

An abstract painting with a rich, textured surface. The background is a mix of warm tones like yellow, orange, and pink, with cooler accents of blue and green. Thick, expressive brushstrokes create a sense of movement and depth. There are various shapes and forms, including what looks like a stylized face or figure in the center, and some areas with more defined colors like red and black. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and visual complexity.

UNISLAM
ANTHOLOGY
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UniSlam Anthology 2021

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Foreword

At the Grand Finals of UniSlam 2020, poets cheered for each other's work, sat side by side, laughed together, cried, hugged, danced shamelessly in Birmingham's finest queer drinking establishments. On that night, no one would have thought a year later we would be sat in separate cities, recording poems onto computers, not allowed to gather in person due to an ongoing global pandemic.

So much has changed since that time. The poetry scene has had to adapt, the arts sector continues to fight for survival. Many of us have lost jobs, workplaces and so much more. We mourn those in our community who are no longer with us.

In a year that has felt so desperate and isolating at times, the work of events which bring people together has proven to be more powerful and important than ever and we have seen the power poetry can have in uniting and empowering people across great distances.

How the artists who take part in UniSlam have adapted and supported one another over the last twelve months is testament to the strength of our community and this anthology both celebrates and memorialises that spirit of support, shared experience and the possibility of hopefulness in the most extraordinary of circumstances. These poems take us between cities and across time zones back into each other's pockets. Forward Prize winning poet Danez Smith talks about poems as 'gathering grounds', places we can come together to feast on a feeling, an idea, an experience. And while we may not be able to gather in person this year, this anthology provides a place for us to come together, sit side by side, laugh, cry and dance, shamelessly, again.

Toby Champion, UniSlam Director

Francis-Xavier Mukiibi

Whitehall Street

At the start of Tottenham's regeneration,
this block of flats lives on Whitehall Street. Moss
creeps through its brick lines. It separates the beaten mortar,
and the damp patches of rain. These walls have chipped paint
and soot stains across their surface.

This block is like a weary mother, wrinkles stretching against her concrete.
In this block, our families see beauty beneath her brick lines.
It is here that Tobi and I, kickers still planted on the floor,
find we can see over the railings of jungle-gym balconies

That are woven around the block like coiled dreads. Our bodies
are no longer held forward by his eldest brother
to Tobi's playful screams, Auntie Jo's crinkled laugh,
and to the wind trails that whistle past this high rise
whose tiles are faded as an old Sunday dress.

We look down at the High Road, bathed in panes of marble, tiles of glass.
White tower blocks are being erected like gravestones from a polished earth.
Who can tell you what cemeteries for our lost ends look like?
Our block hears the wind trails passing the ghosts of shattered brick lines
and imagines this would probably be the closest thing.

At what point is it harder to count the gravestones
and easier to count the days that this block draws closer to isolation?
As wrinkles droop against this concrete, and Tobi's screams
and Auntie's laughs no longer pass air within this block's lungs,
this does feel almost inevitable.

There are new voices on Whitehall Street.
This block still feels this silence.

Christian Yeo

Midsummer Common

Two swans roam by Jesus Green.
Two of us stride, boots crunching

across manicured lawns.
The tulips die at year-end,

keen over. Ice is not yet a flat mirror.
'Skeletal,' you say,

pointing to trees atrophied by belonging.
We hold hands and dismember

Kant, freely pinwheel out of red,
exploding into indecision of yellow,

fig leaves of reliance huddled
round mementos of decay.

'Spring comes just after March,'
I think stupidly, willing the branches
into remembering their strength.

Nicole Calogero

Disillusion

МИН СИНЕ ЯРАТАМ МИН СИНЕ ЯРАТТЫМ

To love-strongest. One directional verb,
at least in this case, in this declension:
love conjugated only to the first person.
Linguists are unable to translate these syllables
in second, let alone third, person.

What love is composed of remains
a mystery. I was fooled to believe that
higher authorities appointed me
to uncover and analyse, what secret messages
were encrypted beyond this painting.

Conversations flowing back and forth:
a tennis match characterised by sentences
and anecdotes. The more I got to know
what was labelled *love*, the more the painting
became less ambiguous. A mystery,
a davinci code, getting clearer like the sky at dawn,
with your beauty and quaint personality
which eventually I came to love.

Blindly believing, subduing
the catholic schoolgirl in me. That you loved me back
as much as I loved you. Faith became my shield,
the most important feature of my armor
when everyone mocked the unlikelihood
of tenderness between us.

But people have different ways to show affection,
don't they? Dropping questions
releasing heat waves of tender emotions,
my eyes crying with happiness whenever
you were mentioned, my heart composing symphonies
when I was with you, my hands weaving epics
whenever I thought about you.

All of this turned out to be useless.
Burnt dust. Embracing the disillusion
that your memory is only a brief breeze
through time. Tears torrent, stream one word: longing.

Longing for your smile, longing for your voice,
longing for your wittiness, longing just for you.

I wish I could confess once more
that I love you (min sine Yaratam). How much I miss you
and how much you meant to me.

But that would be in vain. What good would it do?
I already know the answer anyway.
Delusion. Disillusion drifting slowly.
Disillusion haunting those depressed hours before dusk.

Normally, in my poems, I flex my knowledge
of Czech- Stare mesto appropriately
among the most ancient components in the city.
But this time it is more appropriate to rely
on another current, a language as alien to me
as your full absence.

Eu sinto saudade de Você

Chloe Bayliss

Andromeda

for Frazier

Linking us together: a wispy bond
of memories and time,
fashioned into a ribbon of connectivity.

What I feel is mirrored through you.
Words stream from my mind to yours:
a dual breath of synchronicity.

If I close my eyes, I can see your face,
each feature, each part of you memorised,
not a characteristic out of place.

This thing between us, though new,
is the strongest string of my heart,
all for you, only you, always and forever.

From the stars and moon and outer space,
to the distant galaxies.
I love you to Andromeda and back.

Tasha Mapes

32°C

The heat wave is a surprise.
It slumps over the village,
heavily weighted
as asphalt smokes and things
melt. Ice creams and sun lotions
and neighbourhood cats
that lie like puddles of fur.
The park grass is still:
a steady drone of insects
and no breeze.
The monkey bars shine –
past child's fingerprints
seem to have melted away
like everything else, too hot
to touch. Childhood paused in the heat
and sticky drips of sweet cream
from cone to fingers,
pudgy and thin and smooth
and wrinkled.
The background hum
of cars, the whirring of bicycle wheels,
and kids sitting in paddling pools.
Their adults grumble
about the heat,
and hang laundry on the line.

Tyjana Howard

The Scream

A pastel pose: hands clasped tight
around a gaunt face. Wide eyed and pale skinned.
You were walking.

With friends? Strangers?
They went ahead. You screamed alone.
A conflicted sky:

burnt orange and scarlet hues.
Do you wail on nature's behalf?
Or because the sky is bleeding?

You've been stolen twice by thieves
but many times by artists.
They take you from the torment

to give you different faces,
different forms, different purposes.
They always keep the sky.

I guess that's why you keep on screeching.
Can your hands cover the screams of the sky,
or do you overpower them with your own?

The water contorts about you
and your spine echoes its bend.
Hush and trust in the blue chalk,

it holds back the tumultuous reds.
The sky won't spread its embers
if you stop screaming

William Tuffen

Ode to *The Griffin*

I'm the best barman. I like to spin the glasses,
I can do it well. And last night, on the eve of death
I flipped the glasses whenever I took them off the drying rack.
Only the pint glasses, mind – the wine glasses and the gin glasses
and the whisky tumblers don't flip too good. People would watch
and be impressed, they jumped at it like I was some daredevil
driving a motorcycle through fire, over something big and boisterous
like helicopter blades.

Drinks were bought for me and I only drink premium
lagers these days. I won't go back to the 4%. It's the 5s
or above for me; I only charge them for half, mind – I don't take
the piss.

Peroni Paul bought one,
he only drinks Peroni and only by the bottle
unless it's a proper session,
then he might take small sips from a rum and Pepsi.
He exclusively wears silly shirts, they'll have flowers or golfclubs
or little monkeys in tutu's using bananas as phones,
but last night he wore a muted white shirt that gave shape to tedium
like the night meant nothing to him.

I got one off Peyote Sean in his baileys and brandy blended state,
a white bearded man in his mid-40s, unmendably mauled
by decades of dragging his face over porcelain. I read him a poem once
and he asked for another – the man always wants more – I read one, quickly,
it had some rich take on rain that upset him so he left without paying his tab.

Alice insisted I had one,
she was deep in her wine drunkenness
and trust me when I say she can get through a few bottles
before feeling a thing. She was let go by her hotel room comparison company,
so now chips into her redundancy package, looking for a good time.
She spent the night dancing with red wine after red wine, eventually
tripping and spilling a large glass over Peroni Paul.

And meanwhile, I did what I did best. Serving, talking,
joking, flipping – shit I dropped a glass.
And sure, experts will say there's no way
to revert glass to its original state, but when one shatters
you'll be finding shards for weeks after, like sand after a trip to the beach.

People laughed and suddenly I felt very tired.
I peeled off my mask because who gave a shit?

We were dead tomorrow. I am –
but what I am will go by unnoticed, like Danny,
the former everyman of the pub who would clear tables of glasses
for half a pint each time, put out ash trays and pulled through ales
every morning all for the privilege of sitting in the corner booth until closing time.

I took the time to shine his memorial plaque before I left.
He went on the 1st January 2020, alone in some faraway country.
I watched the burial on a phone recording weeks later
because bringing him back became 'unviable'. It did no good.
One day I woke up and he didn't. I think of everyone now
the soft ghosts of The Griffin who, once again, find themselves with nothing.

I am the best barman
with nothing.

Andie Davies

oh god, we're in transition, pray, give me attention

ah jesus hi, a friend a brother, a god a son, ah jesus, it's cold out here in the wind
and the wilderness, but god, is he, this red-wine black-top boy leaning in to me?
I pray to god he'll be a man as far as I can understand the bible tells me so

human in gods image: creation, creator; I'd want him, my lawmaker, to tell me
where to turn to; my master make me yours, and be selfish with our time and
hearts, be as selfish as god, christ, carpenter, book of Mark, genealogy of Luke,
hear this prayer to trace those lines back to Adam and make me humble in awful
wonder

christ, I could kiss him, if he'd bring his lips up close to my eyes, I'd inspect
and run my fingers across his stubbled throat oh my god, touch the holes, hands
and feet, faithless Thomas who had thought he would never receive, let me believe
better than most and expect love from you

christ, it's the day in the middle of the fucking day and, oh jesus, the grip I could
have locked in tongues and spit and heavy chests
oh god, to have and to hold with, and this a breathless, still not in dark, night or
valleys of shadows and death

ah jesus, you'd deny it, but for warmth I'd run a nail over his palms and arms,
scratching the pink away to have the red, demand my attention and search to know
me better than an angel can know the history of man and what we're getting wrong
– if we're lost, be distant, and if we're wrong let's come to misunderstanding
together

oh god oh god, in word in deed, with dripping wet morality we parched people
are panting deer our hearts wandering from spring to clouded spring and casual
to uh christ, sexual thing, to lie in clothes, or not in clothes in bed, or back to back

oh jesus

praise be

he smiles

Sean Colletti

Five lessons from high school

“The next time someone’s teaching, why don’t you get taught?”

- Run-DMC

The eyewash station in chemistry was never used correctly—just to the beat of “Mambo No. 5”.

Brittany got detention in art for doodling Homer Simpson instead of aligning angles towards vanishing points.

Dr. Kent was the first person who insisted on being called doctor but only after someone guessed the length of the hypotenuse wrong.

Someone must have been saying something useful at the front of biology at some point, but you sat behind the girl whose curls floated like noodles in habanero broth.

There were only ten of you in oceanography and, even then, no one thought to ask why.

Sarah Ernestine

Shoulder Pads

When white Easter sandals rubbed blisters into heels and my teeth held wilting honeysuckles, those shoulders carried me.

She always kept them tucked away, covering learned posture and taught muscles with lace collars and beige cable-knit sweaters. Squared–formal. Slumped–eroding.

Her shoulders taught me where to carry my shame, how to fold it into myself like a flightless paper crane, how to take up less surface area in shadowed corners and school lunch tables.

They were an example to carry more than I should – four bags for one overnight trip, or, the intangible duffle bags and tattered Samsonites of ache that I slipped from every soul I've ever blushed. I understand: lightening will be smothering.

Why is it always shoulders? She's got a good head on her shoulders; give 'em the cold shoulder; why are you always looking over your shoulder; call me if you need a shoulder to cry on.

Shoulders are mostly humerus, partly scapula.

There's an electric pain that trails from the base of my neck, a guitar string has snapped and now coils beneath my left shoulder blade. I can't remember how long it's been there. I find my hands kneading it, attempting to unweave the fraying lump one sinew at a time. I keep my shoulders covered, broadening them under vintage plaid blazers – the ones with shoulder pads.

Reiham Amin

I am

I realise one afternoon
when I meet his father who holds a bottle of liquor in his hands,
his mother a bouquet of orchids. My love holds my hand;
I hold his tighter. His father's bottle
slips through fingers.

All eyes on me as I try to introduce myself
[deep breath]*Hi everyone, I'm*

"Black" – his words
shatter the confines of my pride.
A drunken mistake.

The texture of my crown makes his parents take a few steps back,
this skin is a bitter coffee missing its sugar.
My melanin is like a tempered child – one his parents can't handle,
and this skin is a label monster

I learn to find refuge in my skin,

My mother showed me beauty in simplicity,
enchants me with the scarf on her head,
the beauty is a motivator to be just like her,

I become just like her
but my lover's eyes are fixated on me.
He blinks to the rhythm of my heartbeat,
and a voice inside tells me to keep leaving,
leaving,
leaving.

My love tells me my identity is becoming an issue,
scenarios running through his head. He questions his ability to love;
I utter solutions but his voice overpowers,

Woman, don't say a word,
he speaks.

Every tear drop is a hopeless wish.
His silence is a thousand slurs
My silence is too scared.

He's right. I am a woman
but he didn't realise
his voice was the motivational speech
I needed to hear.

This body is a temple embraced through pilgrimage
the silk around my head is a symbol of peace,
my modesty protects me from fixated glares,
This skin is my safeguard from mouths that sip bitterness .

I am a woman.

A god loving,
head covering,
still discovering human being,
strong black,
woman.

Hannah Ledlie

lab report

when the materials were you and me
and wine we'd hypothesise
going back to mine
and be right every time

a taxi was called

my perspective was lost
in the past
passive tense
of lab reports

I thought I could grow affection
in the petri dish of my bedroom
but I sterilised myself
with ethanol and expectation

the results were as predicted

I felt nothing
but correct

the bodies experienced diffusion

I want an experiment
where I'm not numb
to the conclusion

Isobel Dunn-Lowes

Love is Indoctrination

You treat me as though I am prized and sat,
weighty in my material worth,
on an array of red and rich velvet purple cushions.

Inside my mind I long for an escape, for I am suffocated
by your red-hot breath which lacks the oxygen
I need to feel alive. A passion so fiery, so red-hot, so breathless.

Our innate ability to create flames baffles me
for I have known your mind, body and soul for many
many days yet have never felt so stifled.

And yes, I thought I knew what beauty was
but then I gazed into your deep, melting, warm eyes.

Those kind eyes now pierce through to my brain
and strangulate every individual thought I have!

Sharing more of my soul would kill me
so please
let me leave

I want to assassinate our relationship
like you asphyxiate me and you,

you believe, foolishly,
I'll always be your home.

Do you have no higher desire
than to scrape our brains for more
mundane conversation? I do not want
to greet you every
single
morning.

I do not want to see your face
next to mine. I do not want your voice
to echo through my head. I do not want you

or your time.

That irritant splinter that pricks the nail
otherwise shaped like a perfect crescent moon
is you. Please remove yourself
before I rip you away and my blood
ends up on the bathroom floor.

I do not wish for any further adorning
for you are nothing
but dull, and I've never believed it
more than now than when Winston wrote:

Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull.

Pearl Nzewi

Unlearning Fatphobia

Two years ago, someone told me they'd love for me to get back to my *slim nature*. Well, wait till they look at me now. Still thriving, fat and all.

I hated how I looked because I was fat, and people told me
I was meant to be disgusted by fat,

and even though my ancestors may have praised curvy women, I didn't feel like
the same narrative was perpetuated in our day and age. The only fat women I'd seen on TV

had the same *fat to glam* story. These shows told me that I had to be slim to be glamorous
and I had to be slim to get the attention of any boy or girl. It was even rarer to see a fat
black woman.

People bash Lizzo because she's comfortable in her fatness, because she's unapologetically
fat, because she justifies her fatness to no-one: I'm fat, so what?

Growing up, especially in Nigeria, where no one minds their business, I've been shamed into
believing that fat is a sin and every time I ate I'd feel shame like I was somehow not allowed
to eat, and instead meant to delve

into the reserves of my fatness and live off that.
And now that I'm older, and my weight has fluctuated,
I still struggle with allowing myself to eat.

I'm still scared of going to the hospital in case they ask me to weigh myself.
I still struggle with my weight.

I wanted this to be some type of inspiring *love yourself despite the numbers*
type text. It's not. *I AM freaking glamorous*
But it's a *I'm trying to unlearn fatphobia,*
I'm trying to love myself

Because, not despite.
it's a *I'm conscious I'm not giving myself*
the same kind of kindness I would to other people.
I hope you learn to do the same too.

Gem Baskerville

Ode to Fucking or Love or maybe Drugs

Open the clouded window my love,
make space for the world again.
Feel the crisp night air blow away the heady smell
of our fucking and light up a spliff.

I will cup my hands to protect the flame,
if you strike the match.
Your calloused hands are so delicate
where you balance it between your fingers.

We will slide back under the covers, then,
and lie in the wet patch left there.
The city lights are tiny flames too:
see how they wink at us
as if they know,

as if they'll keep this secret
we hold so carefully, that we relight when it goes out,
work our lips and lungs harder
to keep the flame going

and when I breathe out,
my lower lip splits open,
blood wells in that tiny crevice
and it stings so sweetly when it kisses me,
when it comes away red.

Come,

come closer,

breathe into my mouth.
I will whisper into your ear,
tell you how I get higher that way
that the way the smoke no longer burns in my lungs
just makes sense to me,
that being close enough to touch lips,
but choosing not to
simmers in my blood.

I'll tell you that you are day,
sunshine and smooth honey heat

I'll tell you that I am night,
I am an iced tea to swirl yourself into,
I am the ice cube melting on your tongue.

I'll tell you that when you rest rough fingertips against my hip,
run your thumb along the crease where my thigh meets my pelvis and downwards,
how in that moment, everything makes sense.

Maybe, later, when you crush out the end
and flick it into the night or when you fumble
with my underwear, get a chewed off nail
caught in the lace, the world falls out of order for a second.

But when your breath ghosts over my ear,
along my neck and down my sternum.
When you sink to your knees,
rest your cheek on my thigh,
there against the burning,
there is chaos in your eyes

but you don't touch me yet
and the world is in order
and I am in love
or maybe
I'm just
high.

Raina Greifer

Ben Schwartz is a dreamboat

Always putting up posters in my
bedroom and ! I don't have a poster
of Ben Schwartz !
Ben Schwartz ! Lets forget
about our cracked skin ! The
dead herbs in the kitchen ! Tell me
what you like to eat ! I want
to make you vegetarian
food ! and sit on a vintage couch!
Tell me your
gross habits ! Our
hands almost touching !
Imagine my heart beating ! There is a
jack-in-the-box inside me ! There is a
kitchen floor to dance on ! Two
lame lovers ! Ben Schwartz ! You
make me want to drink enough water !
Write a poem on a
napkin !
Open our bodies like bubbles blowing !
I want to
put plaits in my hair ! I am
quaking from smiling ! Lets lay on the
grass and stain our lips
red from eating
strawberries ! Everythings a
theatre game ! Lets play the
ukulele and call each other ugly !
There is a veil of sun
in my eyes ! Everything
is rose colored ! Put me on
reality tv ! I love crying at the
wrong time ! I love montages !
I love feeling like a sticky
ripe mango ! Lets
xerox copy our faces ! Lets
burst egg
yolks and make omelets ! You

call me perfect and I
make you a
zine !

Kirsty Goodman

The Way Paver

This one is for the first ones
to the *Kamalas, Michelle Obamas, the Malalas*
to my Grandma

When you're the first one the pressure's on
to get it done, no room for fun when there was none before.
Can't afford to explore: it's an atlas of traps,
crevasses for cracks. One wrong you might slip
off this cliff made of glass and just like that
gone along with the assurance that you wouldn't be the last –

only the strong can carry that gravitas, and it's a thankless task
waving the flag up front taking the brunt of the flak
called all names under the sun. Tough to innovate
when you're a lightning rod for resentment and hate
but that's the price paid to be an I –
con so that I
can

because she has done. Quick,
get behind her. You can hide in her shadow
of unmatched size, not a care while she's there,
dismiss the sacrifice. She stands up, offers her voice
despite knowing full well you'll pull the rug from under her,
she doesn't mind, her kind unmet.

So, here's to the brave and courageous who dare to be **outrageous**
the creatives and **innovatives** who disobey and pave their own way
the *Aerharts, the Simones, the Sylvestres and Kahlos*
the *Katherines and Joans, the Williams and Jos*
to the **beautiful** minds took for granted, the dutiful wives reprimanded
the wistful and restless, **dreamers** who yearned for **more** and got far less than they were worth
the *Graces and Lovelaces, Hidden Figures* and the *Don't Knows*, and the *Should Knows*
to **all those** who came before, that suffered and endured for
altruistic convictions, optimistic ambitions
bushwhacking the thicket so we had a ticket towards **progress**
just mouthpieces for complainers who became **unwavering way pavers**
and made sure to signpost for the ones that came next
Evas and Harriets, Therasas and Elizabeths

who were **Never** the less
persisters, as your sister, resisters, who must have blisters
so much walking in others' slippers, they will miss her
earnest endeavours

And the *Gretas*
Marys and Hillarys, RBGs and AOCs

ridiculed and pilloried because they demanded better
the '*Any-Woman-But-Hers*', the '*Something-Not-Right-About-Hers*'
the '*Not-Sure-Why-There's-Just-Something-In-Her-Eyes....I-Despise-Hers*'
who must be tired, no matter how precise they dot their i's and cross the wire
they're always on the wrong side.....and they wish she'd just be quiet and—

disappear,
I hear. Got the message crystal clear,
sheared and speared, seared in her soul:
no revere here, must be lonely in the cold
when they steered clear for fear of catching her veneer
so, she does as she's told
and disappears

'Til forty years
Appreciation at the gate, fashionably late
to commemorate the woman misbegotten
but not forgotten name carved in stone
on the way that she paved
so that others could one day walk the talk
and not be broken when they awoke
cloaked in the courage of her words spoken

So she is here, still.

Emma Robinson

Somewhere, a perfect moment

What if we could put the world on pause,
catch a million people as they pass
and hold them?

Somewhere,
a perfect moment just happened.

Time is not something we lose
because it is not something we have;
we do not drop and break it –
it doesn't exist to be held
or held onto
or healed or replaced
or made up for in a cycle
of thoughtless guilt and legless hope.

Somewhere, a perfect moment
just happened. It was captured
through a lens on zoom, wider picture
blurred and on the third count an instant
was preserved.

Can it be perfect if it exists to be airbrushed?
Detect the defects and make that second
something that never was but always will be
kept.

Somewhere, a perfect moment just
happened and we missed it.
Sitting in bubbles, wrapped in layers
of ourselves, headache from the weight.
Take it away, lay down with nothing,
let time break for the sake of seeing the whole
before it's shards.

Somewhere, a perfect moment just happened
and nothing changed. The tree still fell,
The tree is always falling and breaking

and landing and growing and
nothing and thousands,
millions, of creatures live in one tree.

So, if a perfect moment just happened
how many lived in that one moment, felt
the reverberation of the fall, the ball of time
as it passed through and broke and lived on?

Somewhere a perfect moment just happened
and I am numb.

Time is not a gift. It comes
unwrapped and raw,
from a store of uniformity,
which falls on us, presses in
on both sides,

and I must know that
somewhere a perfect moment
just happened.

If we put the world on pause,
who would hold me?

Sarah Adegbite

A record of my daughter

after Fiona Benson's Eurofighter Typhoon

she greets me for the first time with gelatine eyes
and curled, rhubarb skin. small hands –
tiny starfish – open and close
to the not-yets of the world.

she smiles at me for the first time,
stalagmite teeth guard
the entrance to her stomach. fatty secrets
line those zip-tight blood vessels.

she bellows at me for the first time – since when
could the megaphone of her lips grow louder
than my heart? the shadow of a curve protruding
from breast to hip haunts me in school corridors.

it is me who will have to tell her all the things
my mother did not, and do all the things i said
to my mother i would never do

when i had a daughter.

she kicks me for the first time.
the potential of my belly is something dangerous.

Rebecca Bailey

Writer's Lament

There's sadness in being a writer; something palatable
in the way the ink runs across the pages
where you weep into chipped teacups.
You don't make enough money to afford newer ones,
newer anything. Inside your mind is a palace
of extraordinary wonder where tears collect
in a great shimmering pool and you bathe in them
arriving clean and baptised in loneliness,
carrying a sense of inspiration, a muse
you've never met before. She's got red hair
and you write about it because all you can do is write.
It's easier than breathing because all you feel is pain.
People laugh and tell you *there's nothing to it*
the writing, you won't be able to live on it.
But you've always known that you wouldn't
be able to live without it. It is your saviour.
Your god when you're an atheist. Perhaps
that's why you need it so much: there's nothing else
you can believe in except words on a page
or a screen. It's so much easier to bleed in writing,
it's so much cleaner and people aren't as squeamish.
People will look when it's nothing
but a person's emotions stretched out
like tanning leather, cut and scarred and broken
cracking under the weight of everything
you express through silence and itching fingers.
Sometimes, all you can see are ideas,
and the world doesn't exist, not really.
You think it's a blessing being so detached
your fingers drift through everything but pen
and paper. You know it's a curse
to have so many things in your head
you never have room for yourself.

Lumie Okado

2020 Reflection

We stopped
to hear our planet
to heal ourselves.

Time, money, belongings
became illusionary feelings
of happiness and wellbeing

when we had everything in a bird's song.

We sat down for an instant, heard nature
for the first time since

since – when did we lose ourselves?

When did we lose ourselves
in a system that kills our mothers,
and our brothers and sisters of colour?

We dig deeper into the soil under our feet,
standing tall but in fact so weak,
to unveil the complexity of our own society
fighting for
but acting against equality.

There's a woman suffering behind a man;
Working-class heroes paying the rich man's plan;
Tinted melanin consumed for White lifespan.

Natural resources screaming for help in a world
possessed by the misleading idea of exponential growth.

Auto-piloting, procrastinating the healing and the repairing
Of White supremacy that has killed too many for centuries:

taking their gold, their oil, their very own identity.
Leaving them with no choice under White audacity –

I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't –

And so, for a second, the world has listened.

But it is not our pity the Universe relies on,
it is begging for us to finally move on,
Unlearn the things we were told to believe
only for the system to enjoy our grief

We must see where the water rises,
we must see where the toxic air arises,
for it is there that lies the threatened community
and we are the murderers of our own humanity.

Dave Agyei

Digital Age

The social doesn't feel so social,
when the focal point is an argument with a stranger.
Fear missing out, but you're ignoring the people trying to fit in to your life,
in the physical – is it real if it's not tweeted or reposted on your timeline?
Attention span shot, I feel I cannot be myself without my device.

Time spent on socials isn't so social,
hours upon hours of screen time which should have been spent
being vocal with people – friends and such –
I'm being quite anti-social and unactive today,
so let's say I put the phone away. Every awkward silence is painful
I instinctively reach for what's not there. Every fact or reference I don't get
I can't Google. The minute I get back to it, it's a flood of relief
But to the break of my belief, it's only been two hours.

Two lousy hours from the overwhelming
boredom, the polite excuse to not partake in conversation,
having all the useless information and horrible news up to date, in my face
and I embrace it

again, like the substance to the addict
I don't think it's an addiction, more an affliction of being in the digital age
you're glued to the timelines, but in this timeline it's a fine line
before extinction

Welcome to the digital age
where it's far too common to see people
have a twitter rage than act like adults.
Empty performance artists doing their bit to end racism –
can't blame them when corporations set the fucking gold standard –
echo chambers where judge, jury and reasonable doubt is thrown out.

Now trends and blind hate is in fashion,
action means jumping on bandwagons
in blind belief for moral relief.

Welcome to the digital age.

Felix Woods

Yellow Wallpaper

There's a 24 year old sitting at home.
Alone.

He keeps the TV on so other voices air out the walls

The yellow, sick, peeling
mould at the window
was telling him to do it.

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT
He sits there as the individual stains
on the carpet come to life
living individual lies in his head.

All of them said he should do it.

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

The screen flicks by as the light
dies in windows. His head hit a pillow
and then a wall

and the wall smiled and he smiled back
and he grinned and the sink blinked.
and the knife winked

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

The voices from the tv
were competing now
and losing.

Steam broke his lips.

Cold air fell
through his aching chest

This was night number 5
since she had seen him

everything was going to be alright

she missed him

he prayed

she missed him

he read in red lines

she missed him

he missed her
he missed silence

he missed guidance
a defiant part time on the side lines of his life

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

his near miss
missed him

as if a fictional depiction of some persistent creature
tempting him back to harms way

his near miss
kissed him

filling his blissful thinking
with depictions of his limp body

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

This was night number 5
since he had seen outside.

why would he want to see outside?
There were people outside.

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

There were voices outside.
He used to love outside.

He used to love –
but like a dove caught
in a hand of callous courtship
he was broken apart

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

but she did miss him –
he knew. In every vacant blessing,
in every vacant reflection
she watched him

as he filled his addiction for self-affliction.
Shaking diction danced on his ears, her voice
beat him, kissed him with the power to devour
common sense, she missed him.

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

When the walls shook he knew the trains were coming.

He knew the exact timing.

He loved those trains,
and they loved him –
not that they showed it –

but he knew.

Their light smiled at him through slits
in blinds

and he smiled back.
and the sharp objects could see him now
and their shiny edges grinned

and he grinned back

and the sink blinked
and the knife winked

EVERYTHING *WAS* GOING TO BE ALRIGHT

Hannah Drury

Hand-Me-Down

This poem is for a very special woman.

Thanks, Mum.

My mother once echoed
in the things that she left me.
As though through ears
pressed into tins of baked beans
cleaned, and joined by strings,

Old jumpers, books,
hand-me-downs.

These tins, once clasped
by two sets of fingers, her voice
humming like the beat of wings,
noise flowing like champagne
raised in homage at the wake.

She sounded to me like the hum
of the wet glass rim.

Now, her replies,
muffled by metal, no longer come.
The string falls limp,
as the twine is held one-sided

and when I shout
into aluminium, I don't know
if I fear more my own echo
or her silence.

Now, the cans shrink in my hands -
how did they get so big?
Yet still
these fingers cling to the string
between my thumbs,

I watch the edges fray.
I am so afraid of this silence.

She never taught me how to sew
but she plaited this rope into my hair,
embroidered under my skin the knowledge
that she would be there if I pulled the cord

and believe me I am trying.

I claw at the dust
for her. Clog my fingernails
with the rust of her
long dead cans.
The jagged edge gashes
my thumb and I relish the wound,
watch as my blood flows.

But I find rivers in the grooves of my palms –
that stream from her, through me, and beyond –
she is my source:

I came from her waters, she flows through
each beat of my heart, runs through my every part
like golden fibres that shine. She and I
still intertwine inside me.

Her threads are now mine,
my lakes are her legacy

and the gorges
she etched in the valleys of my brain,
the canals that line my eyes with laughter

those are the things she left me.

Bashir Ahmed

Vesuvius

Look at how my kingdom falls:
enemies through cobbled streets.
Idle jaws chatter and gnaw,
Smoke billows through pyroclastic teeth.

Look at how my kingdom falls,
the birds have taken flight.
The demons launch a caterwaul
In cloaks that mask the light.

Look at how my kingdom falls:
catapults lined and slung.
Molten bombs at nightfall
razing buildings one by one.

Look at how my kingdom falls,
The din of fiends grows near.
They drum upon my castle walls,
My heart is filled with fear.

Look at how my kingdom falls,
I hear the foe within.
In hordes they plough through banquet halls,
Cries echo above the din.

Look at how my kingdom falls
The heat now stings my eyes.
I pray they leave, for a close call,
There is nowhere left to hide

With cracking limbs and flaming tongues
with malice I hear them hiss.
I can only watch my kingdom fall,
and step into the abyss.

Daniel Turaev

Muse

The Lady Muse is a heartless bitch.
She appears and gives you a single rhyme
Then vanishes with no trace – a witch.

No matter whether you are poor or rich
She only stays for a short time.
The Lady Muse is a heartless bitch.

She helps you with your first delicate stitch,
Plants the seed of her master crime,
Then vanishes with no trace – a witch.

For her amusement she readies a glitch
Before you make anything truly sublime.
The Lady Muse is a heartless bitch.

She knows we rely on her in a pinch –
Even cooks are gifted her thyme –
Then vanishes with no trace – a witch.

She likes to leave you with an itch
A mountain before you, an urge to climb;
The Lady Muse is a heartless bitch,
She vanishes with no trace – a witch.

Louise Devismes

giantess

i don't look at your mouth when you speak.
your lips are of little interest to me.
you notice,
sometimes.
your face breaks when you cry and i
don't help you rebuild it;
instead, i collect the prettiest pieces
and hang them on my wall.
when you tell me you love me,
i transcribe it in my pink notebook
and feed on the pages when i'm hungry.
i grow bigger by the day.
soon, i will touch the ceiling
and squash you under my heel.

Izzy Hodgson

Butcher

Sawdust chitters, nibbling at work boots
teething little milk teeth
waiting (to drop or)
for red drops to
glut, glut, glut them.

Bare backs hang in
tact. Fully dead,
taut enough
to be Vellum.

Don't turn them, the canvas tears.
There's a nasty split for death
on their fronts

She doesn't want to touch me.
I'll concede I am a corpse.
When I touch her, I try to imagine she's
not the butcher.

Bare or clothed, I am her job
on a spinning rack
She'll peg me up there
and will lose fascination

Oh god that's out loud
tingles through the electric,
blue hairline fractures
ever so intrusive.
Thought you could only hear them on
the static.

I suppose we must be done now.
That's what the chime's for.

Dannie Elizabeth Reynolds

Psychosis

a neurological flex
matter breathing
order to disorder
dynamics of the structure
intrinsic energetic properties
openness allowing new chemistry
affinity, interaction, reactivity
experimentation
varying bond formation
initiating transmutation

Don't call me crazy. I practice alchemy,
scientific sorcery. I develop a mastery –
magician of reality bridged
with another plane
beyond the limits
of the simply sane.

If you want this power,
don't hold your breath.

Kate Srichandra

Dyke Walks Into a Pub

Looks about for her straight
pal, Jenny,
spots her in the corner booth
already armed with pitchers.

Dyke walks over,
hugs her – not
for too long.

Dyke listens to Jenny harp on about her ex-boyfriend,
checks out a bar maid,
wonders why all the bar maids are so fit,
wonders how Jenny can't tell that Dyke is bored
out of her fucking skull.

Dyke spots her first love chatting
with a, quite frankly, gluttonous amount of friends.
Tries not to ruminate.
Downs half a pitcher
with a shitty paper straw –
no need for a glass.

Dyke moves on to a club with Jenny,
dances with her like she would any
other pal.
Jenny asks Dyke to give her space.
Jenny is trying to pull,
Dyke is ruining her chances.

Dyke glances about for any obviously queer women,
sees a girl she's known for two weeks kissing another girl.
Dyke wonders if she would have been worthy
if she'd dressed more femme.
Goes to the bathroom for a quick cry.

Dyke watches Jenny make out with Greasy Turd
twosteps bops her head
tries to give them privacy while not looking like a loner,

knows that she'll be responsible
if he tries anything funny.

Dyke continues the charade for two hours,
asks Jenny if they can go someplace else.
Jenny says she wants to go wherever
Greasy Turd goes.

Dyke pays extra to get into the one gay bar in town.
Dyke pays for Jenny's entry
too – part of the deal –
the music is superior.

Dyke can see two of her ex-girlfriends
and three years' worth of one-night stands.
Dyke feels at home.
Jenny knows Greasy Turd isn't there,
Jenny says she wants to leave.

Kathryn O'Driscoll

Sunburnt

We sit in a summer-drenched garden
and pick baby flies off wrists and thighs.

You, exasperated, sigh. Again.
It makes me laugh

which makes you laugh
and buzzing slides to nothing

as we giggle into coffee mugs
of own brand lemonade.

We're here to worship the sun. We're here to get warm
off each other's conversations and compassion
and find the strength to stumble on.

We're here
for each other.

The petunias are posturing for your attention,
but your arm is slung over your eyes.

You want to absorb more sunshine:
you aren't out here for the sights.

Grass seeds slip between stitch seams,
aggravate the hay feverish flush
creeping across your flesh.

You tell me *it's hot* and I *mmm*, agreeably,
and try to decide if the shapes we see in clouds are a correlation
of our mental state.

I hope for a tentative smile.

A grasshopper plays the violin so I turn
to look at the underside of the skirts of daisies
and I listen to a sound more hazy than humming.

A noise like calm. I listen to the calm.

And you say, *if you don't want to live anymore -*

I guess I get it. It's okay.

As long as you don't

talk about it.

I cry until the light hangs behind the horizon on a noose
and the sunburn leaves a permanent scar.

Erin Green

Somewhere in a Distant Universe

There is a cat-shaped soul
chasing stardust mice
across a kaleidoscopic sky.

I feared witnessing his deterioration,
could not endure its presence in him.

I was thrown by his blank stares,
pupils wider than planets,
unblinking,

yet I am blinded by his absence,
caught off guard at the sound of silence.
as his pleas for food murmur
across a distant solar system.

I miss his nightly check-ups,
the quiet padding of tiny feet
into my bedroom;

a watchful eye
hidden amongst a pile of undecided laundry.

He was my furry Florence Nightingale
sitting in stoic silence until he was certain
of my survival and swanned off again.

I hope his eyes are winking
with the stars.

Sometimes, I think he died like one,
shining bright before our eyes
even as he was burning out,

as if we had been watching
from light years away.

I have not yet felt the emptiness:
Avoiding that house as long as possible,
Putting off silence at the door.

I will not I trip over half-eaten chunks of meat

Or brush hair from my work clothes
Or find him asleep in the sink in high summer.

I let my heart fall to the floor
Because I cannot throw it to him
Like a treat I brought home.

Cannot hold him
Or feel him rub against my legs.

I am as empty as this house.
There is so much silence.

But somewhere,
In a distant universe,
there is a cat-shaped soul
chasing stardust mice
across a kaleidoscopic sky.

It could take light years, and a lifetime
but somewhere, in that dark, dense solar system
I will find him.

About the contributors

Andie Davies (they/them) is a queer poet, currently completing their BA in Creative Writing at Roehampton University where they run the Writing Society, and have set up the uni's first student-led literary journal, '*Roey Writes On:*'. They perform at spoken word events (Poetry Cafe, UniSlam, Beehive Collective) where they can, and share their work on Insta: @andivo.they_write

Anne Gill has been anthologised in the *Dizziness of Freedom*, and *Close Gates or Open Arms?* They were shortlisted for the Outspoken Prize for Performance Poetry 2018. Their pamphlet, *Raft*, was published in 2019 with Bad Betty Press.

Bashir Ahmed thinks that art, much like energy, can be transferred and reused, and so writing is like translating the inaudible language of our surroundings and experiences and giving them a voice.

Celestine (they/him) is a trans artist and poet based in Durham. There, they are Captain of Durham University's Slam Team who have and will continue to compete at UniSlam. They were longlisted for the Outspoken Film category 2020 and won the Langland Spoken Word Artist Feature in 2019. They have been published in *The Gentian* and they are also the Editor of *QUIRK magazine*. Their artwork has been showcased in the Harbour House Gallery and will feature on the upcoming Braag Production Company Website. You can find their artwork @rattatittytat on Instagram and Etsy.

Chloe Bayliss is a first year history and creative writing student at Hertfordshire. She works as a freelance student journalist, student representative for her two subjects and runs the website for the Poetry Society. She is currently reading the *Midnight Library* by Matt Haig.

Christian Yeo is a final-year Cambridge law undergraduate. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Mays*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *The Tiger Moth Review*, *Notes*, 6'98, *ZETEO*, [Insert], and the *jfa* human rights journal, among others; it won the Arthur Sale Poetry Prize in 2019 and was longlisted for the Sykes Prize in 2021.

Daniel Turaev is a second year maths student at Cambridge. Growing up they always loved playing around with sounds and words. Poetry with some form of metre and rhyme lets them challenge themselves to how creatively they can express a thought or idea within the confines of the rules.

Dannie Elizabeth Reynolds is a doctoral researcher studying structural biology and a University of Leeds Spoken Word committee member. Combining passions for science,

philosophy and psychology in her writing, she explores consilience between them as integrative aspects of spirituality and as a holistic lens into social and relational issues.

Dave Agyei is a Sheffield based poet who's influenced by hip-hop, and loves to write introspective poems as well as pieces that critique all sorts.

Emma Robinson once performed spoken word in a crypt in London. She discovered both what a crypt was, and that she absolutely loves it when people audibly affirm what she's saying. Now stumbling through an English Literature degree at Cambridge, she's holding onto her love for performance and connection.

Erin Green is a dance and drama student, as well as a poet and occasional artist in whatever time they have spare. They use poetry as an outlet for processing the world around them and as a springboard for further performance work.

Felix Woods is a new writer, inspired by the likes of Kae Tempest and Benjamin Zephaniah he began writing in a protest style by developed his writing to indulge in stories and characters. Playing around with hip hop flows as inspiration for tempo changes throughout his poems.

Francis-Xavier Mukiibi is a spoken word artist from London. Recently selected as one of the final 12 artists in the BBC Radio 1Xtra Words First 2020 programme, he has performed his poetry on BBC Radio and iPlayer, and has also featured for various creative arts festivals in the East Midlands area.

Gem Baskerville is an up-and-coming young poet based in South West England. She is part of Team Bath Spa and is studying for her Masters in Creative Writing. She likes to find romance and beauty in the dirt of the everyday. With a distinctive image-filled yet accessible style, her poetry deals with topics such as love, loss, queerness, mental health and growing up as a deeply feeling person in a harsh world.

Hannah Drury is a Psychology Student at the University of Bath. As a young girl in her local 'writing squad,' she discovered creative writing and the community it brings. She owes her recent rediscovery of poetry to her ex-boyfriend. Thanks, you.

Originally from Edinburgh, Hannah Ledlie is a writer interested in sexuality and dystopia. As a member of team Birmingham, she came first place at UniSlam 2018 and '19 before helping coach in 2020 and '21. Hannah is a member of the Second City Poets collective and is currently on the University of Oxford's Creative Writing MSt programme.

Izzy Hodgson is an English lit student at Edinburgh and has been part of their Unislam team since 2020. Her work has been published in The Student.

Isobel Dunn-Lowes is 19 years old. She has always enjoyed reading, drama and poetry as she finds it gives her a sense of purpose and enjoyment. Participating in Unislam has really allowed her to push herself as she had never performed spoken word poetry before.

Kate Srichandra is a poet and spoken word artist studying English and Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham. They began writing poetry as a form of emotional release, and continued to write as a mode of activism. Kate particularly enjoys writing to music, and hopes to further explore this passion.

Kathryn O'Driscoll (the coach of Team Bath Spa) is the current UK Slam Champion, a spoken word poet, writer and activist from Bath, England. She talks openly about disabilities, mental health, LGBTQIA+ issues and joys, loss, and gender politics in her wide range of poems. She has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, on BBC Radio Bristol and was featured on the Sky Arts spoken word TV show *Life and Rhymes* hosted by Benjamin Zephaniah. Her debut collection will be released by Verve Poetry Press in Spring 2022.

When Kirsty Goodman is not writing poetry, they are working towards their PhD in security and crime science at UCL. Thanks to the pandemic, they get to do both with their grandparents in Cornwall, who read everything they write and are their greatest cheerleaders!

Louise Devismes is a French author who pursued her studies in Canterbury for creative writing opportunities. Her work is focused on femininity, family, coming of age, and abuse. She started performing in 2019, receiving honourable mentions and very promising critiques each time. her poetry has been played on BBC Radio Kent.

Lumie Okado is an architecture student on stage and a lover of the arts in all forms, feels and colours behind the scenes. "Paper is more patient than man", Anne Frank said. And she says the same. So there's a little food for thought, on paper, just for you.

Nicole Calogero studies Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Sheffield. Unislam is her debut in the world of poetry. Nicole's poems often deal with love, doom, history and languages. Apart from poetry, her interests are discovering music and learning languages. Her native language is Italian.

Pearl Nzewi is an English major and socio-political activist who enjoys writing, cooking, and photography. Passionate about women's rights and changing the status quo of her motherland Nigeria, her writings tend to touch on these subjects amongst other issues.

Raina Greifer (she/they) is a queer creative and theatre-maker. She is interested in combining poetry with drag-inspired performance to explore themes of sex, grief, and

femininity. She is an avid watcher of reality tv and is currently writing her dissertation on the ethics of The Bachelor.

Rebecca Bailey is a 20 year old writer with a thousand worlds in her head. Studying a BA in Creative Writing, she has been writing since she could hold a pen. Having a family of book-lovers certainly helped. Her current areas of focus are fiction and poetry.

Reiham Amin is an undergraduate student at the University of Leeds majoring in English Literature and Arabic language. She loves travelling around the world & writing about what inspires her. She began writing Spoken word at the age of 14 when she experienced her first heart break, but regardless she's the biggest hopeless romantic we know.

Sarah Adebite is a first-year theology student at St John's College, Cambridge. Her debut collection of poetry 'Creatio Ex Nihilo' was published in 2018, inspired by her faith and Christian identity. She spends her time writing poetry instead of doing her uni work, watching cringey Netflix shows, and eating burritos.

Sarah Ernestine was raised in the southern United States but currently lives in London where she is studying to get her MA in Publishing. She loves finding the juncture of art and literature, writing mostly poetry and creative nonfiction. Her writing has previously been featured in Inverted Syntax, Capsule Stories, and Better than Starbucks Journal.

Sean Colletti was born in California but moved to the UK in 2009. He received his PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham. His debut pamphlet of poetry, Saeculum (2018), was published by Bare Fiction.

Leeds team alumni Talya Stitcher is a cat-loving, challah-eating, pottery-attempting poet based in Sheffield, where she runs Sounds Queer. Credits include UKNA 2021, Homos and Houmous, Ilkley LitFest Slam, Roundhouse Slam, BBC EdFringe Slam and Leeds Queer Film Festival. Joelle Taylor recently called her "cinematic" and she's been kvelling ever since!

Toby Champion is the Director of UniSlam and founder of the National Youth Poetry Showcase. A former UK National Poetry Slam Champion, Toby performs internationally and his poetry has been published widely, winning the Aurora Poetry Prize 2019 and highly commended in the Forward Poetry Prizes 2018.

Tasha Mapes is a California poppy transplanted to the South West of England when she was eighteen. She self-published a poetry book called "Changes" in 2016 and is currently the head of poetry for the University of Bristol's Poetry and Creative Writing group.

Tyjana Howard is a 3rd year English literature student who is very proud to be part of the Bath Spa Unislam team. She puts forward this poem in honour of her grandad who

was an amazing poet. They mainly write on disability and queer subjects but enjoy new challenges.

William Tuffen is in his final year of a creative writing BA at The University of Roehampton, having achieved firsts in two poetry modules. He has read for The Beehive Showcase and Unislam. His poetic voice has been described (by him) as, himself talking to himself, about himself.