so damn pretty.

Aviary gets tetchy when there's an unexpected beep. In a slice of shade, she talks the talk into the melted walkie-talkie. Everyone is listening somewhere; the whole world is primed and piqued. *Don't leave plastic objects in the glovebox* is the message she will intone today.

Aviary tests herself on the edge of the linoleum. The black and white squares, squared. A man with an up-and-over garage door scoops bargeflies from his pool. Sallow light, low watt bulbs buried. Light like low-fat cheese in plastic bags. Keeping it all down gets harder every day.

Aviary leaves her door open. It's better that way. In a way, it's always better when your door is open. Otherwise you can miss the point and the point can miss you; like splinters of planetary objects flying at very high velocities through space. And space is on the head of a pin in her hem today.

Aviary used to cry. She used to miss someone. She used to write a name with her finger on the table top. Not in the flour, she had none. Not in dust, because the house was always clean. Not in the night, because that didn't really figure in the schedule then. And names, like curtains, fade.

Aviary wants you to know she may be some time in her return, and that no one is immune from the effects of too much heat. Aviary wants you to know something it took her a long time to figure. It is the world. Aviary can't take calls right now, but you can leave a message, or phone another time.

Aviary folds up her face. The chair is a shadow, the window a series of intersecting lines. *The telephone did not ring. There was no note.* There are see-through doors, a waiting room, a row of empty seats. And it feels right somehow, because there is no ending; only the burden and the back that bears it.

The bowl

As if she'd been riding side saddle and her body could not quite shake the ridiculous posture now she was back at home, she leant on the right-hand arm of the high-backed chair. Each day is a slow drag to the butcher's, the baker's; those candlestick takers running up back lanes in the dead of night, snuffing out flames with persistent fingers; *we can see you, we can hear you* they snide, as they insinuate themselves between coalhouse and back gate. She remembers the panic on the radio, the rush to the registrar; no one told her about the bargains she'd have to make, the blind eyes she'd have to fake, wincing as she adjusts the dial. How she considers the stain blooming across the cornice as he seethes away, night after night, on top of her. There were times when she flew out of the door and across the city, past the river to where no one else would ever have to squat over a bowl of bleach on the scullery floor. What sort of man brings that home, what sort of man stays after that? The shame of it all falling across the front of the house like the shadow from the barrage. At least she had the children first, because they wouldn't happen now. Not after this. She wipes the bowl, leans it against the taps, he folds the paper on the table and winds his watch.

Nadia Drews

Fingered

He put two fingers up
Nicotine tipped
A little prick
Snickering
Balls barely dropped
Hawking up snot to spit cockiness
Chock full of spunk
Tickling mid air
Teasing the pleasure from his waiting mates
Taking the piss, fake masturbating
Grinning a tongue-flicking grin
Ear to ear
Stretched clear to the side
Like knicker elastic, leg lifted leering wide-eyed
His mates hissing

'You lie'
He smeared a skinny pubic-wisped top lip
And sniffed in
Grimacing shit eating smile wiped
Pigeon chested with pride. He sneers
'See it stinks,
She must be rotten inside.
Like something you'd hook Sunday on the side

Of Pennington Flash with your dad
Fish that has long since died
Gutted
Lusty titters
Guffed oohs and phwoars
Become disgusted, twisted, bitter

'Hanging...tramp'
He grabbed his dick
Flicking his wrist, dismissive wanking
Licked his lips
Pretended to gag
The verdict from the lads
'Ewww... you are sick for fingering it'

The girls whispered
'Carol Donnington's a lying bitch
Her tits were the only reason he went with her
He's fit. Have you seen her nails, all bit
They're fake those tips
And he lives in The Limes
He went with that girl kitty
Gets on my wick
I saw them from the bus loads of times
Holding hands like husband and wife
I think he even bought her a ring
Silver, solid not sterling
It's which finger, that's the thing
How you know

Her dad's rich
I'm not being a bitch but a lad like him though
That's the kind he'd go for, the kind he'd get
She's in the top set
Buffed to a shine, filed to points, whitened
Uptight though. She's right stuck up
Toffee nose
She's always got new clothes from the posh shops

The way she smells like...I dunno...Roses
You can tell how well off they are
Better than Carol Donnington by far

His dad drives a sports car. They go abroad. They can afford it.
Cream carpet in the bog, a *Dulux* dog
Gravel on the drive, a brass knocker on the door
I know 'cos me dad laid their floor
They have a bathroom with a separate lav
A lean to. You know like you can have
Carol Partington's mum's a cleaner
I mean
I bet he's been up her
That's why he's keen
As if she's his girlfriend. In her dreams'

In Class 3B Carol Donnington tossed it off
Flicked the market varnished V's
They could believe what they liked
She wouldn't tell tales
Noticed a chip where she'd ate the acrylic
Welled-up, started to skrike
Then thought better of it
Tore it in her teeth then spit
Wincing scratching the surface on her lip
Remembered jagged edges
Ripped open petals on flowers on bushes
Torn with thorns
A brass knocker on a door.

Julie Hogg

Driftwood Detroit

A city is being sedated
Jesus Christ where are you now!
Listen, for God's sake, to the almost incidental
silver-tongued debates, polished up by cheap liquored
words, marinated for zero hours in all the habitual permanence of a
hotel room, calling it a

town, calling it a town, for God's sake,
not quite meeting byzantine, undisclosed criteria for
numerous reasons, making metallurgy a cyclical, self-deprecating
struggle in authentic better nature and Sunday best pride, keeping an
infant Hercules, juvenile. God I've tried, I've really tried to contort to
hard and brittle, tarred in

over-sized molten alloy footprints,
watching the core of our Constantine College's
foundations quiver and crack, Jesus Christ, I'm an
inshore seagull flying over the tracks from a driftwood
Detroit and you call me a Fishwife! But this is my voice and this,
this is how I cry

Materie

for Bridget Foley

*'A soft rain was falling,
the temperature had dropped
several degrees.*

*The wind picked up
and was whistling through
the still bare trees.'*

Who would have done this other than you?
Eternal girl from Monasteraden,
joie de vivre across the street, beach, lough,
Arimathea; a water-fresh portent,
singing small, lie low and laying her out,

mauve pall in their parlour, plump cradles
her chin, a relief in speciously resting,
flutes of breeze replace her breathing,
whipping the nets, plugging the silence
with a filling sensation; her amaranth dress,

fingers placed perfectly over her chest,
a siren sounds ritualistically; at four,
feathermen roll here in red dust from the ore;
there's a quickening moon and I'm writing
this in Cricklewood, but you know that.

[quote in italics from *Glory Days* by Marilynne Rudick (Mills & Boon).]

Wendy Pratt

Tampon

I

First to the fight,
small mouse, compact
as a kimono, lozenge
of freedom. A bullet packed within
a body, wound dressing, deliverer
from evil. Throwaway thing, toilet blocker
seaside surprise, stinker, saviour.

Slipper-inner, rip-chord,
parachute, rag for your rag-bag,
stopper-upper, launched
from your pod like a bomb,
coming back swollen and bloated,
a wounded warrior, a freedom fighter.

II

Firstly, disappointment. Where
are the Dalmatians, the roller boots,
the pony tail of sleek, blonde hair
the skin tight body suit?

I expect something to emerge from me
other than blood. I expect a neatness to my
menstruation, not this shameful seep,
the blush each time I sneeze, the clenched thighs.

First time, hovering, one foot
on the bath's white lip. The diagram
is torsoless, a line drawing, a poor man's cunt.

I struggle. I get it wrong, somehow I can't align
my body to its shape. My vagina rejects it.

My body smears its rage in red, across the school nurse's seat.

The Lemon Trees

My dance is a slick of oil;
is the back-ridge
of a waiting crocodile,
is a too-stoned-stagger,
smoking hash
in the corner,
my dance is a mill pond
and the club is the wheel,
and the room is being annihilated.
My dance is white skin,
mouth open,
my dance is this minute only,
nineteen-ninety-two, slipped
into my brother and sister's
heavy metal obsession.
My dance makes the rules bend.
I dance and dance my dance
and go home spinning.
What a beautiful name
for a shithole club.

Jane Commane

On being asked to imagine the Brontë Sisters in the modern day

And so Charlotte hits London in a blizzard of haberdashery,
billboards, talk shows, a pretty litter of noise in her wake.

Book-signings become flashmobs in Oxford Street,
C-listers scramble for a moment in her orbit.

Emily stays home attempting a sequel gothic novella
with TV rights, a departure never to be complete whilst

holding the fort against paparazzi scenting a whiff of 'tragic'
who riffle the bin liners and doorstep the servants.

Anne takes quietly to rehab in vacation Scarboro' sun
And is pictured, reclining in chic retro beachwear,

all the while under heavy sunglasses, refusing to comment
on rumours of all-not-well back at the humble origins.

Bitch

Always just within reach, it is the desk-drawer revolver
or the switch that is flicked when a woman says No
and means No and knows her own mind
and makes herself inconveniently clear;

it is the cocksure roar of boy used to his own way,
one more of the ones we warn each other about,
whose reputations we pass around like classroom
secrets, names itching from girl-hand to woman-hand,

the ones who just love women, who say their wives
really don't mind, the ones who wonder, aloud,
and publicly, what hitch qualifies you to claim
this space for your small fierce self,

the ones who will scrape back their chair, stand up
in the kitsch restaurant, tongue catching on the latch
of that single syllable, the alarmed door he shoulders
open becoming the exit she will depart through.

[Previously published in *#MeToo Anthology*, edited by Deborah Alma and published by Fair Acre Press].

Pauline Swards

My grandmothers

were one liners
two word-ers
non speaking parts
tip-toeing trays
into dining rooms
rising before dawn
to riddle ashes
walking home
in too tight boots
on high days
and holidays
bleeding into rags
in secret closets.
My grandmothers
were stitchers
daisy chain and purl
they were
'only women's work'
unwritten poems
stories told
as mere gossip.
They were young once
blushy and bosomy
discovered and undone.

My grandmothers
brewed bitter remedies
read headlines
and heartiness
remembered a time
before bunions
and arthritic handshakes
left recipes instead of diaries
went to their graves
with gold rings
still gleaming
in soft ear lobes
their secrets bagged
in white cotton shrouds.

When I met mine...

An entire childhood becomes a marble
rolled behind a sofa
I reach across a desk for a pen
and break a conversation about eyes
held in a fixed gaze and shining.

I think of cats but this is about
Birth Mothers
*We met in the car-park at Golden Valley
we couldn't stop looking at each other.*
The second woman says
I wore a velvet jump suit when I met mine for the first time.

I hone in on the story intrusive as a florist styling a petal
I hate the feel of velvet the first woman says
and the talk turns to textures
and the sound a chair makes when it scrapes across the floor

Some things are just too skinless to talk about
on a Wednesday afternoon when the phones
are waiting to be answered.

Ivydean

Who will tribute these women?
Trapped in the aspic of the seventies

while punk rock rages outside
and Thatcher waits ghoulishly in the wings

trapped in the locked ward
where iron beds line up in Victorian bays

on concrete and marble floors
and window restricters hold in stale air

They toe the largactil shuffle
as student nurses wash their hair

with cheap strawberry shampoo
share stories as water drains into the sink

Who will tribute these women,
I no longer have their real names

Rosemary for remembrance
third eye drawn on her forehead
in lipstick and kohl

Maureen with the silk kimono
who stabbed her husband as he was sleeping
how else to slay the beast
who beat her head against the wall

and Judy Blue Eyes
Survivor of two hundred and six sessions
of Electro-Convulsive Therapy?

Amy Acre

every girl knows

i was never more than at fifteen. sick and lovely. see the men jump out the street to check their shadow. see my high rise skirt, glass tights, double parked eyeliner, apocryphal name, smell of monthly embarrassment, suede platforms, scapegoat thighs, dandruff and blackheads, porn lips, skin lipstick, yid nose, cheat bra, cheap heart. men were sick cave puppies, new teeth all over catching sun, rumbling like cars. prepping the school gates or milling asda whistle wolves clawing for cookies they would read my tshirt. where you from and how old do you think and how about a fuckage penetrating my lopsided ego faith of the worst kind. see the men fall out the sky to kiss rumour. and my best friend was more. unequivocally pretty. i would stand next to her and liquify, a reflect. she get free clothes and steak dinner, pocket money, jacuzzi hotel room with businessman. manga face curve child method actor before the abortion. worshipping her slaves, a confusion. summer camp eves were a tally of kisses. ugly me with six but only for telling. i slutted as a macguffin, closing the narrative of last year: fourteen. see the man with kind face and chub reading storybooks to me and brother. see his hand placing under dark the wax and wane of his fingers. see my atomic. see my roadkill. see my throb tick sunburn aerobic vomit soft breezing through the house wave like a giant whale i am in the throat of crest of all downhill best days of your life enjoy it and stop crying look it's top of the pops and kat slater. i was never more than when i was nothing. i was never i never did all shhhh and no. i was a pen from melting. objectivity teething on gobstopper lust i couldn't give away but i gave it. wet every day like a spaniel's nose. catching flies on the nightbus, pedalo lake, tube purgatory, blockbusters, park

bench, trocadero, mcdonald's, bridge belly, cherry tree,
corner shop, rope swing, climbing frame all ironic joy but
only wanted or worthless, i and the rest colouring ourselves in
sticky paint and promise, chewing chat, boys in their tshirts
and genes bubbling destiny and if love wasn't boy flavour you
just kept quiet love who said anyway who said love no i only.
if your mouth could sing all the animals out of the forest you
would, wouldn't you. we all method actors pumping puny
cocks for oil waiting for the feelz or feeling daytime soapy
drama but never feeling ourselves. watch out i am so hot i
can't even touch me and days and days of this and not one thing
i would go back for, no not one. did you know if you put
enough posters on your wall you don't need to think, did you
know masturbation is a food group. i am closing on hungry,
peel my upper lip back baby, see how you roll right in.

Sogul Sur

Hologram

I am in my blackest mood, and she
lies on the whiteness of my sheets in her
blackest bra, staring at the air I am supposed
to breathe, except that I cannot breathe.

Her black jeans are as tight as my lungs
I have coughed and fought all my sable life
My visions of her have become holographic bars behind which
I am trapped.

Like every melancholic captive, I love my dungeon
Like every claustrophobic patient, I loathe it
at times, I crave escape, but when she turns her pensive
head towards me, the darkness of her eyes hit mine, I

collapse to my knees, pulverised by her silver thunder.
Upon being touched by her flame fingers, and her tongues of fire,
I explode. She celebrates my combustion by collecting my ashes
from her cool ceramic floor, warming them in her powerful grip

before sniffing me away. Later on, in a sunny concert hall,
she will lie to her envious friends, saying it was just cocaine.
I know I am her drug and it's what I have wanted to become
since I was a child.

Jackie Hagan

NOT a dissertation on how shit your life is. For everyone who has filled one of those forms

Please fill in the following in blue or black ink, red lipstick, mauve crayon, pink glitter or don't.

Question 1)

Please write down the address of the place you felt the safest, the furthest from harm,
where you can breath, where you can be yourself, use your imagination if needs be, if your imagination has broken, or become stained by life, this is not your fault, you can use mine, mine wants you to be happy

Question 2)

How would you like to be contacted?

Please tick all that apply.

With respect

with due care and attention to your individual circumstances,

softly

gently

with acessible, concise words

in a way you understand

without a brown letter

with warning

what font do you prefer,

we're sorry

Question 3)

Are you

a) awesome

b) awesome wonky

c) wonky with strains of awesomeness

Question 4)

What was good about today?

Question 5)

What 5 things should we not presume about you?

Question 6)

Please draw your grandmothers' smile in the box below

Question 7)

What sweets did you like as a child?

Question 8)

What are 5 things you can do.

Question 9)

Who has loved you.

Question 10)

What have you overcome? In the least patronising way — well done, it's not always easy.

Question 11) How would the world be different if you were in charge?

Every February

In here, everything's broken:
the activity cupboard's broken,
the kettle's broken,
this felt tip is fucked,
and I don't know what these are for anyway (Jeni - i
show them my hands here)
just keep banging your head against the wall we know that works.

Come on in, it's like a holiday from life,
the view from the dayroom of men pacing and holding it in,
until they don't,
and women in crazy woman coats with no hope and sick from trying
and we smoke a lot
and every day at nine and twelve and five we have food,
and we smoke a lot.

Come on in, you're just in time
Beryl's kicking off and screaming all that stuff we all already know from
the last time she kicked off,
with more arms and legs and hair and the nurse's face and blood
and later, she'll come sedated, tailed tucked, shamed
that we all know what we all know,
what we all know anyway.

Come on in, it's like an Enid Blyton boarding school
and all the girls are grown up and instead of Matron
we've got Elaine the nurse who's overworked
and going grey from empathy
and no time to care.
And Lucy the young nurse on whom it's just dawning
that this system doesn't work.

And once a week we have wards rounds
it's all straighteners and bobbles
and Beth thinks she might have a chance to go home,
and Erica's dying to see her kids.

And we wait, and wait, and wait
until the Lord our Saviour - the psychiatrist
is ready to look at us through his peripheral vision
with his surprising lack in interpersonal skills
considering he's chosen to work with people,
and psyches.

You see some psychiatrists need to learn one sentence
when someone tells you something horrific that they've been through
which they will cos you ask them again and again,
just say this:

"I'm really sorry you went through that".

Clare Shaw

Flood as revenge

May it be night. Give her no light.
100% chance of rain.

May nobody tell her what's coming.
May she be all on her own.

May day follow night, relentless.
Make it rain so she cannot see air.

Make it pour, and never stop roaring.
Make it rise, one-by-one, up the stairs.

May nobody hear her or help her.
Make the current unbearably strong.

May the places she loves all go under.
May nowhere be left to run.

Let her know what it's like to go under.
May it stink. May it not wash her clean.

~

Make it take her - and nobody find her.
Let it take her, please. Make her be gone.

May it be night. Give her no light.
100% chance of rain.
May nobody tell her what's coming.
Make it fall, and never stop falling.
May she be on her own.

May all of her work come to nothing.
May she not have insurance. A plan.
Make it inch-by-inch cover her garden.
Make her watch
as it comes through the door

and nothing she does now can stop it.
Give her no signal, no power.
May day follow night, relentless.
Make it rain
so she cannot see sky.

Make it roar, and never stop roaring.
Make it rise, one-by-one,
up the stairs.
Let nobody hear her or help her.
May all of her roads be blocked. .

May the landscape rise up against her.
May the places she loves all go under.
May nowhere be left to run.
Make it stink.
Make it not wash her clean.

Make it deep.
Make the deep current strong.
May it take her, and nobody find her.
Make it take her. Please.
Make her gone.

Cordelia

My father chose blindness.
I was the youngest. Of all of my sisters,
I was the one who would drive him to madness.

Believe me, I did it
though I was his favourite.
I spoke the truth and he would not have it.

I said I would love him no more
and no less than a daughter.
For this, he showed me the door.

We were not reunited.
He did not kneel and ask for forgiveness.
and where was my mother

and where were my sisters
when the rope was pulled tight
round my throat?

I am his daughter
and he was my father.
And I will not lie for him. Never. Never.

Outside Birmingham New Street Station

there's two police officers I could ask for directions
but they're talking to some tourists
who aren't tourists, they have that hollowed-out look -
drugs, no home to speak of.
I'm lost.

Summer has come early, temporarily, we are hungry for it,
already dreading the day it will leave.
There's smell of fumes
and a fight brewing, a woman with dark hair is shouting
and I'm looking for the police and I can't find them
and I can't make sense of the map

and I think of my voice and no-one coming
and the dark-haired woman comes from nowhere
and there's a sound like nothing
but the sound of fist with a body behind it
making impact with another woman's face.
She walks on.

And the traffic restarts and the noise resumes
and the police are nowhere to be seen.

I think of everyone I know who could stand up,
let alone walk, after a punch that hard.
It is impossible not to fall
unless you have been hit like that
over and over. Unless you have learned
not to feel.

A clock will strike thirteen
if it's broken. Pigs will fly.
The sun rises in the west
if you live in another world.

I think of everyone I know who could stand up,
let alone walk, after a punch that hard.
It is impossible not to fall
unless you have been hit like that
over and over. Unless you have learned
not to feel.

A clock will strike thirteen
if it's broken. Pigs will fly.
The sun rises in the west
if you live in another world.

Fran Lock

Enter Judith (Jael, Deborah)

a small town, ours, prolific in injury. dominion,
conspiracy, fait accompli down the local disco.
Please walk with care. there's men round here,
chewing us names like wedges of flavourless gum.
Down country lanes, a supernatural light declines I
n lay-bys, slides off lockets, flannel laps; the bare
shoulders seatbelts bite. where girl is a ticklish
purse of skin, trapped in the pouty depths
of a mirror, syncing her cherry-ripe lips to gloss.
Where girl is a pageant of plastic barrettes;
hair in platinum contrails combing across the cutty
dusk. in our town girls are everywhere, their bony
commonplace in braces, shorts. in terraced houses,
spilling out of cul-de-sacs, homogenised
and obvious; turned into pillars of table salt on
corners outside our price. their hips and rigmarole,
bop and shrug and panda pop. please walk with
care. where men are buttoned into their absolute
names. this one, an aneurism with personal plates,
and a hand on the small of a narrow back, kinked
like the clasp of her cheap brooch. this one in boots
and promises and gab. this one in wheedling reproach.
Or a weary cool girls gravitate towards. another is
sweets and a warm interior out of the rain on the long
way home. it's a tiny town, the width of a cell. us girls
have made escape our one fixed star. contortionists
and inmates, girls. please walk with care. an open door,
a graspy brittle light within. a future you could make
a fist around has made a fist around us all. enter
judith. judy. moi. in plimsolls, gingham, scimitar.
Through the car park up the youthful, eyes front.

An immaculate braid like a velvet rope, blue-black.
My implausibly pink-white mouth is plumping
meagre vowel to sound. i pay my pound and wait,
watch simultaneous monkeys bumping foreheads
on the floor. i don't wait long. he steers me
between gravy smelling curtains, down
a corridor lit by the nicotine stains on
the ceiling, his own luminous teeth. i keep
my hand on the flap of my satchel. inside is
algebra and balisong, tampons and apples,
a highland dirk; is scramasax and gym slip,
a razorblade and a londis bag. in the back room
he butters and fumbles. wine in polystyrene
cups. i spit mine into the cushions. his i ginger
up with mammy's sleepers, watch his eyes
slide into bewitchment, writhe my skinny
pelvis to a popular song. he gasps, he reaches,
fails and drools. i grab my tools. a small town
ours. faces made asymmetric with shame. girls
without names, girls who become their own out
of-focus photos, flail through life lost count of
and forgotten, walled up behind their silence
like medieval nuns. knife like a spring-loaded
butterfly. machete settles on his throat. an awl
to the side of the skull. to crash through
and transfix his temples, to sever his head
and wend back through the streetlamps
blinking on, like a little boy tired of more
innocent games. where the dirt washes off
and dinner awaits. yellow mash heaped up
between two plates.

Notes on the Contributors

Jane Burn's poems have appeared in many magazines including *Strix*, *The Rialto*, *Butcher's Dog* and *Under The Radar* and anthologies from Seren and The Emma Press. Her poems are regularly placed in poetry competitions both national and international. Her pamphlets include *Fat Around the Middle* (Talking Pen, 2015) and *Tongues of Fire* (BLER Press, 2016) and her collections are *nothing more to it than bubbles* (Indigo Dreams, 2016), *This Game of Strangers* (Wyrd Harvest Press, 2017 co-written with Bob Beagrie), *One of These Dead Places* from Culture Matters and *Fleet* from Wyrd Harvest Press. In 2018 three of her poems were nominated for the Forward and Pushcart Prize.

Joanne Key lives in Cheshire. She is completely in love with poetry and short stories and writes every day. Her work has been published in various places both online and in print. She has won prizes in a number of competitions including second prize in both the National Poetry Competition in 2014 and The Charles Causley Competition in 2016. She was Runner-Up in the Prole Poetry Competition in 2017. In 2018 she won the Hippocrates Open Prize. Her poems have also been commended or highly commended in a number of other competitions and she has been previously shortlisted for Mslexia, the Plough, Winchester, the National Poetry Competition and the Bridport Prize. She was the winner of the 2018 Mslexia Short Story Competition.

Hannah Lowe's latest book is *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken 2019).

Deborah Alma teaches part-time at Keele University and works as a writer in the community, especially in schools and with vulnerable groups. She is also Emergency Poet prescribing poetry from her vintage ambulance. She is editor of *Emergency Poet — an anti-stress poetry anthology*, *The Everyday Poet — Poems to live by* (both Michael O'Mara), and *#Me Too — rallying against sexual harassment — a women's poetry anthology* (Fair Acre Press, March 2018). Her pamphlet *True Tales of the Countryside* (The Emma Press in 2015) and her first full collection, *Dirty Laundry*, was published by Nine Arches Press (May 2018). She is

about to open the world's first Poetry Pharmacy from her home town of Bishop's Castle in Shropshire.

Angela Topping is the author of eight full collections four pamphlets of poetry. She is a former Writer-in-Residence at Gladstone's Library. Her work has featured on Poetry Please and has won several national prizes. She blogs at <https://wordpress.com/view/angelatopping.wordpress.com>

Catherine Ayres lives and works in Northumberland. Her debut collection, *Amazon*, was published by Indigo Dreams in 2016.

Joelle Taylor is an award-winning poet, playwright and author currently touring her latest collection *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* across UK, Europe and Australia. She is the founder of the Poetry Society's national youth slams SLAMBassadors, and the host of Out-Spoken.

Lisa Matthews is a prose/experimental poet currently writing up her PhD thesis exploring text blocks and sequentiality; her fourth collection, *Callisto* (Red Squirrel Press), is in its second edition, and you can see a selection of Lisa's work-in-progress at TextBlockCentral (www.textblockcentral.eu).

Nadia Drews was born in San Francisco and brought up in Greater Manchester. A Socialist mother with a suitcase of vinyl recordings by Leadbelly and Howlin' Wolf and a well earned Young Democrats badge led her to revolutionary politics and eventually to sing and write songs about changing the world first in the bedroom and then on stage. The stories of working-class lives in the songs grew into plays and she left Manchester having written and co-produced 'I Love Vinegar Vera (What Becomes of the Brokenhearted)' based on the local legend of a woman that each Lancashire town seemed to have. Having moved closer to family roots in the East End of London in 2011 she began to perform poetry at the Poetry Cafe's Poetry Unplugged night and then to become a Farrago Poetry Slam champion. Through this she has been able to start to find the ranting voice she was unable to achieve in the 80's. Thirty years of repressed rhymes mean she writes long poems... but she reads them fast.

Julie Hogg is published in many literary journals including *Abridged*, *Black Light Engine Room*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Corrugated Wave*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Irisi*, *Poethead*, *Poetry Bus Mag*, *Proletarian Poetry*, *Well Versed* and *Words for the Wild*. Featured in anthologies by Ek Zuban, Litmus, Zoomorphic and Seren, her debut pamphlet, *Majuba Road*, is available from Vane Women Press.

Wendy Pratt is a full time poet, freelance writer, editor and workshop facilitator living on the North Yorkshire coast. Her latest collection, *Gifts the Mole Gave Me*, is available from Valley Press.

Jane Commane was born in Coventry and lives and works in Warwickshire. Her first full-length collection, *Assembly Lines*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2018. Her poetry has featured in anthologies including *The Best British Poetry 2011* (Salt Publishing) and *Lung Jazz: Young British Poets for Oxfam* (Cinnamon) and in magazines including *Anon*, *And Other Poems*, *Bare Fiction*, *Iota*, *Tears in the Fence* and *The North*. In 2016, she was chosen to join Writing West Midlands' Room 204 writer development programme. Jane is editor at Nine Arches Press, co-editor of *Under the Radar* magazine, organiser of the WordPlay poetry series in Coventry, and is co-author (with Jo Bell) of *How to Be a Poet*, a creative writing handbook and blog series. In 2017 she was awarded a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship.

Pauline Swards currently lives in Bristol where she co-hosts a monthly spoken word event called Satellite of Love. She has one collection of poetry, *This is the Band*, published by Hearing Eye in 2018 and is co-editor of *Magma 74* — on the theme of 'Work'.

Amy Acre is a poet, performer and freelance writer from London, and the winner of the 2019 Verve Poetry Competition with *every girl knows*, which has recently been published in the Verve anthology, *Closed Gates or Open Arms*. Her pamphlet, *Where We're Going, We Don't Need Roads* (flipped eye, 2015) was chosen as a PBS Pamphlet Choice and Poetry School Best Book. She runs Bad Betty Press with Jake Wild Hall.

Sogol Sur is the author of *Sorrows of the Sun* (Skyscraper 2017). She has just completed a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London.

Jackie Hagan is a working-class, queer amputee with sytemic sclerosis and bipolar. She is a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellow and a multi award-winning playwright, poet and stand up comedian. She is passionate about accessibility in the widest sense and in us making the world a better place by shrugging off conventions that are just nasty hangovers from the past.

Clare Shaw has three poetry collections from Bloodaxe: *Straight Ahead* (2006), *Head On* (2012) and *Flood* (2018). Often addressing political and personal conflict, her poetry is fuelled by a strong conviction in the transformative and redemptive power of language. Clare is an Associate Fellow with the Royal Literary Fund, and a regular tutor for the Poetry School, the Wordsworth Trust and the Arvon Foundation. She won a Northern Writer's Award 2018, and was a judge for the Ted Hughes Prize 2018.

Fran Lock is in the process of completing a Ph.D at Birkbeck University on the relationship between the epistolary form in contemporary poetry and the use of letters in therapeutic contexts. Her work is concerned with the unlikely strategies for resistance in the lives of working-class women and girls, and exposing the often unspoken and half-hidden histories of working-class lives. She is the author of several poetry collections: *Flatrock* (Little Episodes, 2011), *The Mystic and the Pig Thief* (Salt, 2014), *Dogtooth* (Out Spoken Press, 2017), *Muses and Bruises* (Culture Matters, 2017) and *Ruses and Fuses* (Culture Matters, 2018) in collaboration with artist Steev Burgess.

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Contemporary women's
voices to celebrate
International Working Women's Day
8th March, 2019

Edited by
Jane Burn
and Fran Lock