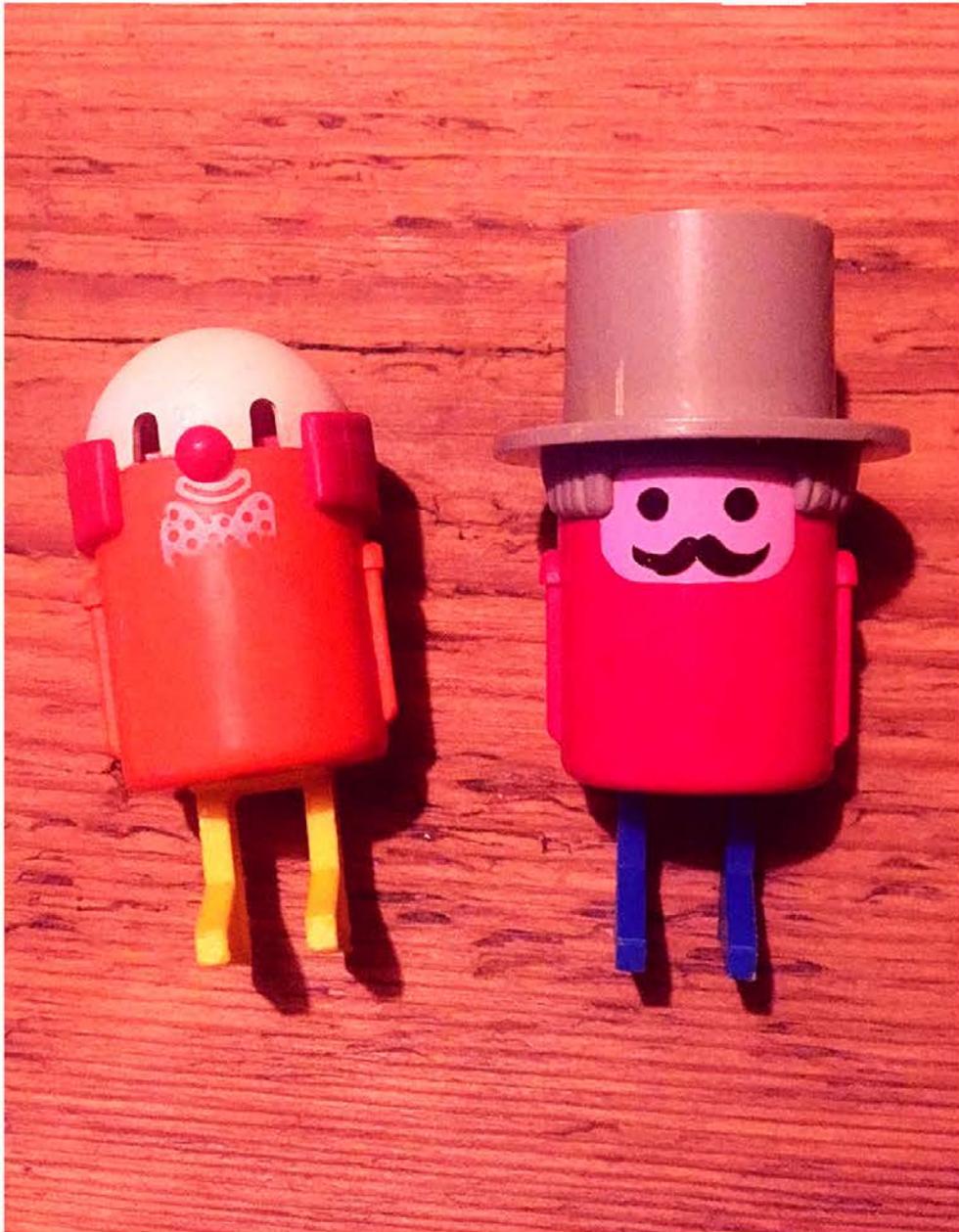


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Clear Poetry

Anthology 2017



Edited by Ben Banyard

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For everyone who's read, shared, submitted and contributed... especially Kymm Coveney

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Editor's preface

Welcome to the last Clear Poetry annual anthology.

I've really enjoyed editing the site over the past three years, but earlier this year I reached a point where I realised it was time to call it a day. The main reason for this is that reading submissions was taking up a lot of my spare time and I decided that I really needed to reclaim some of my evenings and weekends!

Not that editing Clear Poetry hasn't come without its rewards – thousands of people have tuned in to read the (just under) 300 sets of poems I've proudly featured. Thanks to the wonders of Facebook, I'm in daily contact with poets all over the world, whose careers and work I will continue to follow. And it's been lovely to see that poets have mentioned Clear Poetry in their bio in other journals, as well as to spot poems in their books which first appeared on the site.

There can never be too many websites and journals which give poets the opportunity to strut their stuff, so how about setting one up for yourself? A WordPress account costs nothing and the only overhead you'll ever encounter will be your time. Give it a whirl!

I hope you enjoy the poems I've chosen in this anthology. As in previous years, the ebook is free to download, but do please consider either donating to your favourite charity or if money's a bit tight, how about a random act of kindness?

If you'd like to find out about the contributors, or read more of their work, head to <https://clearpoetry.wordpress.com/index> and find them in the list.

Thanks again for reading.

Ben Banyard
Editor, Clear Poetry
Portishead, December 2017

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Ben Banyard lives and writes in Portishead, near Bristol, UK. His poems have appeared in various print and online magazines. His debut pamphlet, *Communing*, was published by Indigo Dreams in 2016 and his first full collection, *We Are All Lucky*, will be published by the same press early in 2018.

Ben's personal blog can be found at <https://benbanyard.wordpress.com>

Westward Ho!

Louisa Campbell

He couldn't build a tree house,
or hoik a spider from the bath.
His job was too boring to remember.
He couldn't even swim.
His words of wisdom were all borrowed
from perky concert hall comedians
and he lost his temper much more
than any dad should.

Not for him, the Padstein hoorays;
he liked a real town,
a take-me-as-I-am town,
a dogs-in-the-lounge-bar town,
a corner-shop-in-your-dressing-gown town.

In soft sandy coves, dumpling hills,
he paddled and played his childhood away.
Munched squidgy pasties,
all-butter scones with the jam on top
of the cream, to shimmer in softened sun.

I come back to Devon
where nobody minds
if you use an exclamation mark –
even when naming a town;
I've just been called m'dear again,
and I realize why he was my hero:
it must have been the Devon in him,
simply the Devon.

How Can I Mourn a Man Still Living?

Gram Joel Davies

At the edge of my ears, a single nerve
rings like a tungsten bulb.

All I have done is mention the orchard
where my dad would take us to buy from a man
who measured sugar into cider flagons.
Through planted rows awash
with a slow syrup of photons, I hear
the apple fallout of the branches.

Only a mention—but my dad looks to have witnessed
a flash over the horizon. A bottled
ferment from his centre rushes
staggered trees.

His face is fruit complete with rot
as the blast goes through but leaves him
standing, as himself, comprised of ash.
When his whimper finally breaks,
a ring of light hides everything.

First published in The Moth (ed. Rebecca O'Connor)

Edith in the Bay Window

Roz Goddard

I spied on Edith as she sat writing letters,
full of softness, like a mother in a fairy tale.
There was no man, apart from a bachelor son
who was no bother. He brought half-decent
windfalls over and I baked an apple pie in return.
It was neighbourliness of a sort, though I never
found out how either of them felt about anything
important. She died suddenly and without knowing
why, I imagine letting myself in as a daughter would,
touching her things, holding vellum to the light.

Oystercatchers

Marc Woodward

Stabbing orange beaks into kelp and wrack
they collect dark weed to cover a child
lying naked where the tide licks the land.

The baby is dead but the birds can't tell,
compelled by a biblical instinct
to hide her from some unseen pursuer.

No one knows the mother's name, how she came,
why she strapped such a cross of pain to herself,
leaving her baby on a cockling sack.

The small corpse, layered with weed, might be just
a washed up jellyfish, a salt bleached stump.
The birds scatter to sand spars and rocks.

Long ago they concealed a different child,
cowering under a coat of seaweed
and the count of time itself was altered.

Black flags emblazoned with white crosses
tip in the cold breeze. The Mussel Pickers,
the Sea Pies, whine like a winded klaxon.

Clapham Junction

Robert Ford

Men with hairy hands are falling
asleep on every blue train picking
its way through the wasps' nest
of intersecting lines. The manger-like
rocking reminds them, sub-consciously,
of being babies, and sends their smug
newspapers, folded with debatable
truths, sliding to the floor from their
crumpled laps. At home, in placid,
unthreatening towns, anxious wives
are fidgeting all alone, while children
wrestle elsewhere in expensive schools,
desperate to become something different.
A gaunt November evening crashes
down outside, but nothing will interrupt
their slumbering. Whole worlds, apparently
managed yet rarely understood, are
slipping by, just beyond their reach.

Vintage

Jennie Farley

Dinner, and he's floundering like a drowning fly.
The wife's parents, and Mr and Mrs Whatsaname
who've just moved in next door.

Impatience slinks around his neck.
He makes a point of glancing at his watch.
The dog jumps up, wags its tail.

From the kitchen he takes the wife's
Saturday-job key from its hook, his mac, torch.
A brisk walk, one turn of the key, and he's in

the midnight shop he calls Rosinaland, where
torchlit spangles twinkle, satins slide and shift.
Rosina awaits him in her scarlet gown,

blonde wig and bowler hat. Off with his mac,
outdoor shoes, trousers, golf jumper, socks.
On with the gown, the wig, the hat.

A slick of Coral Kiss. On with the heels.
The backlit mirror flaunts his catwalk twirl,
a tip of the hat... The dog yawns.

Bummerty
Colin Will

Bummerty's one of those flowers
that always brings out a smile.
Their wee blue and yellow petals
are like faces, with black eyes
and a jammy mouth.
You have to hunker down
really close to see them.
Most of the time you come across
a Swedish carpet of them
in a woodland clearing.
See – you're smiling. Knew you would.

Busker

Miki Byrne

It's a lot of strum for throwaway coins
and the lug of gear on a chilly day.
Fingers stiffen, wind moans
over greasy tiles in a damp subway.
Acoustics govern choice of place
catches sound, keeps him out of the rain.
A smile hangs on his cold face,
in the pluck of songs, lie love and pain.
Washed like a log to a streams bank
a walking river keeps him pinned.
Coins in the hat glisten and clank,
his jeans hems are wetly rimmed.
Cold, hungry, a back that aches,
he pack his guitar in a battered case.
Counts the pittance his songs made,
trudges to crash at a mates place.
One day, there will be a band,
guitar, vocals, bass and drums.
He sits in a pub, beer in hand,
marks time, till that fine day comes.

Better Than Sex

Marissa Glover

When my grandma tells me there is a cake better than sex,
I don't believe her.

So she describes it—
I listen, still not believing,
watching her eyes water at her words,
her hands animate the actions as she lists ingredients.

Better than sex,
she says, licking her lips,
which have dried in the telling.

Looking to the kitchen clock,
she clears her throat with a cough,
and gives me final instructions in staccato
as if reading from the yellowed recipe card
kept in her mother's tin on the stove:

Prep time: 30 minutes
Cook time: 1 hour
Ready in: 1 hour 30 minutes.

I ask, *Who has that kind of time?*

She sighs, *Exactly.*

Veterans at the train station

Jennie E. Owen

Soft invader
arriving through mist and fogged windows,
drizzle framing the platform. I watch

the pensioners now, faces bob
over scarlet uniforms, buttons
as shiny as the business end of a bayonet.

For a moment I think
of reunions, hot tea
scalding good china, tiny
sandwiches soft between
the teeth Stepping
off, I pin on the bloody petals
forgetting sacrifice
forgetting the horror of it all.
Shredded, pulped
lost deep beneath the mud.

Gifts the Mole Gave Me

Wendy Pratt

My own face staring down,
the arc of a horizon
framing my head
like a portrait. The world
staggering backward behind me,
the dog curved to a streak
on the convex mole-eye.

The memory of sleep,
the plush of a velvet heart,
the scraping away, day
after day, enough soil
to glob a mouth shut,
shut a world in,
pick treasures out.

Clocks are Circular

Caitlin Thomson

My grandmother has not forgotten me. My daughter,
a toddler, eats a clementine, does not remember
meeting her great grandmother a year ago, half
a lifetime from now for June.

Jacquie has had 87 years. She can remember every one
only as part of a whole. A past filled with woodstoves,
dogs in from the rain, children back from the mainland, doctor's
examining her chest, a field full of sunflowers, a summer filled
with labor, an endless cycle of planting, of weeding.

Jacquie asks "where are your parents?" once and then again, again.
Every time she hears the repeated words for the first time, maybe,
with her new hearing aids. But she can remember us entering,

remember how much June ate at dinner last night. The lines
that memory makes are not straight, her childhood is there,
my father's childhood, her other children now all parents themselves.
Other things go anyways. Just the other day I forgot

the word for glass, just for a moment, I pressed my hand against
the window as if that would tell me anything.

June just learned the word glass, but she still prefers to call it
window. My grandmother gleams with pride at each word June

offers her, even *no* and *mine*. With Jacquie's memory it is hard to
tell what is gone, and what is always as it was.

She flooded the bathroom twice in two days, now and thirty years ago.
I still bathe June. Jacquie can still bathe herself.

Dear Anne Monroe, Healthcare Assistant
Bryony Littlefair

I'm sorry that my sister will not let you take her blood
for the operation that will save her life.
Sorry for her ratchety stubborn fear,
which will make you late
for your next appointment. Sorry, also,
for the 16k a year, for the commute
from Clapham North to Archway
where the light is piss-yellow
and everyone is angry. Sorry
for the overtime, for the man who asked,
offhand as if in your living room,
where it is you're from *originally*.
Sorry for the ten-minute lunch break,
the gulped-down cheese and lettuce
sandwich. Sorry she is snatching
her arm from your grasp,
and leaping up to leave. Because
the way you kneel in front of her now
is so perfect, how you fix her with
your steady yellowish eyes, fierce
with your short hair and scrubbed bare face
and piercings. You're just the sort of person
who can get away with calling someone
sweetheart, which you do, and my sister
(not a sweetheart, all bones and edges)
blinks like a new-born animal,
slack now from all her jumpy breathing.
Sorry, because it's not even 8.30, Anne,
and you're already magnificent
knowing just how to grip my sister's knee
so her breathing slows and deepens
and she barely feels the needle as it enters

Subtracting Forty-Seven

Danny Earl Simmons

while reading the obituary page, February 23

Mr. Anderson, 93.

Jackson would be 46,
Alisha would be 76.
The grandkids, unborn
now, grown by then,
won't miss my phlegmy
coughing, my spots, wrinkles,
nursing home smell.
Maybe those grandkids will love
their Nana Isha enough
to mow the lawn, trim
the tall trees we planted
just last year. It says
Mr. Anderson had a smile
when they found him.

Mr. Gibbs, 53.

Jackson would be six,
young enough to love
a different Daddy.
Would he run to the window
smiling and watch him walk in
from work? Would Alisha
join him there? What if
they're not smiling?
Son of a bitch!
Mr. Gibbs chose cremation.

Mrs. Morgan, 83.

Church deacon, bridge club,
investment club. In lieu of flowers,
donate to the Humane Society.
Jackson would be 36 –
wife, kids, getting along.
The grands still young enough
to love baking cookies with Alisha.
Mrs. Morgan's husband died
20-years ago.

Mr. Gregg, 63.

My greatest fear.

Jackson would be 16
and hard on Alisha.
Her weeping
would be all for him.
Mr. Gregg ran marathons.

Andrew, 3.
I was wrong
about my greatest fear.

Feeling the cold

Michael Bartholomew-Biggs

Edwardstone, Suffolk, Winter 2012
For Daveron Mulberry

Whatever may be true, I'm sure
enough to tell myself
I'm treading where my forebears used to
trudge across hard fields
towards the sandstone certainty of church
to huddle in a winter congregation,
pinch-faced and jostling like penned cattle.

I guess the chancel's barely changed.
Dust drifts among the sallow smells
of wood and wax. It carries memories
and remnants of their breath
to mix invisibly with mine.

Snow and gospel, visiting again,
disguised as new arrivals,
hide the graveyard's hardened scars
and dress its half-healed wounds.

Sharp cold's a pain that's eased
by stamping feet and fire
and meat and ale and company
when squire and parson sanction them.

Blunt grief must make do
with less substantial consolations:
a father's hasty, muddled blessing
muttered in a husky voice
with a hand laid on the shoulder
of a rough-made coffin.

No Chime

Bethany Rivers

At the end of the decade
you got to keep the house
both cats, the furniture,
the car, the driving skills,
the river-view, the bookshelves,
the rugs, the blankets, the bed,
the stepped-garden, the
enormous copper-beech
with stately wisdom, the cups
with the origin stories, the framed
photos from the festival, all
the god damn photos, but
the one thing I don't miss,
the only sound you left
me with, an empty hall
with a lone grandmother
clock, ticking.

Butcher

Mab Jones

She fell in love with a butcher. Master
of meats. Strimmer of limbs. Arms which dealt death
daily, as a routine. They carried her
'cross the bloody threshold, into a bed
patterned with hearts, frilled at the edge with white
like toque blanche. He was a seasoned lover –
salt-tongued, sweet-chop'd. Killer by day, at night
he cleaved her body to sweetness, covered
her ribs with kisses stronger than pepper.
Hooked on him, her yesses were a given,
assumed, even when the edges of his temper
frayed, his hands serving hell, not the heaven
she had known. But, she stayed. Was never freed.
Cut her teeth on his love, and learned to bleed.

Cul-de-sac
Catherine Ayres

Yes, I am lost.
But on the lawn
by the circle of cars
a slant of dusk
finds the tree.
I watch it flare.
Sometimes there is
just enough light.

My Friend Finch
Scott Edward Anderson

(For Don Paterson, after his "House")

My friend Finch visits me each Tuesday,
When he knows I ought to write a poem,
Telling his stories in an illuminated way.
A Samaritan, he once worked for Home-
Land Security, designed surveillance
Systems to guard against terrorists;
Now, a person of interest, helping freelance
In a way that, by and large, consists
Of violent measures ably performed
By three friends, Mr. Reese, Fusco, and Shaw.
And then there's Root; she's a nut-job, informed
By the system he created, a flaw.
Still, if I'm in danger or threat mortal,
I only hope it's Finch who gets the call.

Black Rat Snake

Kevin Casey

From the pines behind the shower house,
it cut through the campground beach like a drop
of midnight poured back into the lake,
bisecting families that shrieked on their towels,
parting the stillness of that summer day.

Fifteen years old and weary of vacation,
I watched, admiring the panic
this five-foot stockwhip lashed across the sand
before writing its escape on the surface
of the water in a flowing script.

How enviable to fashion chaos
from your presence, to be both dangerous
and beautiful—a single strand of terror,
an onyx fuse that might detonate the day.

Remember

Sumia Jaama

Carpet burns on your tongue.
Remember, how you swallowed back every confession.
Your throat
Now resembles
Scorched hallways.
Show me where she hurt you.
Build a refuge here.
Bleach the memories so you never revisit them.
Furnish your mind with something other than empty.
Pick the scabs so you never forget.
Heal/
Let it teach you.
Cook your wounds by the window.
Let them not mistake this tenderness for a cookout.
Marinate your meat so well she never wakes up.
Wait for sunset to cremate her bones.
Bedsheets of your skin now mingle with the incense of her memory.
Shedding is a prayer I cannot afford to neglect.
Remember, how your voice stopped wearing her name.
I'll rewrite this poem so it feels less like mourning.
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Remember, how your voice stopped wearing her name.
Shedding is a prayer I cannot afford to neglect.
Bedsheets of your skin now mingle with the incense of her memory.
Wait for sunset to cremate her bones.
Marinate your meat so well she never wakes up.
Let them not mistake this tenderness for a cookout.
Cook your wounds by the window.
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Pick the scabs so you never forget.
Furnish your mind with something other than empty.
Bleach the memories so you never revisit them.
Build a refuge here.
Show me where she hurt you.
Scorched hallways
Now resemble
Your throat.
Remember, how you swallowed back every confession.
Carpet burns on your tongue.

Moving

Marina Sofia

Every room a borrowed room.
Every chair tried on for size
Or posture
Stool-crouching
High-backed
Hardwood
And still
Perfection eludes us
Maybe it's time to sit cross-legged on the floor.
The doors and keys changed year on year
Some had welcome mats
Some scrapers to knock off caked mud
You didn't even realise clung to you.
The constants we carried from room to room:
The pearl-leafed teacup
The teapot
A spoon.

Islands

Amy Kinsman

I want to take you to Crosby beach
to watch that cast iron legion disappear
into the Irish sea.
You can't swim there,
the water's colder than the air in February and
you already wear two pairs of trousers
smoking on the fire escape,
hand cupped around your tiny flame
to keep it lit
while your fingers ice down in their bones,
but I think you'd like it there
watching the tide wade in towards them
and us.

You're a warm island boy and
I know this place doesn't feel like home yet.
Spend fifteen minutes in the water
in this season
and it will stop your heart,
twenty a year get caught out like that,
so we became a nation
of sailors instead of swimmers.
We went in search of oceans
clear enough to see the bottom,
climates where the air never cuts your cheeks
and fills the wounds with the cold salt of sleet,
found them
and felt the wanting still.

We belong to these dirt and pebble beaches,
silent, empty, thankless
as their waves heavy with the weight of duty
pull the wreckage onto shore:
Shipping containers full of motorcycles,
half-drowned Spaniards
and all the Gods that strayed from their sacred rivers,
the way all that cocaine washes up
with the steady breath
of the tide just as ceaselessly on yours.

I want to tell you that I'm sorry
but I'm not sure what for –
some old sin
beating steady

as the pulse in my neck
that you kiss and kiss,
this mark of yours rising
against my pale skin.

Let's call this continental drift.

How to Achieve Immortality

Jimmy Pappas

Curry the favor of the gods.

Never feed the gods their own children for supper. They are sensitive about that. You have probably already swallowed yours whole, except, of course, for the one who tricked you with the boulder wrapped in a blanket. He's the one throwing thunder bolts at you and trying to bury you alive. Keep thinking it's not your fault.

Twins are very popular with the gods. If you don't have one, find someone who looks like you. Follow that person like a doppelganger, haunting their days. Leave their nights alone. Others will take care of that. You will need your sleep.

Fall in love with a statue or a painting. The gods have a sick sense of sexuality. Chose one that shows your impeccable taste in art. Make no effort to hump the statue. That may be taking it too far.

The gods find animal sacrifices appealing. Goats are especially popular. You can eat the meat. Leave them the bones and the skin. Prometheus's liver is being eaten by an eagle, as we speak, for sticking his neck out for you, so take advantage of this deal.

The calendar will be rearranged to fit you in somewhere between Pisces and Sagittarius, both of which have lost their usefulness.

If you win the approval of the gods, they will turn you into a constellation. The sky could use another crustacean. Perhaps this time it will be a spiny-tailed lobster. You can click your claws as you scuttle across the Milky Way. The Crab will envy your glory.

Another dawn like this

Mark Connors

for Gill Lambert

My stepson joined me once or twice;
the novelty wore off. I can't recall a single time
I was accompanied by a lover on a morning jaunt like this.
But when a postman's lad meets a baker's daughter
they'll be out there, catching worms.
We're too early for the sun, too impatient
for the dawn to break at Ingleton.
We are too late for the stars.

But look, look what's coming in above the viaduct,
A big black flying thing from Lord of the Rings,
that some would think a heron;
But never has one sported such enormous wings,
and black, black as the night we hardly slept through
in the B & B. We watch it land on a stepping stone
far too small to host it, watch it calming into balance.
It stills itself, begins its one-eyed-peer into the monochrome.

We walk towards the falls, giddy-wired, our stinging eyes
from lack of rest, adjusting to the pre-dawn light,
and there's little else to see but one another.
But day is bleeding in. We hear a rumour of a deer
above the tree line of the river. Nothing transpires
so we impersonate that other early riser, still ourselves,
peer into a landscape of fading silhouettes, waiting
for colour, movement, waiting for something to reveal itself.

The Five Year Sentence

Helen Kay

Different has twin fs.
He pictures them as wasps, special, not loved,
ripe for stinging the weekly spelling test.

Jam stains his word list.
Get Back. He loves Rock n Roll songs with toast.
He's humming *I Feel Fine* in perfect pitch.

Time for departures.
His bag's Nike logo ticks him ready.
Teachers' dice will rattle and shake his day.

Panicked, he packs in
every book, the more for less forgetting.
Zips gag on letters home, unfinished work,

mushy banana.
A reek of sports shirt leaks neglect. The door
spits us out, my long-lashed camel, my float,

my Siamese fear.
In the street he stutters on the kerb's teeth,
crosses. The pavement dribbles him from me.

The day's uphill roll
ends. Mouth stuffed with words, the rucksack blocks
the hall. He curls behind the couch, lips sealed.

The Old House

M. Stone

A new swimming pool swallows the backyard;
the thinned woods are threadbare rags.
Our beloved maple now a phantom limb,
amputated for uninterrupted green lawn.

I ask: "If you could, would you live here again?"
My sister says no, too much has changed.
She pulls away from the curb, but I want to circle

back for one last look. I swear I left a piece
of myself in that unfinished basement,
beneath the grime-caked window.

How To Fly Kites On Wordless Days

Emma Simon

Find a hill, a view to make your lungs ache,
run with time stitched to your heels
unspooling your cloth-yards of hope
until polka dot ribbons stream behind you.
Do all you can to keep these colours airborne.
Be the friend who'll chuck the cross hatch
high into a blue tomorrow,
laugh at the swerve of sky,
and roll out picnic rugs from rain clouds.
Ignore those holding a finger up
to taste the air. Grab the ropes of days
and sail the bright pendant of them, far as you dare,
in spite of pylons. Don't count the starlings
gathering there, like isobars on nearing horizons.

20 Zone

Neil Fulwood

Dead skin sloughs off me, settles
around the gear lever. A layer
of dust coats the dashboard
in slow-motion. The Jones's cat
watches me pass but loses interest.

My hair concentrates on the business
of hippie-length growth. I spout
a beard worthy of a Solzhenitsyn emoji.
The kids waiting at the bus stop
pass exams and have kids of their own.

There's a General Election. A handful
of celebrities die and a few others
are caught doing things they shouldn't.
Donna Tartt publishes a new novel.
A small galaxy winks out of existence.

I reach the end of the estate; indicate left.

All Those Parties

Chrissy Banks

Someone trod smoky bacon crisps
and chocolate cake into the pink nylon carpet
and someone helped themselves
to all the bottles in her father's booze cupboard,
drained them dry and lurched out
into the garden for a piss, threw empties
all over the lawn and into the pond
where the gnomes were poised for fishing.
And someone went upstairs
with someone else's girlfriend
and wrestled with her
all over the gold parental candlewick,
but the boyfriend crashed through the door
and thumped the kid and thumped him again
till his nose bloodied the polycotton easycare sheets
and the girl screamed and ran downstairs
in daisy-patterned knickers and a flood of tears.
And close to midnight someone said 'Who's that?'
and the party girl's parents marched in,
her mother speechless, her father barking,
'God in heaven, what's been happening here?'

Or so someone told me later.
I was stretched out on the chintz three-seater,
for the first time
with that month's crush,
the happiest girl alive

till the door flew wide,
all the lights in the room glared down
and *A Groovy Kind of Love*
scraped to a halt.

Getting it Taped

David Cooke

When I couldn't keep up with the cost of music,
I found a solution: the second-hand
reel-to-reel I picked up at a snip –
a Philips most likely or maybe a Grundig,
some brand I thought would last.

Its clickety counter gave no insight
into the digital age. It couldn't remember
or shuffle a thing. Pre-CD and pre-cassette,
it lacked a remote or any inkling
of the bells and whistles to come.

To make a start you wound the tape
onto the empty spool, then let it
run to take the slack. Engaging
its five sturdy controls
required decisive pressure.

And once you'd hooked it up to the radio,
you only had the space of a song
to change your mind and reset it,
ready for the next one, your dithering clunks
recorded in that seamless stream.

So I gave up on *Pick of the Pops*
and 'Fluff', its pop-picking deejay,
but left it purring quietly to the John Peel show,
his musical taste consistent,
his mumbles, yeah, laid back.

A Whale in my Window

Rose Cook

She swam by my window,
imagine that,
a whale so close.

That was when a humpback
came to the bay on my birthday
and to eat the shoals of silver
that swirled and flew the wintry sea.

When you speed up the song
of a humpback whale,
it sounds like birdsong.

Turn Up the Volume

Emma Lee

She plays the same CD in her car,
matching junctions to specific songs
to monitor her speed to the same daily pace,
the volume always on a prime number.
Everything on her desk has its place.
She watches the soap operas and reads *Glamour*
so she can talk to colleagues.
Her wardrobe is divided between
pencil skirts and blouses, and block colour shifts.
Make-up from a neutral palette.
She holidays at the same hotel,
sunbathes after breakfast, shops in the afternoon.
Meals are weighed and measured
from a restrictive menu.

She turned down his restaurant invite.
But he knows she'll marry him.
All he has to do is make small
adaptions to her routine, offer protection
and become familiar enough to be allowed
to undo the zip on her dress.
He thinks he knows what will be revealed.

But doesn't know about the scar
under her left breast, under her ribs
or what might happen when a mouse roars.

Young Robins

Claire Walker

I thought of them as children.
He perched on his father's shoulder,
while she rested in my hands.
Early morning, their insistent beaks
would tap the window for food,
perched on their window-sill cot.
I learned their tastes, fed sunflower
seeds from my palm.
I watched fluffed feathers grow smooth
against growing bodies.
In the skies that came,
they chose the garden's touch
instead of mine. Paired together
they grew shy, found the hedge-lining,
jumped the border and flew to their own nest,
away from human eyes.

Recollection

Roy Moller

Boy caught on a motorbike
bolted to the metal
of a carousel rendered
static in an instant.
Sunbeams are frozen
in earthbound spiral.
The air is surely
transistorised super pop,
and candyfloss perks
the Burntisland breeze
with the stench of singeing sugar.

The spool will be wrapped,
dropped off at the chemist's shop
basking behind a mortar and pestle.
In a dark wood drawer
date-stamped colour prints
will rest in an envelope,
tucked next to negatives,
waiting for collection
and casual preservation
on paper by means
of adhesive corners
ever more prone to slipping.

Fasting
Jack Little

Between you and me – and God,
an empty gut from dawn 'til dusk
is a brick sinking to the ocean floor.

The smells of tortillas, goat meat frying
on the street corner are stinging petals
on the tendrils of jellyfish... I pray

beyond my immediate space, I try to be reflective,
those less fortunate are murky in my mind and light
barely breaks the water's surface... the ripples of my fast

less a transformative process, more a guilty silence in place
of a loud and greedy swallow.

Homeless

Maurice Devitt

The doors on your street
have become strangers,
the windows no longer smile
and the dogs bark
at your unfamiliar shadow,

as though, when you received
the letter to return the key,
someone secretly erased
the years of carrying messages
from the shop, buggy wheels

finding every crack, and
pretending you had some to spare
when neighbours called
to borrow sugar.

Now you hurry past in the glim
of evening, breath catching
as you hear a child
crying in the empty hall.

Before Entering the Ward

Joanna Nissel

Soap suds to her
forearms, she slides her
palms over the outer
edges of her fists.
Interlacing her fingers
to get into the cracks,
she traces the slight
web of skin between
each knuckle. She runs
her nails under one
another, mining the
space for stray germs.
Last of all she sweeps
the curve of skin
between her forefinger
and thumb in a
semicircle. When she
shakes her hands, she
flicks water droplets
outward like throwing
salt to banish bad
spirits.

landscape

Jim Bennett

after shopping at Tesco's
built between
landscaped landfill hills
we struggle to get all our
plastic shopping bags
card crates of cans
and bottled water
in the car boot space

our shopping spills over
onto vacant seats
into foot wells
we manoeuvre
soft fruit, eggs,
cracker packs
to the top

all the time we
talk about poetry
and what we
leave
for posterity

Voiceover for an advert for modern life

Tom Sastry

Imagine that exile was the thing you were born for.

Imagine being lonely without shame.

Imagine a world of supermarket cafes staffed by brisk women and beautifully meek young men with fractured smiles.

Imagine ready meals that taste of indulgence; imagine all the time you can eat.
Imagine privacy.

Imagine a bus whose passengers don't pretend to have anywhere to go.

Imagine a world of sound, with the texture of silence, free from human noise.

Imagine the library hush of a busy office.

Imagine ceiling tiles.

Imagine trees and cars; cars and trees.

Imagine birds, as if for the first time.

Imagine never coming home. Imagine never having left.

Salt, Pepper, Vinegar, History

Ian McMillan

Steaming chip-shop and the red-hot chips
And me shaking salt, pepper and vinegar
All over them like I'm some kind of weather.

'Do you want history with that?' The woman
Behind the counter asks. Her tattoo is laughing
Or maybe it's just the way steam makes the shop

Shiver in and out of time. 'No thanks' I say,
'I'll eat it here' and she puts away the history,
Beside the pickled eggs on the top shelf.

Passing
Stephen Daniels

You were all top and I all bottom, which should have made it easy
as I shuffled past you. I wondered where
to put my hands and If you
were thinking the same
as your hands
slipped
across
my
thighs
from one
to the other,
the moments in between.
I placed my hands behind me and looked
at you. This unsure smile we shared, as you apologised.

Wild Rocket

William Stephenson

*Strong, shout the letters on the bag.
A dark green leaf with a distinctive
peppery flavour. This pack provides
two servings. But the plastic's pearly
with droplets from your breath. Rocket,
you've lasted ten days in your oxygen tent.*

Your topmost leaves are green. Promising.
But you're black as slurry at the bottom
where leaves and stalks soften into slime.
I open the bag and dare to breathe in,
hoping I can snip your top, eat the shoots
to honour the cadaver that shoves them up.

You reek of brambles and bracken sagging
with damp, the smoker's lung of autumn.
Old mushrooms, wilted ferns. Can I bear
to bin you? Definitely. *Try Me Love Me,*
wheedles your pack, moist and shrunken,
as appealing as a second-hand condom.

I shake you into an old margarine tub
to join a lemon scrofulous with penicillin,
an apple wrinkled as a goblin's scrotum.
Bitter leaf, you are compost to me now.
Watch me unscrew the lid on the garden bin,
deciding where to dump you among the worms.

Leaving
Millicent Stott

Crushing a smooth, ripened peach,
bird song ripples like anger and delight in the early hours.
Sparks escaping a roaring fire,
vulnerability and power –
flowers left abandoned on a grave,
guilt lies unkempt, a nose bleeding into a sink.
Electricity, blue skies hazy with pain,
an empty barn, sweet, sharp straw,
chalk on your hands,
fear in your heart.
Travelling, the smell of new carpets
and soft ice cream, melted before it reached your lips.
Hoping,
for pink skies instead of grey.

Gran Reserva

Matthew Stewart

I dozed in his cellar. He pulled me out
at a dinner once, and waited for her
while his taut fingers smudged my dusty neck.
He couldn't bear to keep me after that.

You saved me from the local merchant's shelf.
A whole decanterful of crispy air,
and I was born for this: a pair of mouths
to roll me across their tongues and share me.

How to Be Your Father

Ali Jones

Comment on the speed of others
and suggest that it's never necessary, until you put your own foot down
Develop a liking for tweed, wear checks and herringbone together for contrast
Realise that boiled sweets aid the concentration, while driving or attempting the cryptic
crossword, always aim to complete it in less than ten minutes
Know the names and ways of garden birds and what to feed them, be the first to hear the
Bittern booming when you visit waterlands at dawn
Play regular oracle games with your keys, divine them frequently in unexpected places
Covet a special tin, keep treats in it and hide it badly in plain sight from seeking eyes of
others
Study the Telegraph with the attitude of a Guardian reader
Realise you are a socialist, and what little you can achieve might mean the world to
someone, so do it with grace
Pour by the finger, a golden liquid, the peatier the better, savour it on your breath, because
you know smoking is bad for you
Enjoy the RSC and Spaghetti Westerns in equal measure
Read every night until you fall asleep, never stop learning, always leave the lights on

My Case

Carole Bromley

Its abandoned doppelganger
goes round and round on the carousel
long after the crowds have left.
I curse myself for not tying on
a sparkly Christmas ribbon,
for not painting a Union Jack on it
like we did on our tortoise.

I walk through *Nothing to declare*
and out into bright sun, in my hand
Ted Hughes, The Unauthorised Life,
a banana, crisp new euros in a purse
I never use, and sunglasses.
I hail a taxi, feeling oddly weightless,
my knickers, my six ironed T shirts gone.

Another Cup of Water

Susan L. Leary

It is an incredible fiction made by the feet of fathers
who walk unendingly into night's open
mouth. From the sink to the bed and back to the sink,
for their daughters: they have agreed to another
cup of water.

The floorboards quiet and creak.

The tap rushes on and off.

Every sound is sacred—so girls, who cannot bear
to fall asleep,

can plot and scheme with the changing silhouettes of men.

The stars: they too are sacred—playful they are,
pretending to be peeved.

The stars: they make girls feel close to God.

Never, then, can there be *a last one*: because one day,
we will all be going to bed.

So daughters remind themselves to drink slow,
to drink into the morning,

to make the water last—and they do:

because a good father understands what his daughter
doesn't know she means
when she says that, still, she is thirsty.

The Sky at Night

Órla Fay

I do not know why we fell in love
and out of love
when the swallows built their nests
and left
when the tide took your name away
when the spiders appeared
and disappeared
when the mountains were clear and beautiful
when the meadows were tall and sweet.

Like a laughing magician the night
pulled away his cloak, our stars and planets.
I pleaded for it all back,
to have those grains of sand again
and knew only the agony of the wound.

And then past storms and moonlight,
eclipses and meteor showers,
purple midnights and teal dawns
the time returns sharply,
glassy or diamond-like,
jagged-shelled and vicious
from a monstrous sea
or a universe we know little of,
except our flesh, our blood
and our connectedness to it.

Five Spice

Annest Gwilym

Outside is not much to see:
pavement studded with fag ends
from the pub next door;
rosettes of chewing gum in bloom.

The daffodil-yellow sign:
Chan's Fish & Chips Chinese Takeaway.
Perfume of five spice, refried fat
and black bean sauce drifts from the open door;

inside, a red and gold money cat waves hello.
Fish swim endless circuits in a bowl,
copper flashes to bring gold,
while a silver Buddha watches.

Silence is punctuated by the hiss of chips frying,
groan of a bus at the stop outside.
He translates my order into calligraphy
while a single damp feather of hair

falls over his forehead in the heat.
Deftly manoeuvres food
from a small white bowl into his mouth
with chopsticks, a snatched meal

handled as precisely as an artist.
Packs my meal for one, smiles,
says 'Thank you, lady.' The steaming
parcel like a warm hand in mine.

Hard Times

Rebecca Villineau

I have fallen
On hard times

There are envelopes
Beneath the lip of my door

Demanding the rent
Now late

There is but a little
Coffee

And no milk
I have fallen on hard times

This love for you
Sweet as lemon

Drop Cooke
Or the radio

Swaying in
The background

Of this picture
Framed and placed

In a slice
Of setting sun

On the occasion of buying a used copy of my own damn book
Janette Schafer

Reasons why you should not Google yourself. Ever.
My book was on Amazon marked,
“Used. Good Condition.”
Arriving media mail, it pleased me
that it was read; dog-eared pages,
name of the most recent owner
in pristine cursive, bright pink highlighter.
The first owner was Susan—I had signed
that it was lovely to meet her and her husband.
Louis, the second owner with
the beautiful signature, I am glad
my words were with you for this long while,
and pained that you decided to let them go.

Another Dollar Store

Gus Peterson

The day before
they break ground
I see a man onsite
digging up lupines.
He's done this before,
the way he binds
each ache of dusk
and plum in burlap,
a bruise of beauty
secreted away
in the trunk
of an old Subaru
I'll see parked
the next morning
by a bulldozer.

Cotton Ghosts
Laura Hoffman

we were more loaded
than cotton gins
on that airless
southern night
beside a fire
in a wheelbarrow

he forgot where
I was visiting from
but this time I didn't
even give a shit

off the dirt road
in a thin bed
of pine needles
pale lips twitched
eyes found mine

he staggered off
to vomit in the woods

leaving me empty on my back

pine needles sticking
to my legs
I was still

thinking about cotton

Distant Savannas

Ivy Schweitzer

I write the word *tawny*
trying to evoke highlands
downed with autumn grass
savoring the velvety play of vowels

when the word yawns open and
out rushes — you
the almost ghost that troubles
every poem I write and my hand
warms against the nap of your back
I stroked over and over
on nights of elusive sleep.
You would say *my hair hurts*
meaning, attend to me
true axis of your world,
with all the avowals of motherlove,
heal the hurts little boys should not have.

And I faithfully intoned those ritual words
your tawny back,
as you preened and grew quiet and tiny
even when you overtowered me,
lulled in the stillness
of skin on skin and my authorizing hand
as if birthing you weren't authoring enough
it had to be those syllables
of bronzed communing
and my touch like does
grazing the savanna of our shared awareness
of how the world rends you.

Emerging from the fog of Haldol and charcoal,
chaperoned by the suicide watch,
you whispered hoarsely
my hair hurts.
I had the illusion I knew what to do.

Athanasia

Caroline Am Bergris

That will be me

in a hovercar boot sale
two hundred years hence.

A middle-aged woman
with red curly hair,
smelling of vanilla musk,
setting out her stall
of curios and books.

A girl
with smudged mascara
flicking through a yellowed volume
of Sara Teasdale poems

out of which quietly falls
A4-sized printouts
of Asda online shopping orders.

On the back
are notes for poems
from an untidy fountain pen:

attempted assonances crossed out;
lists of Googled synonyms;
experiments with line
length.

They will be me.

Sneaking out at 4am

Kathy Gee

It is the lark. One wake-up call.
Then more and louder,
rising notes of almost tune.
The sky's invisible and visible,
untraceable and full of sound.

Blackbirds lead the chorus
'leaving, leave you, lovely you'.
The pink horizon sings
'I love you, lovely, love you'.
He pulls the car door shut,

must go back home to where
his father waits in the metal
cold of April's early morning.

Sigourney
Meggie Royer

I am told the scene broke me
in which/the alien/burst through her stomach.
That I grew into myself like a nettle.
The sky deep outside like paint/
the rest of the audience/able to move on.
Unexpected, the way the body runs
without serotonin.
Even when the walls crumble,/br/>the keyholes/gone/or worse.
A few left the theater.
Most stayed.
I saw your face next to mine, lit by shadow,
and said nothing.
Being beneath someone else for too long
is so hard/to explain.

Wren

Anthony Watts

When wren flew
from the carpenter's chisel

she ricocheted

from cover to cover
amongst the flowers

for just so long
as her momentum
lasted.

After Larkin

Melanie Branton

The vast, warm store on the High Street,
pimping overpriced clothes. An overheated house
of mandatory fun, where placards
shriek, "Mix It Up!", "Playful Colours!"
above rails of sour lemons, hard emeralds, thorned roses,
chains, belts, clutches, tights, corsets,
wire cages trimmed with lace, deceitful
whites that you know will renege
to grey within a couple of washes,
where uniforms with clipboards
guard a chilly hall of mirrors.
They tag you with a number, before
hiding you behind a heavy curtain.

But past the columns of structured separates,
past the headless mannequins twisted
into seductive poses, past a line of twill slacks
pressed into knife pleats confronting you,
a flight of airforce blue, a whole flotilla of navies,
sprawl Men's Casuals. Charcoal that glows
into umber, groves of olive, a Sahara
of khaki opens out before you. Airy
boxers flap in the breeze from the fan,
elasticated slippers bunch on a pair of thrusting hips,
Y-fronts, algebraic in their mysteries, enfold
a value you'll never find, an insoluble equation

that warns us we will never know what men are,
or what they do, that they will always lounge
beyond the limits of our striplite section,
loose knit, light jersey leisurewear
printed with cartoon characters.

Office Romance

Julia Webb

He is a desk-jockey and no mistake,
riding the nine to five swivel chair,
each working day a rodeo steer
to be lassoed and broken.

Here is an escaped afternoon boiling
over into the people-dense street;
here is a lift stuck between floors.

He is hardwired to the keyboard,
all qwerty-fingered.

When you speak he turns his blank-screen
face towards your voice. A software crash
rolls across the space between you –
everything in an instant frozen.

You are a blip he can't quite register, a rogue cursor.

After lunch he saddles up again,
and as he gallops past you in the corridor
there's a momentary flicker.

You find his emails in the spam filter later,
press delete without reading.

Horsey Seals

Mat Riches

We disembark, desperate to air out lungs,
get ourselves halfway down this track.
Seagulls offer a pencil line shrug
on the skyline, following the last trawlers back.

The seals are writing hieroglyphics
on the cold sea-stretched canvas
spread out along Horsey beach;
a constantly moving language.

It's hard to tell between rock,
driftwood and new parents.
We are kept at a distance
to protect the innocents.

Each being shelters the other
like a Russian doll.
I pull you closer;
spell it out in full.

This is why we can't have nice things *Charlotte Ansell*

It took just weeks to demolish the Bohemia,
the silhouetted ladies writhing around poles
now buried beneath rubble, consigned to the dirt

but I wonder if they will rise in the night
in their heels to dance on the bonnets of cars;
or if they too accepted defeat.

Outside Ferham School a woman boasts
“*They won't get me to work, can't mek me*”.
Aspirations are lost between Steel St, Holmes Lock

as generations draw dole cheques,
forget what it is to bring home a wage
as shame settles and stains like coal dust.

Resignation has been ingrained; trodden
into pavements like the puce in the covered market
loo floors that never quite looks clean,

even the river's going nowhere, silted up
with *Farm Foods* plastic bags, *Tennents*
cans and shopping trolleys; burdens

it can't shake off, while outside The Bridge
the lads are going twos on fags,
waiting for jobs that don't exist.

Midnight, Tesco's car park. A woman
pulls her leopard skin thong down
carcassed thighs, squats between cars for a piss.

Oh they can pretty it up, planting wild
flowers outside the Minster but the playgrounds
are held together with rust, graffiti,

broken glass, bus stops smashed in,
litter bins burnt to shrivelled black
stumps, a generation that believes

this is all they deserve, smash up even
what in the first place wasn't much
with no idea how to get what they want by honest means,

austerity just means more of the same.
At a pub across town, in the ladies loo,
a scrawl on a broken window asserts:

this is why we can't have nice things

I disappear down Love Lane

Laura McKee

here lies love of olden
here lies love of then
here lies our love
if it had ever been

in the long grass
beaded with rain
in a small black and white bird
she opens her throat

calls out three times
in a nettle's stubble kisses
in a gurgle over a boulder
in a pink ball still caught up

in the river's wind
in the cars' moan close behind

no goodbyes

Mandy Macdonald

that year, in the spring,
it rained for weeks –
you remember it, surely –

that was the year we saw the last of him

surely you remember
his coming in, ramshackle, slicking
rain on the sittingroom rug

climbing the stairs, silently
before anyone could say a word –
you remember, you looked at me,
eyebrow quirked, as though
I might have a clue

then, front door clicking
quiet
brief crescendo of rainwhoosh, sharply
snicked into silence

and we never saw him again

never knew how
he could have come downstairs and past us
without our catching a rustle of him

don't you remember?

Jenny
Maria Taylor

There was always a Jenny.
Jenny no.1 wore a roll-neck top,
beige and ribbed. She was so quiet
she's only a face now, unlike
Jenny no.2 who was cuckoo
and told fibs. Her one truth
was that she was adopted
and was moving to Llanelli
which sounded made-up.
Next was Jenny Monaghan,
the talented one who knew
how to Lindy Hop and did so
on Blue Peter. Then Jenny no.4
who didn't actually exist.
A boy called me Jenny,
at a bus stop in Leamington Spa.
I was so taken aback,
I nodded and rode home
with a different name.

From *Instructions for Making Me*, HappenStance, 2016

DIY

David Coldwell

Fact one – Morning

The early bird catches the worm.

Listening to birdsong but seeing
only magpies as passers-by watch mist
disappear to sky.

Fact two – Rust

Hinges made from an unacceptable alloy.

Knowing that rust is alive and making
a guess as to how long paint will survive
before red oxide makes another appearance.

Fact three – Letter

An unopened letter left on the dresser.

My name in black on white with no capitalisation
or sender information. The haves and have-nots of household maintenance
and a history of human kind in lists.

Fact four – Sun

The birds are now quiet.

The sun has moved to where I'm standing and the day has become
too hot to paint over rust. The colour, anyway,
I would suggest, would only be temporary.

I Have Never Dissected a Creature

Kitty Coles

I have never peeled the seven veils of skin
away, sliced through flesh like a gourd or squash,
to reach the musculature, the organ-bags.

You, to gain wisdom, have opened –
or watched open – the human head,
observed its contents, probed its softnesses.

You have seen the heart unarmoured,
dense and tuberous, a grapey purple,
and memorised its functionality.

You know the circuits that make beings move,
the chemicals whose glitches make me sick.
You understand it all. You never found

a soul in anybody, which must prove
no soul exists – or else, that each soul moved
when you came after it and shrank from you.

After the Earthquake

Donna Pucciani

Around the table, we drink coffee
in small cups, peel oranges
with little knives. Crumbs of cake
dot the blue cotton tablecloth
like chunks of houses all over Umbria
felled in the streets.

Just when the pieces of our lives
fall into place, another tremolo
sets us afire, breaks us into pieces
where our fears multiply.
The lights flicker. Television falters.
I look up at the wooden beams,
imagine them crushing us,
leaving the house roofless
where concrete used to be.

But for now, we are safe and whole.
The sheep still in the valley, the bees
swarming in the apiary on the hill
as though nothing has happened,
nothing at all.

One A.M. Concerto, Saturday

Mark J. Mitchell

A dying man floats up into your store
on whisky tides. Elgar's cello piece haunts
him, lifts him, propels his one perfect choice.
His wounded breath, staccato as applause,
embraces bottles. Eyes slide from the floor
back to liquids. A thin smile—petulant—
a tenor's—betrays his sandpaper voice.
He coughs to cover your too polite pause
and points. The malt's as old as you. "Let's pour
some." Shrug. "Why not." He pays. You splash. He wants
one last adagio, one final, moist
concert recap. Nightcap. The long dark law
awaits. He seals the flask and drinks. "We're done."
he laughs. Shakes your hand. "It's been a good run."

The tenderest offering
Hélène Demetriades

Morning rises
from the softest bed,
the tenderest of offerings
you can put your arm
or body through

No captain at the helm
to navigate his way,
no boat gliding us,
just a spontaneous
unfolding pouring
as the heart of all things

And silly scarecrows
dew drenched
in their fields
stiffen in rusty futility
at the sparkling
cackle of life

Boxfresh

Rob Smith

'The dress code at Opium Barcelona is one of the strictest in Barcelona especially on weekends. No sport shoes are allowed'

(Barcelona, 17/07/17)

These were quite white once.
Before I learnt to tie my mind in double knots,
tuck it under the tongue can't let it fray
down on your home front
you need me tight
up on my feet again.

Before this suede became
speckled with scorching orange stains
equally sweet and sour takeaway
from nights spent talking, forcing
down the fire of hungry days
trying to love the scales again.
Weighed down from winning
all those almost silver medals,
as empty as yesterdays crumpled foil tray.

Before I earned my three red stripes
stitched on from this tin we're still spilling
trying ourselves for size to a different rhythm
that night. Before every step was
silenced by the swarms, 4am notifications.
Before both these soles were riddled with red dots
bullet holes, burning buckshot translations.
remorse coded messages after the tone stopped,
of your shoestring hanging up on self-appreciation.

We're not quite boxfresh
If that's not good enough
we'll just stagger on to another club.

I love your mud.

Madame Dubois' Confiture

Stella Wulf

A wedge of sun squeezes past the shutters,
drenching the room in an orange glow.
Monsieur Dubois resists the press of his dreams,
throws back the covers, rises
with the levity of proven dough.

He picks for his wife, a petit déjeuner,
plump figs ripened by a fine promise.
Madame Dubois doesn't care for muesli,
coddled eggs, kippers or kedgerees,
she likes to pluck from her husband's tree.

She craves the flesh of his Mirabelles,
devours his juicy Bergerons,
until she's overcome with the yield.
Touched by his tenderness, she preserves
his sweetness to spread over winter's long denials.

When the orchard sleeps under a duvet of snow,
and the brassica beds have lost their allure,
she'll screw the top from a pot of summer,
fall back on the comfort of bread and butter,
nourish their love with her confiture.

The Sickness

Gill Lambert

It gave you an aversion to coffee,
washing powder and new-mown grass,
made you want to hurl your tea
as soon as it went down. You remember
this time of year, because of the sickness.

With each one it was different.
One of them made you crave cheese
(a love you've never lost) another one
expensive orangeade (the cheap stuff
didn't cut it) and they all put you off fruit.

It was the sickness made you realise.
Before blue lines, or ultrasound, one month
in, one month missed. Twice
it was the answer to a prayer, once,
the delivery of a fear you'd tried to ignore.

But they all came anyway, bringing
shit and sick and noise. Turning you
into a different version of yourself.
Each one chipping a bit more off;
adding something, somewhere else.

The Turn
Tom Montag

As if only falling
through the darkness,

falling through August,
towards autumn. The dry

scratch of loneliness,
and evening deepens.

Everything depends on
something. What I need

are these Perseids, these
fading streaks of hope,

this tearing up of sky,
these last *Ahs* and *Oh*s.

Leaving for the Airport
Kathleen Strafford

No windscreen wipers

The car ahead strikes
a cat with a glancing blow
 launching it
 spinning 360 degrees
 and then some
its tail jutting, fur spiking
 blood spraying
 leaving a crimson circle
we watch
 the cat's legs refusing to accept
 its helicopter death
 ready to high-tail it
 across the highway

Strange how shock
will keep your head spinning
 & your motor running
 when all is lost.

that's why I'm leaving you

Field Skittles

Gareth Culshaw

The sun has taken enough light
for the streetlights to pop open.

There is commotion in the field
two men try to gather sheep

like catching marbles on a hill.
One of them does star jumps

but only with his hands. The other
whacks his leg with a flat cap

like he has a hiccup in the muscle
and he wants it to go away.

The sheep scatter, tumble along.
They are evading the metal

trailer that waits like a suitcase
on the last day of a holiday.

I watch the streetlights dink
while the farmer and son

keep the moon at bay
and sheep break like skittles

unsure of the meaning of flock.

Agnes

Belinda Rimmer

Agnes, in her front room
turning up bars on an electric fire,
telly on full – someone screaming blue murder –
as the last light of a winter's afternoon fades.

Agnes, her skin sprouting potato spurs
the size of old threepenny bits.
Gnarled fingers round needles
busy making baby bonnets.

Agnes, in cheerful woollen stockings,
tartan slippers, out in her garden
in search of loose frogs.

Or at her stove stirring blancmange,
rice pudding, plum jam.

Agnes, aged one hundred,
remembering her daughter
who would have been eighty-five
if she'd been allowed to keep her.

in cities at night

Paul Waring

foxes overturn bins of light sleepers
clinically unpick dead bones of take-aways
and sashay away deaf to sirens
that spike through night air

unobstructed you accelerate
through gears of sleep...I reverse
to a window seeking culprits
but only gangs of October wind

loiter on corners below...chase plastic
bags that escape witch-like or hang
impaled on branches....as traffic rests
sharpened sounds of night emerge

a bruised can drums past margins
of parked cars....inside park gates
an owl hoots derision at a whining
passenger jet blinking in blackness

I swell night's underbelly in a crowd
of one....people and things merge
snake hope and doubt....a river
seeking deep and dark recesses

can't stand still....turn off or sleep
and cities at night are clocks
that count time....unlike people
like you and....occasionally I

Ghost

Annie Fisher

She's weighed herself again.
She's six stone three and finds this
satisfactory. Tonight she'll have
two eggs (hardboiled),
one orange and a cup of tea.

Midsummer and she's sitting on
the college lawn, a notepad on her knee.
He's told them to: Enjoy the sun.
Write anything. Come back at four.
But she can't write at all.

The page gapes like an empty plate.
She tries to calculate the calories in birdsong,
the fat and carbohydrate in a flower.
She watches as her shadow on the ground
grows more obese with every passing hour.

In the margins

Steve Xerri

We are used to this falling below notice
when the stories come to be written.

No embellished initials for us, we
are walk-ons in the calendar, wielding
broom or flail or billhook
in fields not ours while the high-born
dressed in cramoisy and fox fur
trot by on caparisoned horses,
heading across the gilded page
for some warm chamber, for their
appointed place in legend.

Our accents are unheard, but we
burst out ink-sketched in margins
alongside dogs with bagpipes, cavorting
monsters, whales and mermen. We
catch the eye – we gurners, we barers
of arses and turners of cartwheels. But
the book knows nothing of our little
smack of grace, inward as bright lining
smuggled inside rough gloves : says nothing
of how we lived – with the sun on loan to us
a few years, a bit of love if we were lucky,
and skin as able as anybody's
to feel the touch of both.

Love Child

Tina Edwards

Father spoke of a time before me when it was you and him
who strolled through the park lay on an old picnic blanket
devoured crab sandwiches washed down with weak tea
like cats piss with sugar he said just the way you liked it

he held your hand at the duck pond as rain filled your sandals
the red ones with yellow flowers you carried in both hands
you laughed ran with the wind arms held high
a wild child while others huddled under umbrellas

it was him who sat on the kitchen floor watched you undress
poured Champagne into whiskey glasses wrote *I Love You*
in pink glitter lipstick on the empty bottle kept the cork
in a wooden box

he kissed you goodnight embraced insatiable hunger
held you tight until shadows took shape on the bedroom wall
and tears stopped falling with the rain when you told him
it was me you truly loved

who held your hand walked with you through the park
paddled with ducks fed them crusts from toast he made you
as you slept late into the mornings holding me close exhausted
snatching dreams he said it was me who tore you both apart

Titan Arum
Stephen Bone

Colossus of Sumatran forests,
who'll have no truck with honey bees, fritillaries;

instead
with a stench of rotted corpse

tempt sexton beetles, flesh flies,
grim connoisseurs of carrion,

into sultry powder rooms.
A hothouse sellout, crowds swarmed

to your once in a blue moon flowering,
on your arrival at Kew.

Frock coated gentlemen turned crimson
as your pleated spathe,

at your raw priapic show,
while whale boned matrons pressed

to their faces fragranced silk,
to mask a surging thrill.

Distance Badge

Daniel Bennett

Swimming. She grows stronger,
more incredible. Head first
into deep water, strokes matched
to the instructor's demands. Water
is never given a chance to seal,
the lane markings distorted
into chains. When she won her last badge
I returned her home through winter dark
before my journey back to the city,
the gravity always pulling at me
in these moments, the distance.
She asked questions, and countered
with opinions about the world
which have the fluid logic of dreams.
The sky and its curve, the moon
and its high longing for the seas.
And when we talked about the stars,
and how long light takes to reach us
both of us experienced the wonder:
that these far-flung spheres
– arranged into a hunter's belt
a lions paw, fish shimmering
in a school – are all oblivious
to the patterns we make for them
and are really so far away.

Burning Old Books

Simon Williams

Fire is Gracie Fields,
homed coal in the grate
as it starts in this tub of a burner.
We clear shelves of biographies,
these houses of biographies,
surplus into damp mornings.

Fire is Marilyn Monroe,
instants in the smoke, crepe skirts,
Bernard of Hollywood in the eyes.
The pages curl, turn blonde leaves brown.
Draft blows up from
near the ground.

Fire is Charlotte Bronte,
when wicker suddenly flames,
old varnish governing the heat. Step back.
Here is the bad of it, lighting words
out in the middle of somewhere,
reassembling ashes.

Fire is Byron,
wood on the brazier and the flames
grasp it, climb on it to propel themselves
into the depleted air.
This affair of heat burns greedy, dies
before all pages are complete.

Misread Signals

Robert Garnham

At night
The lighthouse syncopated flashes she translates
In morse.

Irregular yet beautiful words,
Strange juxtapositions,
Poetic devices and
Postmodern cut-ups
Beamed to her coastal cottage.

Who might be this
Mysterious lighthouse keeper?
This poet of the senses?

Enthralled,
She strikes out across the shale
In a trance-like state,
Those breathtaking words
Spurring her on

Only to find
An automated lighthouse
And a restless cormorant.

The Calf

Cheryl Pearson

(from the longer sequence, "A Selkie's Tale")

Three babies he put into me;
not one of them took. They went out
like small flames I tried to cup
but snuffed to smoke instead. He thought
they were stones to weight my bones
to his house. They never were.

This night, I wrestle the landling creature
from the glove of its mother,
place the slick and intimate slip
on the straw before her. An offering.
She licks and fusses it up to a stumble – a bit
of a thing, all eyes and bewilder.

Imagine my fires, if they had burned.
My two sons. My daughter.
They'd have split the world along its fault,
like the line
between sky and water.

You Know

Ahrend Torrey

You know the way it goes —
you're sitting at work and a coworker comes to you,
or you are at the start of a reception,
or even a party (if you go to parties),

and while sipping a glass of chardonnay, or merlot,
or while drinking a bottle of beer,
a random person starts a conversation
that you seem to enjoy at first,
until they take over the wheel

and veer you right into the wall of a theater,
and start talking about a movie
they think is hilarious, with actors
you can't even pronounce, that they
assume you've watched a thousand times over.

And as we all have,
you stand stuck in the middle of a conversation,
about a movie you've never seen,
that you couldn't care less about —

cramped in a corner like a clueless ape,
you nod and laugh: "Ha ha!" "Yep, yep!" "I know!"

Alchemy

Katerina Neocleous

Time passes but my hand
reaches out to twirl
the wedding ring I used to wear;
as if it's still there.
Its twin is lost at sea,
where the waves lapped
and that fish leapt once.

Anyway, you can sell it –
Three grams of eighteen carat
scrap gold, heavier than the soul;
if you believe the metaphysician
who measured it leaving
a dying man's bed:
If it helps you live, husband.

Man Without A Pullover

Jonathan Humble

He wore his usefulness like a threadbare garment,
an image of time eroded mettle, twenty years' experience outmoded,
rooted outside the woman's door, all action lost,
while overwhelmed, his daughter wept alone.

Time was, on these occasions he would don the knight's armour,
have the skills to see off whatever demons had surfaced,
become the arms and chest in the woolly pullover;
a dad pillow for a sad head.

And though, given the choice, he would be that man again *in an instant*,
on these bitter days, these later days on the outside of the room,
he had no dad's pullover to hand.

Spots unknown
Richie McCaffery

In the Black Bull,
there's a Georgian
steel engraved map
of the British Isles.

Many years of boozy
breath and sweat
have got under the glass
and foxed the paper.

These blotches look
like little ghost islands,
perhaps the places
where pub regulars

who've not been seen
in years have gone.

call box

Paul Burns

in red kiosks
at the corner of a Bloomsbury square
and in the Isle of Barra,
in a Cotswold village, the cold

concrete bases with flattened butts
piss stink and a view onto
another slow twilight
the black receivers wait

each light a yellow signal
to blackness, in starfields
of other boxes, shelters for one
or huddled couples, waiting

the enemy is not recording them.
He is sheltering from a storm of shellfire
somewhere in the future and we
are futureproofed with vanity, past victories

quiet countryside and stolid boxes
our pale lights flickering now
through summer beech trees,
ignored by London traffic, and
the frozen billions of suns

Lead

Finola Scott

The weight of rock
between head and larks.
The hole in the clog
to set drip-water free.
The tease of sparkle
along ebony faults.
The wrench of oxide
from miser stone.
The chill of geology
scraping at skin.
The stench of tallow
crowding the space.
The scramble when short
straw is pulled.
The laughter at bait,
the suck on clay pipe.
The bargains we strike
with bosses, pals and God.

Ark

Matthew Dobson

The Natural History Museum, London

The bison skull behind the glass — as dense as iron
with rusting, pitted horns.
It's an anchor
that stops the museum — this ark
for the dead — drifting off above headlights and rain.

The sperm whale skeletons soar like birds
plucked from the seas; spines quake;
tusks sprout beneath
the stag's skull pinned to the wall:
its antlers spread and twitch like large antennae

tasting the air our bodies haul behind them.
Shark jaws quiver when
our throats walk past —
they're biding their time as the building lurches,
tugs at its anchor. Warm crowds surge on board

and our breath steams up the cabinets of oysters,
fool's gold, butterflies,
and feathered beasts
splayed on a slab of slate. Our ribs,
like restless wings, muscle against our skin

as though we had once learnt to fly but are now
keeping it secret from ourselves.

The Twist

Chris Hemingway

"Ok," he said,
"we could dream of childhood homes.
Till some miserable vicar
bashes on the cell door
with a bible and breakfast.

We could hide from shadows
in misty mansions,
or oddly-magnetised islands.
More haunted than haunting.

I could be a giant statue
buried in the sand .
As you approach
with a horse and loincloth."

"Steady on mate,"
she said,
"I was only asking you for a dance.
It goes like this."

Night Train

Robert Nisbet

Ferried by night, train out of Cardiff, ten.
I wasn't drunk or drugged, just stunned really,
by travel. On the last leg now. I wanted to doze,
close eyes and brain to two hours' racketing traffic.

Football fanatics spouted gladsome sound,
through lamp-lit Wales. Some Cup game, the boys,
Josh and Corky up for it, cracking goals, Jesus.
The ref routinely bastardised. Good game.
Around Port Talbot, the steelworks' fiery red
glistened on the dazzled face of drink.

Half-heard, the girls. Mainly mutterings,
the hims, he saids, threads of the intimate, twisting,
as Swansea briefly shone, to their manager, Jane,
the woman's good name quite vehemently stuffed.
The stream of the conversation glimmered
in night's reflections and the flickering smiles.

The guard was soothing. Just at times I felt
a shiver of exposure, down among the castaways,
and he'd be there, station by station, loud, benign,
Welsh-vowelled, regularity's presence.

And we all slobbered out on to Carmarthen's platform,
blinking in a wavering orange light.
The fans looked dopey now, like little old men.
The girls looked younger though, quite coy.