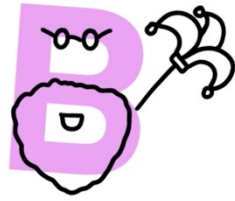




**LIVE, LAUGH,  
LOCKDOWN**

2021 Poetry Anthology



## Foreword

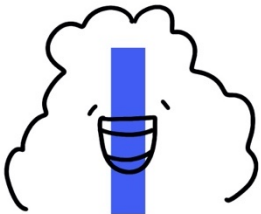
What a weird year. The plan was to wow you all with our incredible spoken-word performances, live on stage. Well. How daft of us.

I'm Bridie Squires – Lead Writer at GOBS Collective, together with loney Smallhorne. GOBS is a growing movement of artists. We're passionate about building community and confidence through spoken word, and thinking creatively in writing, discussion, feedback and performance sessions. This year has proved more than ever that we're stronger together than we are apart, and that art will find a way.

In February and March 2021, loney and I worked with our second group of talented, gobby Nottingham poets by running online workshops, masterclasses and mentoring sessions. The poets worked towards this anthology as well as a poetry film and live performance showcase – via live Zoom Webinar on Saturday 27 March – with Birmingham Poet Laureate Casey Bailey headlining the bogger.

Me and loney couldn't be more proud of what's been achieved by these incredible artists. We hope you enjoy the work just as much as we've enjoyed collaborating with them. We'd also like to invite you to get involved with what we're doing.

If you write or perform, or want to learn more about doing so, get involved at [gobscollective.org](https://gobscollective.org)



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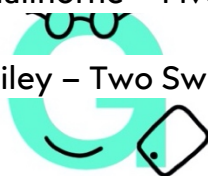
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## **The Portico of Absence**

My eye covered the top of absence, but it wasn't empty.  
There were bonfires in the autumn before home got lost in me.

I'd get up to shop with you when the birds were still groggy,  
the roads were empty and the sky wasn't blue.

I liked the air, the flowers, the interesting characters  
and I loved spending time with you.

You encouraged me not to be idle, to fight for what I wanted to do  
and I guess I'm listening again because I have to be without you.

I will always have the fruit and the knowledge you gifted me  
of how to pick the best yams and satsumas.

Things broke down and I needed space like all kids do  
and I'm sorry I couldn't take care of you the way you needed me to.

Every time I got a bit better something swayed me, broke me,  
hurt me and I was too much of a mess to be good to you.

I think you forgave me and I hope one day  
I can forgive me for not being the me I know I can be.

Sometimes you have to scream to get better  
even though I'm English and I really don't want to.

Sometimes I couldn't tell if you were being kind  
or giving up but I'm so glad the last thing I did was be kind to you.

I'm scared no one will ever be as happy to see me as you were again.  
I felt like I was losing everything before things started avalanching.

I hope there is rest and guineps and steamed fish where you are  
and not one more wicked person trying to hurt you.

*Ingrid McLaren*

## Sinkpiphany

My Arch Nemesis

Picking scabs from week-old wounds

Soaking off the stains

Of last night's Bolognaise

Mum's recipe

Bare hands slip into water

Calm

As palms are welcomed

Dulled tip taps as pomegranate bubbles

Slowly

Dissipate

My Mind        ticks    over

My Hands      grab    lift     dunk    place

                 Dum    Dum    Dum    Dum

Like robot factory movie scenes

Over and over it roooIIIs in my mind

People

Flicker in and out of view

Cleaning Chopsticks

Like old teachers who taught me to knit  
scarves

Skinny Dipping in Granny pants appears in wet  
ceramic

Hands scorched by boiled water

Unnoticed

Glazed eyes

Hide my wondering mind

My worth lurks here

Floating leftovers,

tomato skins and chicken bits

avoided thoughts

Persistent

Coriander and curdled mayonnaise

Tea leaves in my stainless steel teacup

As I pull the plug on visions

Of future children jumping out from kitchen  
cupboards

Gazing out windows

I tear the frying pan up through the air as  
water falls off, dripping and my mind rushes  
to Eureka!

Galileo Einstein and Newton, elbow deep in  
dishwater, picking apple peel from the drain

It's a sinkpiphany!

A revelation!

A memory

A whisper in my mind

It's scribbled on paper

Or told to friends

It's I love you's and thank you's and never  
leave me's

They're Golden nuggets uncovered in coal  
mines

It's finding life

In the death

Of washing up

*Vicky Trotman*

## **Weather to Give**

I just have a lot to give  
my life is like a river  
in a fairly controlled irrigation scheme  
which sometimes can't deliver

the right amount of outpouring  
from this large amount of rain  
I have all sorts of water  
in my sometimes marshy brain

in which I think I think to much  
I'm the kind of scattered shower  
that tries so hard to hold it in  
and finally rains for hours

when I get very all over the place  
and you get very wet  
I just have a lot to give  
please take, receive, accept

for when I know that I can be  
myself to you and me  
I'll just say "I love you"  
without water imagery

*Richard Arkwright*

## **THIS**

Young and bred on fresh-baked loaves  
Ice cream dripping from a cone, I watch  
The boys dive in  
Off the jetty, through the foam  
Sons of Aphrodite  
My feet on roasted rocks  
The crabs and urchins pinch  
Frothing blood, rising,  
Like this thirst in me

Sky as light as English eyes  
And up there, Heaven—  
Where the glare of icons,  
Copper crowns and royal blue,  
Subdue my restless tongue  
The more eager of the two  
Intertwined to a serpentine being  
Ananke, Chronos, writhing  
Like this dread in me

Lift-off from the hob-hot concrete  
To land on soft-trod grass  
Cows and pubs, pound shop fags  
Hand-in-hand I'll walk with girls  
Where branches curl above,  
Where ghosts are one with God  
And tables tip, a trick or treat,  
Reynardine, a fox-man's smile,  
Hell-bent to feed  
This fear in me

Bolex dreams and same-sex scenes  
Action, cut and edit  
What I won't learn I'll never know  
A boy with goals  
Forging deals with faeries  
Celluloid and carob leaves,  
Boomerangs, flung across the sea  
and back to me  
To sink and breed  
And keep  
This thing in me

*Polis Loizou*

## White Privilege

1. No black people  
in our town,  
none I saw,  
only comments,  
nudges;  
faces lined with soot  
passed along terraces  
to home,  
scrubbed clean  
then to chapels  
preaching Empire,  
gold gleaming  
off high altars;  
men spoke  
of all men being equal,  
hit hard on the beat,  
repeat, a sequel  
in my heart I knew,  
strike queue,  
struggles  
to overthrow  
English owners,  
Saesneg,  
overlords,  
we did not stand  
all for one, one for all

2. A new girl in class.  
No one speaks.  
Her difference  
is in her swagger,  
black girl  
all alone.  
I try to talk to her,  
a blagger,  
not listening.  
The divide is here  
it never occurs,  
my land is hers;  
both outsiders,  
accents  
fan flames  
of mockery;



the parakeet,  
a loud bird,  
blames you,  
makes fun,  
excludes;  
guilty by association,  
I walk on  
into the crowd.

3. Hit the beat,  
make it pretty later -  
we move to a city,  
a port full of voyagers  
who cook curries,  
wafting spice in the air.

We have money  
to buy a new house,  
it's fine for us  
to migrate for work  
we are the steel,  
the coal,  
the factories.

Others will steal,  
do the dole,  
all of these-  
such myths,  
dinosaurs  
on plinths,  
old riffs,  
play on a loop  
maintaining a  
tentative  
sense of privilege.

4. At university,  
abstract exoticism ,  
notes clashing,  
touchstones  
slowly changing,  
no qualms

dancing with a friend,  
from Birmingham,  
a Black man,  
they say  
*he's one to watch,*  
*a Panther, who harms*  
though the only aggro  
from him,  
questions  
my fashion tastes.  
He makes suggestions,  
then come reports ,  
comments, questions;  
white friends say,  
*he was violent,*  
*today, we called him names,*  
*cultural stereotypes,*  
*he lashed out,*  
*ruined our paradise;*  
broke a student's nose,  
all blood,  
unprepared  
to overlook  
racist taunts.

5. Unawareness

pumping  
in pulsing rhythm;  
a trip to Africa ,  
apartheid  
slaps these rosy cheeks;  
on the beaches,  
signs read,  
*coloureds, blacks,*  
*whites, freaks,*  
sorted out  
in laundry piles  
washed  
to look respectable;  
extinct dodos  
present,  
still breathing,  
haughty looks  
omnipresent,  
white battalions

swallow their guilt  
hurt everywhere,  
slipping  
down throats;  
screeching guitars,  
castles, deep moats;  
do not enter  
this club, flags flying,  
scurry with geckos  
to hide away crying.

6. Days in the sun,  
white privilege  
has not been won,  
handed down in class  
this power  
is a trespass,  
an invasion  
across  
others' dreams,  
there is no justice  
until we end regimes.  
*No man is an island,*  
stop drifting by  
as icebergs  
calve into the sea;

we are alive,  
the man kneeling  
for police  
will not survive;  
statues of slavery  
standing unchallenged,  
time has come  
to right wrongs  
barely imagined;  
face the music,  
white privilege,  
part of me,  
lurking in history,  
an albatross.

## To the Languages Within Us

The languages that follow us,  
from ancestors to ancestors,  
peer to peer, new generations,  
are treasures for navigation.

*Madres, abuelas*, cartographers,  
from codex to cassettes and SMS.  
Lyrical captains, seafaring through idioms,  
built captions within our peripheral visions.

Indigenous, aliens, hegemony clashes,  
have forced us to assemble internal translations.  
Supremacist standards, inferiority complex,  
our tongues tiptoe on eggshells,  
stumble on clear intentions.

Stand up after you fall  
and remember, *mi cielo*,  
that our maternal lingo  
is a hug from the cradle  
of civilisation.

The words our forbearers would knit  
are the mainsails that guide us.  
No cause of shame,  
but joy and recreation.

Acquisition devices  
still surf on our plasma,  
while we float on the knowledge  
of past, future and present.

For the cold of the north,  
as our envoy continues,  
we wear dialects as coats.  
Functionality and pleasure.

May every one of us decode  
the messages contained  
within our protein sequences.

Cynthia Rodríguez Juárez

## Chronic

1.

She is a dewy eyed, bobblehead quadruped with a spring in her crawl.  
All she knows is songs in C major and saving her troubles for later,  
her only foe is the night-time and nappy rash.  
She giggles at the hiss of hi-hats and lip syncs to 90s synths  
that she thought she could sound out forever,  
and plucks a pearl straight from the world's oyster to suck on at night.

2.

Turquoise skies turn monochrome and dewy eyes turn dry.  
All she knows now is scratched up records and suspicious lumps.  
A drone flies low overhead without any target,  
blind to the monster that peaks over her fleshy horizon.

3.

The monster has a sense of humour,  
and a funny, un-sexy name that no one can pronounce:  
far too long to remember, far too serious to joke about with her friends.  
It skips around the bends of her body, beat-boxes and scats to a grating disco track called:  
'I'm. Not. Leaving'.

4.

She invests in some ear plugs but the monster starts a rock band.  
It ravages her body in rehearsals and head bangs through the pores of her skin.  
The shuffle of soaked bandages becomes its percussion,  
and its encores only come to an end in a curtain of steam  
and a pop of ibuprofen.

5.

They try to carve the monster out of her but it starts a choir and steals the headline slot.  
Her entire body files a noise complaint,  
wails and waits for the monster's latest corporeal concert to come to an end.  
She sends the monster cease and desist letters.  
It uses them as napkins to mop the sweat from its brow.

6.

She removes her ear plugs for the first time  
and is surprised to find the monster's gurgles are starting to make sense. \_\_\_\_  
She listens, \_\_\_\_\_ learns, relents to the monster's rhythms,  
finds truth in its repetitions and in its raspy refrain,  
She exchanges blame for patience \_\_\_\_.  
She writes a symphony with her pain \_\_\_\_.

7.

She leaps out of her flesh  
and calls the monster by its name.

*Cara Thompson*

*Strombus Alatus*

They told me the corpse  
of a fighting conch  
contained in its contours  
the swells of the sea  
as though it were nature's sound-recorder,  
stowing memories  
for eternities  
it could not  
remember.

An ocean inside itself,  
each gentle pulsing tide  
amplified  
by labyrinthine chambers,  
the space  
where flesh  
should be.  
In a primary school music lesson,  
I put one to my ear:

A distant scent of salt  
on chips,  
warm waves lapping my swim-strained legs;  
and my mother's voice,  
echoing out the heart of the shell,  
calling my name  
and holding a melting  
ice-cream  
cone.

second -  
as if it were itself a conch,  
silk wax scored by memory.

Sometimes I (think I) hear a rumour of receding seas.

Still, they could replay their lives  
like storytellers,  
every wave  
and grain of sand  
etched into vinyl wax,  
carved as quavers and semi-breves  
onto the staves of themselves,  
soft lips coated with a thin crust  
of outer whorl.

(expecting silence,  
lies:)  
Suburbia dissolved,  
as though my town was a sandvillage  
reclaimed by a hungry sea  
in reckless advance.  
I was, in my inland classroom,  
at the beach.  
A memory of seagulls' mews;

*Pass it on*  
my teacher said,  
and I tore the shell from my ear  
and the beach dissipated,  
its imagined sands stripped back by waves  
no less tidal for being unreal.  
The bare classroom walls materialised  
heavy as city air, the traffic jam cacophony  
drowning the sea-sounds that lodged in my ear  
for a stretched

second -  
now I pick up my phone's heavy plastic chassis,  
invisible cord.

I listen out for you ~ ~ ~

## Fungi

I spent all day in a damp cow field  
looking for mushrooms  
with a magic to turn waking life  
into the stuff of dreams at night,  
but all I found was poisonous fungi  
popped up in itchy places  
like styes on an eyelid.

What if I were the tumours  
in my mother's breast and bones  
attaching to her branches and grass  
like death caps?

I would bloom in the winter's frost,  
find my home nestled in the mush  
of her marrow and blood.

When spring comes  
I'll die by suicide  
because her body is too warm  
for my gills to breath with ease.

But I'd die  
with a crescent moon touching my cheeks,  
because I know I'm poison.  
I don't carry the spells  
to fix the aches made in childhood.  
I am death and I know it.

So I'll drink in the chemo,  
sip it like a fruit punch  
on a hot day in July  
and die.

Die,  
so she  
can live  
and continue to stir magic  
into teacups and mugs.

Like daffodils in spring  
she'll continue to sing  
in the dewy sun.



Although dead,  
I won't be gone.

Always threatening to return  
with the winter's frost.

This is the dance of hope and loss.

Constantly twirling  
in the dizzy song  
of a rave  
in a cow field  
where and when  
the cows  
have been ushered on  
to graze on a grass that's greener  
so brains can untangle their knots  
in a quest for freedom  
in places incantations happen  
but fail to ward off the haunting  
of my ghost  
under the oak.

*Rachelle Foster*

## HEALING

The weight of my pain and trauma  
I just don't know how I carry it  
I can hear it  
whispering  
getting me to the point where  
I don't want to be here  
just living feels  
Heavy

They make out like it's lemon squeezy  
go on social media  
you'll see posts of pretty women dancing around in beautiful skirts  
Burning herbs  
chanting sacred sounds  
it's not  
Easy

Turning rocks into precious metals  
turning dreams into reality  
turning self-loathing into self-love  
surrendering to the laws  
to the balance of the Natural World  
surrendering to the fact that  
I am transmuting  
magician  
Alchemist

Self-love  
love for others  
peaceful  
getting butterflies and palpitations  
feeling that warmth  
light and airy  
knowing reality is OK  
accepting who I am  
I am worthy  
I am  
Love

Like that of a child running skipping hopping jumping twirling touching leaves and smelling flowers

I'm a fairy a unicorn an alien drifting through space-time dimensions

knowing anything I put my mind to

I can create

knowing my visions my thoughts

do not define me

I am in control

closing my eyes and manifesting

the life my higher self deserves

using my

Imagination

We all slip we all fall we all trip

it's getting back up

Giving up

Never

When you open your eyes give thanks

as you put your feet on the ground stretch high give thanks

it's a blessing

sentinel being

living a life that no one can explain

traveling on a ball of rock

around a ball of gas hurtling

thousands of miles a day

The key to success

Gratitude

Cece

## Scenic route

Dante's being a dick again.  
He's rattling the teeth  
in slinky preachers -  
off the cobbled back streets

Sharpening their  
cuban heels  
on whetstones.

Child pose conductors.  
Heretic yoga.  
And this  
their art in human form -

I commence my practice  
Prowling the street aisles  
on all fours.

Infant cave shadows  
Drunk with the *cold* of walls  
Thrown at the morning  
in neon overcoats.

The carefully lit photography  
Of the big-gest mac  
Dangling from a single thread

Wind buffeted pendulous spectres  
at play with the unbaptised and virtuous pagans  
below.

I  
pass lower ranking bus stop practitioners  
in plainsong  
They have the foresight of  
a journey ahead -

Sage seers  
hemmed into the sides  
of the city -

The stillness of waiting to travel,  
or the charms of apathy  
endear me.

Others I meet.  
Groomed as tyrant saints.  
Napoleon on weekends.

A dozen Town Criers  
Touching tongues from the hurricane  
The chink of  
marble beaks  
Waging battle to empty halls -

A multi headed snake at the bar  
Ordering frozen mice

Old gods with faded tattoos  
Reminiscing  
Sipp-ing two for ones

A deep  
Tight Chess  
I have entered -

With red clay  
through my feet  
And feathers clutched in my hand.

Some beasts are so big  
they can't even fit  
Some so small  
Yet  
they take up everything.

As I push on  
I wonder if  
I walk through hell just to stretch my legs.

After a while  
I see its form take on the horizon  
And I come to my destination -

The lattice work on the back  
of the monument -  
Is it a sign of quality or overworking?

Maybe it's not meant  
for me to ask  
Maybe it's for the crows

to muse on  
*The retirement community of  
the afterlife*  
The inner circle of swans  
*at the*  
distant reservoir

A place to slumber  
Whilst I have dreams  
of flying

Dante  
exits  
stage left  
Throwing glitter and pulling faces

It never occurred to me  
That I may be wild in the wrong wilderness

*Ali Bonsai*

## **Fridge Villanelle**

I open up the fridge and I forget,  
My thoughtless eyes swim over stuff within,  
I had a reason to come here and yet.

I spot a half-refracted silhouette,  
I loose it as it plunges in the chill.  
I open up the fridge and I forget.

And what mnemonic have I left un-met?  
Who would look here for anything but food?  
I had a reason to come here and yet.

All scaly with those magnets you can get,  
A silver body flecked with pinks and greens.  
I open up the fridge and I forget.

I fish forgotten thoughts with tattered net,  
There was a purpose when I came downstairs.  
I had a reason to come here and yet.

Why did I start to write this fridge vignette?  
The door swung wide, the light does not come on.  
I open up the fridge and I forget.  
I had a reason to come here  
and yet.

*Ben Macpherson*

## Pillow Talk

I miss pillow talk.

Those backward dives  
into sanpaku eyes;  
three whites,  
two lives  
finally entwined.

Curling myself  
in cerebral folds,  
a breaststroke  
against a  
juicy temporal lobe -

I want to bathe in a brain!

Slurp on a stream of dopamine!

Match my heart to  
a beat of neurons  
flirting in  
fuchsia dreams.

Limbs tangled while  
we gamble with  
soul chips and  
suck lips and  
toe dip then  
love trip  
gaze first  
toward  
serotonin bliss.

Let me  
love to  
love you.  
Wrap a  
cognitive cocoon  
round fragile  
stems of this  
lust bloom.



A vivid  
recollection of  
a cortex treasure,  
already dying -

already  
dying.

already  
dead.

I miss pillow talk.

Drowning in  
white lies.

Tossed by  
a current of  
adoring demise.

Little spoon  
the echo of  
quick-blinked time.

*Francesca Mesce*

## Full-Force Pessimism

My watch must get so bored, ticking over the same numbers relentlessly.

They wish for new numbers and they're fed up of the eventuality of hitting midnight.  
Slowly making their way to set numbers because it's their only job.

Putting my smudgy black make up on for the day, I think, I put this on just to take it off.  
Every time I take it off in the evening it feels like it's a constant cycle, inky lines on  
stark white wipes and the melting beige foundation. Day after day.

Wasting the time away I reach for a game. I choose Othello and I've decided that the pitch  
black and angel white pieces represent life and death.  
Then I wonder if Dad's life could've flipped to black if the operation went wrong.  
Dad wins the game and my thoughts are replaced with annoyance.

The next day I look at the river and think, one day that will dry up and the mud will crack and  
there won't be any ducks blissfully floating down stream.  
The river then rushes to meet my window, crashing through the panes, refreshing  
everything I am and ever was. While it still can.

Whilst I'm drying off my mum calls me and recites her birthday plans and I forget about the  
death of the river. In the evening I watch a video about the eventual collapse of the sun and  
the vastness of space scares me.  
The carpet underneath my feet feels too warm and I think the earth is overheating already.  
I'm messaging my friend and I realise that someday his heart will stop.  
I look at my feet and realise that these plump toes will probably be  
cremated someday along with the rest of me

I stretch out my limbs, take off my watch and wiggle my toes.  
I smile because these things haven't happened yet.

**Demi Lloyd**

## Grass Houses

“remember when the grass was cut at school”?  
We’d waded through the dense musk hanging at nose level  
Collecting armfuls, enough to build a mansion, flat.  
Like a floor plan

Days diminished as nights protracted  
Kids Innocence dying with the light  
earlier each night  
turning those grass houses with doors  
shut tight to mush

You watch,  
Perched high on mangled limbs  
of naked trees  
that interlock more closely  
then you ever hope to be

Quivering like a small chick  
dwarfed by an eagle  
who’s fury turns red apples dark purple

Your dreaming of bath time  
as crimson stains  
more then just the skin  
And the princesses on your toothbrush  
have an opinion

Rose tinted glasses  
ripped off....  
Age 8

Auburn evenings  
car window chills you cheek  
as **lights** malicious burn  
taunts  
the retinas in flashes

Watching leaves on branches  
imitate art like two bodys touching.... almost.

Question?

When does curiosity stop  
consent begin  
and  
“ I dont want to do this anymore” work?

long snowy mornings  
still horizontal  
as a hot sun burns  
through the pretty dress  
the clouds made for the earth

Remnants of their artwork kissing passersbys,  
who braved a coat, hat & scarf  
Not you

Hear this?  
Soft, empty laughter

images flood of bowling balls, too heavy  
Eyes leak  
and your freckles glint like glitter  
or falling flecks of dust ,

Quiet  
To the ground.

sunshine, sticky over the world  
Glazed doughnuts  
make your tastebuds tingle with sin  
and blue and pink slushies  
turn your brain to ice

Lazy afternoons  
as yellow buttercups under your chin  
finally tell the truth

Memories of branches  
lost as leaves  
hide winding secrets,  
keeping you safe

Feel bliss,  
becoming part of it  
outside of it

Mouth still shut tight  
like the doors of grass houses  
memories fuzz around the edges  
and life seems  
almost worthwhile

*Safia Oakley-Green*

## The Night Never Came

It has been so long and we have not slept.  
I wonder where the moon goes now, who she twirls for, stares at -  
I thought I would miss her peeking through my window,  
but why would you need a lamp when the dark never comes?

They stopped printing horoscopes in the paper  
because no one knew where the planets were.  
Habit held hands with the world until our fingers pruned  
and finally, we were forced to learn what our hands could do.  
We never needed hours and weeks and Tuesday -  
the night did not know me like she thought she did.  
Mattress shops became fallout shelters and the nightlife choked itself out.  
The post stopped coming n'all because everyone just kept arguing about  
what "next day delivery" should mean, class came to mean summert else entirely  
and everyone just stopped eating carrots because there were no dark to see in.

I think I misunderstood her until now,  
the moon.

A Miss Ratchet in familiar imprisonment,  
Cleopatra of the sky, Thatcher of the day, light thief I worshipped her,  
spent nights picking craters into my face in offering and  
I exchanged this all for ageing and egg yolks and I hope she never comes back.

I drink light without a breath:  
Scorching tongue and throat, hands to elbows doused,  
skin pink and flattered and in love -  
Shoulders everywhere host these swelled pockets of life, suspended in  
crusty blister like mosquitos scrambling in amber,  
then burstin, rolling down coating the barks of Arms. The Eternal Day,  
fossilised in me - my devotion for all that is hot and sticky.

One day I looked at the sky a little too long  
and the stories about staring at what is holy were true  
But that's OK. She cannot help it,  
it is all a part of the healing she tells me It is all a part of the day  
and it just turns out that being well is not always the difference  
between the light and the dark -  
some things need candlelight, or dimmer switches.

It is all worth it, I think. I hope she never comes back I declare  
her dead. There is nowhere for her to watch me from,  
No need for me to perform Nowhere for her  
to hang herself Nowhere for me  
To replay the hanging -,

Nothing keeps me up at night.

*Rebecca Summerscales*

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## Bossy

1 message

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sophie diver

March 2021

To:

Please stand clear of the doors  
With elevated coffee cup  
You move with sharpened claws  
Through the shroud of morning bulletins,  
Let's walk and talk, tailored suits and  
Downcast Metropolitans  
You shrink into corners for  
necessary alchemy, travelling vanity  
beholden to mascara and low centre of gravity  
Until the waltz of the 'sorry' and 'excuse me please'  
Alight here for rush of bodies and underground breeze

*Mind the Gap, he says*

To a desk of one's own with  
Window aspirations because This. Girl. Can.  
Swivel chair and two drawers but  
They never mentioned glass ceiling in open plan  
This is your opportunity, time to really lean in  
Time for going forward  
Time for just checking in  
Time for "I'm just popping out, so do you want anything?"  
Time for "it was banter, but you knew that right, hun?"  
And "yeah of course that's no problem  
I'll get it all done"  
For post-meeting analysis in the ladies  
Were you a little too nice or a lot too crazy?  
Remember, it could be a whole lot worse  
It's a team effort  
Doesn't matter if you said it first  
Remember, you're here for the meritocracy believer  
The same who ask  
"Is there someone here more senior?"  
You're here to lose the daily five degree fight  
To change into Nikes  
Before you leave for the night and begin



The *Evening Standard* stumble  
To a chorus of ticket barrier canaries  
Rushing home before the dark gets too lairy

Take a seat  
In a steel capsule of allies refuelling their worth  
Still firm in stance, in voice and  
Immobile in birth  
They scroll silent, without signal  
Carriage after carriage  
In contemplative vigil  
In shared salute to those already been  
That took up space, found a chair,  
And refused a pseudonym  
To Karen Silkwood, Norma Rae  
Ford's machinists  
And Hildy Johnson in *His Girl Friday*  
For those who own that unapologetic drive because  
Honestly, how many exclamation marks  
Would Dolly have typed in 9 to 5?

And Mary Queen of Scots  
Who never ended a letter with  
'no worries if not!'

*Mind the Gap, he says*

...

—

Sophie Diver

'Writer'

@sophiedwrites

← Reply

➡ Forward

**2020**

I am a budgie  
pecking on feed from a plastic cup,  
claws clipped to the cage.

Tastes off.

Outside, a crow is burying a walnut  
under a pile of dried grass.

He must feel my stare  
as he looks up, swoops  
to our window and **r a t a t a t s**  
like a knife on the glass.

The woman baking  
a Betty Crocker hash cake  
wafts the threat away  
with her grandma's tea towel,

pushing the smell of evanescence

around the room;  
one hand blistered red  
from holding a freezing tub  
of Ben and Jerry's too tight.

She is nervously humming along  
to *The Sims*, building mode.

So I sing with her,  
push my toys around,  
take a bath,  
try to forget.

*Bridie Squires*

## Five Days in Lockdown

And start I running  
somewhere.

The government threaten  
to ban exercise, people are too free  
while an invisible killer  
infiltrates the lungs  
of the elderly and the young.  
An ice rink in Milton Keynes  
refashioned into a mortuary.

My arms pump, hands gripping at air  
the pavement a conveyor belt  
churning out strides, along the ring road  
curving with the tram lines  
past the factories at Basford crossings  
encircling the parks.

I've ran once before  
ten years ago when I was locked down  
with a boyfriend who tried to kill me  
frequently  
until ran bare foot through the night  
claiming a future with each stride.

My thumping heart, feet pounding, my breath.  
4954 dead, we're told to stay at home  
but behind these doors some women  
have an underlying health issue that can kill  
with any 'late' return home,

or any wrong meal, wrong T-shirt  
or holding eye contact too long  
or saying no, there bodies on the front line.  
Some women have been enduring lockdown  
under surveillance for years.

I remember isolation  
not allowed to take a shower with the door closed  
prohibited from leaving the house  
for any reason other than work  
until I was prohibited from going to work  
from leaving the house, from leaving the bed  
from saying no.

I considered running before that bare footed night  
a fear of falling, loosing my footing  
a doubting of strength, blockaded my feet.  
But I'm greedy now, I want all the space  
eat up my daily allowance of exercise  
my strides wide and ravenous  
a predators bite.

400 hundred more dead  
stopping is not an option  
my eyes lift a little higher, hungry  
and think of the women who  
be on the front line everyday

their mind is the only place to run to  
their personal protective equipment  
and it's running low. His words  
attack until each thought is a clone of his.  
Their eyes so infected they start  
seeing themselves through his.

I keep running  
knowing this is how survived last time  
one foot in front of the other  
with nothing but my body and mind  
I lift my eyes to the horizon  
realising I reached my destination

when I stepped out the door.  
And I wonder if I'll react this way  
each time my liberty is infringed.  
If I will start running in any direction  
until my body burns  
I wonder If I'll ever stop running

*Loney Smallhorne*

## Two Swings

And they will not hold hands;  
instead they will let little fingers  
hang, intertwined. In this bond  
they will keep the time he said,  
*I dunno, man, you're special,*  
and the time she said, *Yeah,*  
*maybe not all boys, just most.*  
Between this finger link  
and his black Air Max 95s  
brushing along the side  
of her white Air Force 1s  
they will hold a phenomenon  
that breaks every rule of this  
place. They will wrap it warmly  
in black tracksuits, dip it in honey,  
coat it with Demerara sugar  
and rock it, back and forward,  
on these swings, under midnight sky.

Casey Bailey

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