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EDITORIAL BOARD

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(PhD English)
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pv292@exeter.ac.uk

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josielewiswrites@gmail.com

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EDITORIAL

'All things are fluent; every image forms,
Wandering through change. Time is itself a river
In constant movement, and the hours flow by
Like water, wave on wave, pursued, pursuing,
Forever fugitive, forever new.'

***The Metamorphoses*, Ovid[1]**

Ovid's evocative notion of wandering through change is, ironically, of constant relevance. His stories depict transformation as violent, essential, and universal. When discussing the change of today, the phrase *we are living in unprecedented times* has become ubiquitous; scripted into press briefings, deployed in corporate emails and exchanged over the dinner table. Artificial intelligence has moved, within a handful of years, from speculative fiction to mundane reality. The climate emergency remains a mounting pressure reshaping our lives and expanding our vocabulary of extremes. Change, in other words, has become the most reliable constant in contemporary life: pursued and pursuing.

This year's theme, *Transformation, Change & Renewal*, asks our contributors to sit inside the unresolved yet constant nature of transition and metamorphosis: to 'stay with the trouble', in the words of ecofeminist theorist Donna Haraway.[2] The pieces gathered in this ninth issue answer from a striking range of angles – linguistic, ecological, historical, mythic, methodological – and, taken together, speak to the generative potentiality of work in the humanities.

As we flee from the UK's hottest summer on record,[3] it is difficult not to wonder what change will bring, or how it will change us. Unfortunately, transformation is seldom equitable. As Exeter's own Susannah Crockford notes in her most recent book, vulnerability is not simply exposure to harm but being at risk of compound harm.[4] Just as in Ovid's stories, change does not cut more gently those who feel its blade most keenly. Change has also been particularly felt across the higher education system in the UK, where humanities departments have spent this past year absorbing an unrelenting wave of redundancies and course closures. Running a

[1] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, annot. J.D. Reed (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), XV. 179-184.
[2] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
[3] 'Summer 2026 provisionally hottest on record for the UK', Met Office, n.d. <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news-and-media/media-centre/weather-and-climate-news/2026/summer-2026-provisionally-hottest-on-record-for-the-uk> [accessed 4 September 2026].
[4] Susannah Crockford. *A Perturbed System: Religion and Climate Change from the End of a World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2026), 17.

journal by and for postgraduate researchers in the humanities has felt, this year more than most, like a small act of resistance, reasserting that close reading, critical theory, and creative writing remain necessary instruments for understanding and navigating a world in upheaval.

This issue opens with the interrogation of how both texts and selves are remade in the act of re-reading. Chloë Statham Watkins's *What Homer Actually Said: Colour, Translation, and Cultural Transformation* takes translation itself as a site of change, asking how meaning is reconfigured across time and languages and attempting to recover some of the original context. Parm Lota's *Har to Manor* performs a different kind of recovery, retelling Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's nineteenth-century Gothic story as a modern poetic meditation on same-sex desire, offering a rearticulation of Gothic desire that affirms queer interiority.

Sally Hamilton's *'There are no men here, so why should I be a woman?': Transformation and the Exchange of Identity in Women's Writing of the First World War* turns its gaze to lived history, tracing how war led to the erosion and renegotiation of traditional gender roles and the rise of experimental modes of female literary expression in order to articulate both individual and collective trauma. Imogen Dobson's creative piece, *The Dirt Woman*, explores how an ordinary woman's identity is remade, marked as 'dirt,' by the streets she is forced to walk, a transformation that alienates her from both herself and her community.

Where Dobson's protagonist is cast out of belonging, Philippa Johnson's *Boundary Layers* provides a poetic reframing of alienation where the boundaries between the landscape and the self dissolve into productive entanglement with the more-than-human, emplacing the reader within their natural surroundings. Shannon L. Fox Ashover's *'Who will take the madness from the trees?' Transformative Ecologies of Surrealism in the Anthropocene* reads, within the disorienting, boundary-breaking imagery of surrealist poetry, a language for today's ecological anxiety that realist prose fails to offer. Bhavika Sachan's short story, *When Ayyappa Blinked*, turns to magical realism to explore trauma, faith, diasporic belonging, and the uneasy afterlife of inherited beliefs in contemporary life.

Stuart Busby's *Seeds in Dry Ground: A Creative and Critical Exploration of Transforming Ethnographic Research into Fiction* closes the issue with a creative piece that engages fiction as a methodological practice and mode of enquiry, alongside his fieldwork practice, and that explores how meaning shifts when data is reimagined through storytelling.

In alignment with our theme, the last two years have seen much change for the journal. In summer of 2025 we hosted a conference with this same theme, which was absolutely wonderful. However, our commitment to this conference meant that we did not publish an issue last year. Because of this, no one on our current team had ever worked on an issue of Exclamat!on. The word of the year for us was re-growth: building capability within the team and creating connections and resources that will improve future issues. We're happy to say, it

looks like we've pulled it off! This was thanks to the contributions of the lovely writers you're about to encounter, our peer reviewers who graciously lent their expertise, and, most essentially, our editors who worked so hard to bring it all together. We hope you enjoy the issue.

Paula van Eenennaam Sánchez and Josie Lewis Sullivan
Co-Editors

September 2026

What Homer Actually Said: Colour, Translation, and Cultural Transformation

Chloe Statham Watkins

Homer wrote one word, and translators have repeatedly transformed it. As our understanding of the Ancient Greeks expands, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have trans-formed from histories to legends, repeatedly being re-read, translated and debated through new critical lenses. Translation is a transformative act — one that can illuminate or obscure, preserve or fundamentally alter meaning. While modern knowledge can help uncover previously unnoticed gems, reading ancient texts using modern assumptions about realist literature can result in a loss and confusion of meaning. Transformation is unavoidable whenever a text is translated.

This article is concerned less with transformation itself than with transformative erasure — where change goes unacknowledged and is mistaken for the original. This article will explore this by looking specifically at how colour words undergo radical shifts in meaning when read under our contemporary influence as opposed to Ancient Greek constructions, and in doing so, will argue that recognising these transformations, from the *oinops* sea to the wider grammar of Greek light and colour, is essential to understanding Homer's world.

Homer's Colour Paradox

The apparent oddities in Homer's use of colour words, when considering his overall approach, unexpectedly contrast with his style. Describing honey as green, oxen as violet or the sea as winey reads strangely through our contemporary lexicon, which encompasses an abundance of colour words used amply as descriptors just within the blue spectrum. Taking Homer too literally, his story too factually, seems a major faux pas in criticism on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: '[a]s *The Times* put it, these tales were "accepted by all mankind as fictions of very nearly the same order as the romances of Arthur".'[5] Despite the absorbingly detailed world Homer builds, or such revelations as uncovering the location of Troy (itself long taken as proof that Homer's account was historical), 'Homer remains within the legendary with all his material.'[6] Many contemporary readers see the epics not as historical but as fantastical and, amidst debates around the rationale for Homer's strange use of colour words prompting theories like

[5] Guy Deutsche, *Through the Language Glass*. (London: Arrow Books, 2011), pp. 28-29.
[6] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*. (New Jersey: Princeton Classics, 2013), p. 18.

Ancient colour blindness from scholars such as W.E. Gladstone[7] and Friedrich Nietzsche,[8] this strangeness — whatever its origin — is accepted as a component of Homer's style.

However, placed amongst Homer's other descriptors, particularly those of the natural world, this level of poetic licence is incongruous. If Homer shows us natural surroundings in elaboration and minutiae even in the most dramatic of moments,[9] it seems unlikely he had a lax approach towards the correct colour descriptors for these same things. Homer does not present life in a mythical way — regardless of whether we dub the epics history or fiction. His style is, instead, to present 'things in accordance with their natures'[10] and to show 'nature in the most admirable form it could assume.'[11] Homer presents a world so perfect but yet so real that 'it does not matter whether we know that all this is only legend.'[12] Contemporarily, we are used to showing and being shown a flawed world, so much so that '[this] secret of the Greek world: its perfection ... is unthinkable for us'[13] and contributes to our fantasising of it. If Homer ultimately presents nature in its best, but still realistic, form, then why include jarring colour descriptors? It is hard to argue with Guy Deutsche's assertion that if

> . . . we could pick just one haven of stability, one aspect of life that must have remained exactly the same since Homer's day ... then it would surely be the pleasure in the rich colours of nature: the blue of the sky and sea, the glowing red of dawn, the green of fresh leaves.[14]

Possibly the most well-known phrase commonly found in translations today is Homer's 'wine-dark sea.' However, this very phrase is a mistranslation as 'what Homer actually says is *oinops*, which literally means "wine-looking" (*oinos* is wine and *op*- is the root "see").'[15] Many translators have taken this to point to the colour of wine, but to truly understand the meaning of ancient phrases we must consider their contextual usages. Erich Auerbach, looking to the Bible as comparison to Homer, explains of Abraham talking to God,

> He says indeed: Here I am — but the Hebrew word means only something like "behold me," and in any case is not meant to indicate

[7] W. E. Gladstone, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1858), III, p. 488.
[8] Friederich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, ed. By Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 426.
[9] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 3 and Deutsche, p. 34.
[10] Schiller, quoted in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 5.
[11] Deutsche, p. 26.
[12] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 13.
[13] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock. (London: Merlin Press, 2006), pp. 30-31.
[14] Deutsche, p. 31.
[15] Ibid.

> the actual place where Abraham is, but a moral position in respect to God, who has called to him — Here am I awaiting thy command.[16]

Auerbach's argument is that we must read this phrase in the Hebrew context to truly gather its meaning, therefore one can argue that we must read Homer in the Ancient Greek context to truly gather his.

We can expand this from religious and moral statements to vocabulary in general; the Ancient Greek colour vocabulary was far less expansive than ours. Where Biblical and Homeric translators differ is that '[m]ost Bible translations smooth over oddities such as "green gold" [. . .] and render the adjective [. . .] as "yellow". But the etymology of the word derives from plants and leaves, just like Homer's *chloros*.'[17] Homer uses this adjective interchangeably: sometimes to mean 'green,' other times to mean 'yellow,' and other times not to designate a colour at all but, rather, 'freshness.' If we consider Roman translators, 'Both Horace and Cicero [. . .] make an important distinction between word for word translation and sense for sense (or figure for figure) translation.'[18] While *chloros* developed to mean 'green,' in Homer's day it had multiple potential meanings, some more figurative than others.

There are minimal disputed, let alone undisputed, colour words used by Homer. Maria Michela Sassi tells us that '[t]he Greeks [it would seem] were [. . .] not particularly interested in describing the [colours in nature] [. . .] — at least not in the same way as we are, with our modern sensibility.'[19] Instead, they were more concerned with other descriptors. There is a lack of colour words used across Homer's epics compared with contemporary English writers, however, in those cases where we find ourselves confronted with a word we know as designating a colour but that we also know is not the accurate colour to describe the natural thing, there is an instinct is to read this as fantastical given the abundance of fantasy arts and a contemporary perception that Homer's stories were fiction. Might we, immersed in our own culture and our own — as Ferdinand Saussure puts it — signified concepts,[20] be neglecting the Ancient Greeks' additional meanings for these adjectives and that meanings other than colour may have taken precedence?

The Wine-Looking Sea

Perhaps no phrase better illustrates the transformative power of translation than Homer's *oinops* sea. The phrase has undergone countless transformations across centuries of

[16] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 8.
[17] Deutsche, p. 43.
[18] Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 51.
[19] Maria Michela Sassi, 'The Sea was Never Blue', *Aeon*, 31 July 2017. <https://aeon.co/essays/can-we-hope-to-understand-how-the-greeks-saw-their-world> [accessed 18 November 2018].
[20] Ferdinand Saussure, 'Course in General Linguistics', in *Literary Theory*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 59-71.

translation, each rendering revealing as much about the translator's cultural moment as about Homer's original meaning. Its journey demonstrates how meaning undergoes profound metamorphosis when crossing linguistic and temporal boundaries. The most common modern English rendering, 'wine-dark sea,' has achieved such ubiquity that it has become almost synonymous with Homeric style. Yet this represents a fundamental transformation of Homer's meaning: the insertion of 'dark' is entirely absent from the Greek — an addition that transforms the phrase from an appearance-based comparison to a colour-based one. Earlier translators rendered the phrase quite differently. George Chapman's 1611 translation refers to the 'wine-hued sea,' while Alexander Pope's 1715 version speaks of the 'dark-blue main,' eliminating wine entirely in favour of a colour term he deemed more appropriate.[21] Pope's choice is particularly telling: faced with what seemed an inappropriate colour descriptor, he simply replaced it with one that matched his eighteenth-century expectations. The neoclassical preference was for decorous, legible colour language over Homer's more ambiguous appearance-based idiom. This represents transformation as erasure — the imposition of one cultural framework over another until the original is obscured.

Later translators struggled differently with the phrase. Samuel Butler's 1898 prose translation established the hyphenated 'wine-dark' that would dominate twentieth-century translations. The hyphen itself is significant: it binds wine to darkness, transforming a compound that emphasises appearance into one that emphasises chromatic quality. More recent translators have begun to recognise these limitations. Robert Fagles's 1996 translation occasionally experiments with 'red as wine,' while Emily Wilson's 2017 Odyssey retains 'wine-dark' but acknowledges in her notes the phrase's complexity and the impossibility of perfect equivalence.[22] These modern translators' self-consciousness about translation itself represents a transformation in scholarly approach — a recognition that translation inevitably transforms.

On the one hand, translation is a necessary transformation — the essential bridge allowing ancient texts to speak across millennia. Yet, on the other, it also risks transformative erasure, imposing contemporary categories onto ancient expression in ways that fundamentally alter meaning. This is the Horatian and Ciceronian choice — word for word versus sense for sense, or figure for figure, translation.[23] Regardless of which is chosen, both approaches involve transformation. What the *oinops* example demonstrates is that we cannot avoid transformation — texts inevitably change as they are re-translated and re-read in different times. The question is whether we acknowledge it and work consciously to minimise destructive transformation while embracing productive reinterpretation. When we recognise that 'wine-dark' is itself a transformed phrase, we can begin to ask more productive questions about what Homer's original audience might have understood.

[21] Bassnett, p. 58.
[22] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Emily Wilson. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), p. 509.
[23] Bassnett, p. 51.

Cultural Constructions of Colour

We have become accustomed to our Anglicised gaze and as this 'process of imposed uniformity [. . .] continues its work, and hence serves to undermine all individual traditions',[24] it becomes easy to overlook that '[t]he Ancient Greek experience of colour does not match our own.'[25] We must read with different languages and cultures in mind, otherwise we fall into the trap of standardisation and loss of *Weltliteratur* that Auerbach feared.[26]

Jarring use of colour was not just limited to Homer's works: Gladstone noted that the works of many Greek authors contained colour descriptions that 'continued to be both faint and indefinite, in a degree which would now be deemed as surprising';[27] as did Deutsche, who compares the same example of '[v]iolet coloured hair' in both Homer and Pindar.[28] If we look to compare Homeric Greek to Biblical Hebrew, both Auerbach and Deutsche note similar deficiencies, such as: 'Homer's oxen are wine-coloured — the Bible mentions a "red horse" [. . .] Homer tells of faces "green with fear" — the prophet Jeremiah sees all faces "turned green" with panic'.[29] Modern anthropology has 'accepted that every culture has its own way of naming and categorising colours [. . .] all according to different cultural contexts',[30] which is not to say that the natural world looked different, but perhaps that the Ancients didn't have the same need to construct our abundance of colour words. Taking the word 'blue,' for example, both Homeric Greek and Biblical Hebrew did not have such a word, quite probably because they did not need it:

> whereas our eyes are saturated with all kinds of tangible objects that are blue, in all imaginable shades … people in Homer's day may not have gone through life without ever setting their eyes on a single blue object . . . blue dyes, which are very difficult to manufacture, were practically unknown, natural flowers that are truly blue are also rare.[31]

This is not to gloss over that core example of the blue sky. Deutsche undertook an experiment on whether children who are not told the sky is blue register it as such, to 'test how obvious the sky was to someone who had not yet been culturally indoctrinated',[32] with conclusions

[24] Erich Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 125 – 138, p. 126.
[25] Sassi, 'The Sea', n.p.
[26] Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', p. 127.
[27] Gladstone, *Studies*, p. 493.
[28] Deutsche, p. 36.
[29] Ibid., p. 43.
[30] Sassi, 'The Sea', n.p.
[31] Deutsche, p. 39.
[32] Ibid., p. 71.

that there was confusion as to the sky being *any* colour and then discrepancy between blue and white until the age of four, which is in contrast to the recognition of other blue things at 19 months old.[33] Without the abundance of tangible blue objects to compare to, the Ancients' recognition of blue was much like our contemporary child's — and their need for it even less.

The Greek Colour System

Our culture and constructs are very different from the Ancients Greeks' and we struggle to separate these contexts: '[w]hen we speak of the Greeks we always confuse [. . .] and we invent a relationship between Greek forms and our own epoch.'[34] However, 'speakers of different languages may perceive colours slightly differently'[35] and therefore use the words for designating colours differently. Scholars have tried and failed to associate Homer's apparently strange use of colour words to something appropriate to the natural world. Deutsche's survey of these attempts is persuasive, though it proceeds by ruling out alternatives rather than confirming a positive reading of *oinops*. He describes the stretches in these attempts regarding Homer's sea:

> The most common answer was to suggest that Homer must have been referring to the deep purple-crimson shade, such as a troubled sea has at dawn or sunset. Alas there is no indication that Homer used the epithet for the sea at dawn or sunset in particular. It has also been suggested, apparently in all earnestness, that the sea can sometimes look red because of certain types of algae. Another scholar, despairing of the possibility of painting the sea red, tried instead to turn wine blue and claimed that "blue and violet reflects are visible in certain wines of southern regions, and especially in the vinegar from home-made wines."[36]

However, when we consider that Homer's actual phrasing translates to wine-*like*, not wine-*coloured*, we must disregard our contemporary default to colour in favour of more logical reasons behind this descriptor.

The evolution of colour words, such as *chloros* which was used in Homer's day to mean both yellow and green[37] and then to just green,[38] warrants consideration. Before the designation of separate terms for all colours, some words designated more than one. Gladstone explains that

[33] Ibid., pp. 71-72.
[34] Lukács, p. 31.
[35] Deutsche, p. 232.
[36] Ibid., pp. 31-32.
[37] Sassi, 'The Sea', n.p.
[38] Deutsche, p. 33.

> [c]olours were for Homer not facts but images: his words describing them are figurative words, borrowed from natural objects. There was no fixed terminology of colour; and it lay with the genius of each true poet to choose a vocabulary for himself.[39]

This suggests that colour for Homer was metaphorical: he instilled features based on the natural object associated with that colour, but colour did not necessarily need to be the feature. In fact, excluding 'black' and 'white,' no colour word appears in the Homeric poems combined more than thirteen times,[40] which further points to the little consequence the Greeks put on describing something by its hue. The etymology of *chloros* has a root meaning of 'young herbage' and 'if the hue distinction between green, yellow, and light brown was of little consequence in Homer's time, then the prime association of *chloros* would not have been the greenness . . . but rather its paleness and freshness'.[41] As such, it makes perfect sense for Homer to use this same word to describe honey (using *chloros* as the colour green or, in this case, yellow) and just picked twigs (using *chloros* to describe the freshness of the twigs even though their colour would be brown rather than green or yellow).[42]

Considering the multi-use of colour words as not limited to multi-colour-use explains why 'Homer often describes the same object with incompatible colour terms. Iron, for instance, is said to be "violet" in one passage, "grey" elsewhere, and in yet another place it is referred to as *aithôn*, a term otherwise used to refer to the colour of horse, lions, and oxen'.[43] Georg Lukács uses a telling word when he talks of the impossibility of the attempt of '[m]ore profound minds, who try to forge an armour of *purple* steel'[44] as the words for purple or violet in Homeric Greek meant more than just the colour. Deutsche explains that 'Homer's phrase *ioeidea ponton* is variously translated ... as the "violet sea", the "purple ocean", or the "violet-coloured deep"' and that *ioeis* also relates to the flower violet.[45] In *porphura* we see how a colour word is used because of the association that the colour has: the importance of a character being described as dressed in *porphura* is not the *colour* purple or violet but the *association* of power, prestige and glorious beauty; an association the colour has had throughout antiquity.[46] Further to the known association of the colour with prestige, Sassi also explains that the verb *porphurō* means 'swirling' besides 'growing/dying purple.'[47] Therefore, Homer's *porphureos* or *oinops* sea is not necessarily indicating a purple or wine-coloured sea but perhaps, more logically, a powerful or swirling sea.

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[39] W. E. Gladstone, 'The Colour-Sense', *Nineteenth Century*, October 1877, pp. 366 – 388, p. 386.
[40] Deutsche, p. 35.
[41] Ibid., p. 38.
[42] Gladstone, *Studies*, p. 488.
[43] Deutsche, p. 34.
[44] Lukács, p. 31. (My emphasis)
[45] Deutsche, p. 33.
[46] Sassi, 'The Sea', n.p.
[47] Ibid.

The Greek colour words denote a much wider spectrum of hue and metaphor than our expansive vocabulary. Furthermore, the English-language translation tradition this article follows has shifted emphasis to hue from what was a brightness-based system.[48] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explains that 'from light, shade, and color, we construct the visible world,'[49] but the Ancients put much more emphasis on light and brightness. Sassi further identifies that the figurative use of *porphureos* as swirling is very much concerned with the glimmering of light:

> [w]hen the sea is called *porphureos*, what is described is a mix of brightness and movement, changing according to the light conditions at different hours of the day and with different weather, which was the aspect of the sea that most attracted Greek sensitivity. This is why Homer calls the sea 'winey', which alludes not so much to the wine tint of the water as to the shine of the liquid inside the cups . . . *Porphureos* conveys this combination of brightness and movement — a chromatic term impossible to understand without considering the glimmer effect.[50]

Indeed, 'the fourth basic colour in Plato's list, which includes white, black and red, is "brilliant" and "shining" . . . which is not a colour to us at all.'[51] Much in contrast to his limited use of colour words as we know them, 'Homer had an especially keen eye for the play of light, for anything that shimmers, glints and glitters'[52] which, in fact, is in keeping with a contextually appropriate colour palette of 'brilliant and shining.' When we consider that hue was not such a core factor in the Ancients' construction of colour as ours and take J. L. Benson's explanation 'that Plato's colors are not pigmentary mixtures but theoretical conceptions, [and] the color bright is a thoroughgoing symbol of Platonic idealism,'[53] then this colour usage aligns with the Homeric 'perfection' that Lukács deemed so alien to our culture.[54]

Homer's colour vocabulary was not so 'limited [. . .] [and] heavily slanted towards red [. . .], *eruthros*, [which] is rather untypically used *only* for red things, such as blood, wine, or copper'[55] as it might seem, when we consider the constructions and usages of colour words in the Homeric age. Red is the only colour that features in both our modern-day and Plato's basic colour lists, which is why we understand its usage and see Homer's colour palette as 'heavily

[48] Deutsche, p. 94.
[49] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake, (London: John Murray, 1840), p. 73.
[50] Sassi, 'The Sea', n.p.
[51] Maria Michela Sassi, 'Perceiving Colours', in *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. by Pierre Destrée and Penelope Murray, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 262 – 273, p. 265.
[52] Deutsche, p. 35.
[53] Benson, p. 31.
[54] Lukács, p. 31.
[55] Deutsche, p. 37.

slanted' towards it. However, his palette is perhaps slanted further towards those words that we do not construct as colour. Homer does not use his colour words in a fantastical or limited way, but instead as both figurative and glimmering adjectives to wash his world with the *colour* of brilliant and shining in order to showcase the natural world in its most admirable form.

Conclusion

Reading the epics through modern assumptions deprives us of a fundamental element of Ancient Greek and Homeric style. Focusing too literally, by our standards, on reading Homer's sea as wine-coloured means that we neglect its glimmer; seeing oxen only as violet-coloured overshadows their power; and honey only as green ignores its freshness. Each mistranslation represents a transformation from the multivalent, brightness-oriented, metaphorically rich colour vocabulary of Homeric Greek to our own hue-obsessed, literalistic system — a transformation that impoverishes rather than illuminates.

Yet transformation itself is not the enemy. Translation and interpretation across centuries necessarily involve transformation; without it, ancient texts would remain forever inaccessible to new generations. The issue is unconscious transformation — the kind that imposes contemporary categories while remaining blind to its own assumptions. When we mistake our transformed understanding for Homer's original meaning, we cut ourselves off from genuine encounters with ancient thought. The recognition of these transformations, however, opens pathways to renewal. When we understand that our colour vocabulary has evolved from ancient brightness-based systems to modern hue-based ones, we can begin to read Homer's descriptors not as deficient or fantastical, but as operating within a different but equally sophisticated framework.

In an age of increasing cultural homogenisation, where Auerbach's fears about 'imposed uniformity'[56] seem ever more prescient, the careful reading of ancient texts in their cultural contexts becomes an act of preservation. In order to fully appreciate ancient texts, we must therefore consider their contextual constructions of language — acknowledging both the necessity of transformation and the importance of preserving the foreignness that makes these texts valuable precisely because they emerge from a worldview profoundly different from our own.

[56] Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', p. 126.

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Har to Manor

Parm Lota

I saw you first as a flicker—
a lantern-glow across a corridor,
your shadow bending closer to the light
as though the world wished to shape itself
around you.

You walked as if unaware
that every step unsettled something in me—
a quiet creature I keep
deep in the ribs,
breathing only when you enter a room.

I told myself
it was nothing.
A passing shiver.
The draft of an old hallway.
These are the lies we are taught
to choose.

But beauty has its own way
of speaking.
Yours ran through me
like a hand over an instrument
long waiting to be played—
the soft awakening of a note
I recognized as mine.

I have lived with this strangeness
for years:
a soul that moves toward men
as indiscreetly as water seeks its own level.
No darkness taught me this;
no ghost whispered it.
It rose in me as naturally
as breath.

Yet in your presence
strangeness becomes splendour.
Even the shadows brighten,
leaning in to see you.
I am half sick with longing
and half saved by it,
for it draws me toward a truth
I have always feared to name.

Manor,
if the world were kinder,
I would speak plainly.
I would let my voice rest
in the open palm of yours,
and say only this:
that something in me knows you,
though we have barely touched hands;
that I carry your image the way
some carry a prayer—
held close, trembling,
and endlessly returning.

But the world is not kind.
So I say nothing.
I walk beside you in silence,
unseen like the scent of rain.

Still, when you smile—
just once—
the whole room alters,
and I feel for a moment
that even the forbidden
can be beautiful.

And that beauty,
like you,
was always meant
for me.

Critical Commentary

This poem, 'Har to Manor,' seeks to reimagine the emotional interiority of Har, one of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' most compelling early representations of male homosexual desire.[57] While Ulrichs outlines Har's condition – his 'female soul in a male body' – and his yearning for Manor, he rarely dwells on Har's psychological or affective experience. My poem attempts to fill this gap by rendering Har's desire as an aesthetic event. By assuming Har's voice, I aim to articulate the phenomenology of longing that Ulrichs theoretically describes but does not lyrically dramatize.

The poem is grounded in my broader interest in 'gay beauty,' which I define as beauty perceived through the lens of homoerotic desire and intensified by the subject's recognition of his own longing. Walter Pater's influence is essential here: his aesthetic philosophy emphasizes the immediacy of sensation and the subjective experience of beauty as it flashes across consciousness.[58] Har's encounter with Manor in the poem is shaped by this Paterian idea, along with Catherine Belsey's idea that desire is intoxicating. It is a feeling of longing being drawn from a place of lack of the beloved.[59] The poem depicts beauty and longing as something unfolding in Har's body – 'a quiet creature I keep / deep in the ribs' – which awakens only in Manor's presence. Through this, I frame beauty as a personal experience arising from desire itself.

Gothicism plays a secondary but important role in shaping the atmosphere of the poem. Ulrichs' writings contain many gothic tensions. Har lives in a world where his desire is unnameable and morally condemned; this creates a shadowed environment, marked by restraint and emotional terror. The poem therefore employs Gothic motifs for their expressive potential such as through dim corridors, flickering light, and the tension between revelation and concealment. These images highlight Har's position as a figure who simultaneously seeks and fears visibility. His desire becomes gothic because it is forced into darkness by the social and moral codes of his time. Despite these circumstances, Har's desire for Manor is what sustains his life.

In taking on Har's first-person voice, I also wanted to challenge the medical and legal discourses that Ulrichs sought to dismantle. Ulrichs carefully argued that homosexuality was not inherited pathology, nor a moral crime, nor a legal offence grounded in unnaturalness.[60] The poem alludes to these debates obliquely: Har rejects the notion that his desire originated in 'darkness' or 'ghosts,' insisting instead that it 'rose in me as naturally / as breath.' This line

[57] Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, 'Manor', in *Sailor Stories*, trans. by Michael Lombardi Nash (Jacksonville: Urania Manuscripts, 2023).
[58] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Garden City: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 154.
[59] Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 3.
[60] Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *The Riddle of "Man-Manly" Love: The Pioneering Work on Male Homosexuality*, Volume 1, trans. by Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), p. 36.

counters the nineteenth-century tendency to treat same-sex desire as dangerous or biologically aberrant. By allowing Har to speak in a calm and contemplative tone, I sought to represent homosexual desire as a coherent expression of human feeling.

Stylistically, the poem employs a restrained lyricism to mirror Har's emotional conflict. His longing for Manor is fervent but subdued by social fear. This produces a voice that oscillates between confession and withholding. The line breaks and short stanzas accentuate hesitancy and interruption, underscoring the unspoken nature of Har's desire. The poem avoids explicit erotic description and instead opts for a subtler sensuality—light falling across a body, the sound of footsteps, the way 'even the shadows brighten' in Manor's presence. This mixture of restraint and intensity reflects both the historical context and Har's internal struggle.

By giving Har a voice shaped by Paterian aesthetics, gothic atmosphere, and a contemporary reading that challenges nineteenth century ideas of what is natural, 'Har to Manor' reframes Ulrichs' early discourse on homosexuality as a field of ethical self-recognition. The poem thus aims to illuminate the lived, affective dimension of homosexual desire.

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‘There are no men here, so why should I be a woman?’: Transformation and the Exchange of Identity in Women’s Writing of the First World War

Sally Hamilton

By June 1915 — less than a year after the start of the First World War — 78,000 women had volunteered for war service. Within the next three years, 1.3 million were working, almost half of whom filled the void left by male enlistment. Members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps played key roles in the war and recorded their encounters in diaries, poems, autobiographies and novels. This paper considers the exchange and transformation of identity in the war years through the lens of women’s writing. It explores the position of female non-combatants and argues that their experiences — in transitional spaces such as field hospitals, repurposed buildings and ambulances — render their trauma equitable to that of the conflict’s male participants. It examines the erosion of traditional gender stereotyping and the rise of new and experimental modes of expression, in order to articulate both individual suffering and the collective experiences of a generation.

With the outbreak of war, women found themselves in a new and unique position: stepping into previously male-dominated roles at home and taking on indispensable responsibilities abroad. Female involvement in the war effort was tolerated under the assumption that while men were away fighting for the future and liberty of their families at home, female participation was temporary, a case of filling in and ‘doing their bit.’ Meanwhile, home (both conceptually and literally) remained a protected sphere. In direct contrast, portrayals of the euphemistically named ‘front’ depicted a masculine, dangerous and largely unknown space.

While these new roles provided a release of female energy, a revolution in socio-economic expectations, and a shake-up of the gender divide, they were not without sacrifice. Mary Borden was a wealthy American novelist, married to a Scottish missionary and with three young children, when war broke out in 1914. A desire to put her inheritance to use — while simultaneously escaping the confines of married life and the expectations of her social standing — led her to sign up with the French Red Cross. After a few months nursing in the unlikely location of a casino-turned-typhoid hospital in northern France, she took control of a mobile hospital in Belgium. It was while nursing in front-line hospitals that Borden was inspired to write *The Forbidden Zone*. Her unusual composition of poignant recollections and meandering poetry provides a graphic and candid account of the author’s wartime experiences.

A conventional style proved inadequate to express the experiences and trauma to which she was witness. Borden's refusal to submit to changes enforced by the military censors on first submission in 1917 meant that the book remained unpublished until 1929. In the preface, she refers to it as a 'collection of fragments' and 'fragments of a great confusion'. These disingenuous observations underplay the work's unique tone of sensory immersion and barbaric reality.

To understand it, one must look at its author's background and influences. Mary's pre-war London lifestyle saw her mixing in literary and artistic circles. Her friendships with Wyndham Lewis, Ford Maddox Ford, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, among others, imply a personal alignment with the Modernist movement. Equally, Borden's 1914 affair with Lewis undoubtedly played a part in shaping her artistic tastes. The experience of being transported from her comfortable London home and bohemian social life to the distorted landscapes and mutilated bodies of northern France and Belgium transformed Borden's literary style.

In Borden's world, men are dissected and emasculated, not by surgeons but by three enigmatic companions: 'a lascivious monster, a sick bad-tempered animal, and an angel: Pain, life and death.'[61] Pain lies in wait while nurses rush to provide medication, plump a pillow or hold a hand. Life 'mewls and whimpers' and Death 'comes silently.' While the colour green is typically associated with growth and renewal, here all aspects of the natural world are deformed, with the hue delineating gas gangrene and decomposition. War is a rabid dog, Pain is insatiable and obscene, and life is an injured animal. Trudi Tate refers to Borden's representation of the body and its parts on the operating table as 'an eroticised horror,'[62] suggesting that our voyeurism indicates a sordid delight in intimate scenes of injury and trauma. Borden's detailed depictions of the body here and in later sections in *The Forbidden Zone* are uncomfortably graphic and intimate. They indicate the inherent contradiction of this world of healing – its absence of humanity. These tropes are not unusual, and the decimation of masculinity is a much-researched topic in First World War studies. However, Borden's approach is significant due to her vantage point. She enters after the event has occurred, unlike first-hand literary witnesses – the more familiar soldier poets – who report events at the moment of attack, as a comrade or from a position of command. By contrast, Borden's narratives convey the consequences of war and of the physical and psychological pieces that those behind the lines were expected to recover and repair, at whatever cost.

In the No Man's Land of the field hospital, men are reduced to disfigured limbs and objects of horror, to be repaired and returned to the battlefield or discarded. Meanwhile, Borden and her staff remain disassociated from the people they seek to mend, complicit in feeding the insatiable war machine. Borden is brutally aware of the futility of her work but must prevent herself from becoming emotionally connected to it. They are not patients, merely limbs and

[61] Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (Hesperus, 2008), p. 40.
[62] Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester University Press 1998), p. 84.

organs: 'She is no longer a woman. She is dead already, just as I am — really dead, past resurrection.'[63] She extinguishes her senses: deafens her ears, blinds her eyes and shuts out all that makes her female in this de-sexualised sphere. The corpses are simply rubbish, part of the detritus of war, eventually sinking back into the mud in a macabre parody of the life cycle. Borden's assertion that she is no longer a woman both negates her sexuality and provides her with a means to free herself from the boundaries of gendered class-based stereotypes. However, this taste of freedom comes at a cost. Her hospital is an interim space where she and her staff work under relentless pressure, confined to temporary sheds and makeshift operating theatres.

Borden's success lies in compartmentalisation, moving deftly between the zones of war and personal relationships. While the narrator of *The Forbidden Zone* recites her experiences of war, Borden's private letters to her lover Louis Spears contain no references to the world outside, and next to no mention of any experiences outside their transitory and secret shared life. The physical and emotional landscapes Borden inhabits through her writing display the liminality of her experience. The world of disfigured bodies and death in the hospital contrasts starkly with the sensual space of physical and emotional love she shares with Spears.

The ever-changing form of Borden's remarkable writing style reflects her liminal position. Marcia Phillips McGowan suggests: 'An American who became British, then helped the French and English in two world wars, she felt equally at ease with Modernist prose and poetry, the romantic novel, drama, and the English sonnet.'[64] So who was the mercurial Mary Borden of *The Forbidden Zone*? The author herself provides an insight in her self-labelled description of her work as 'a collection of fragments'[65] – an interesting and pertinent explanation of the work's subject matter and style. The notion of collecting together disparate 'fragments' reflects the inherent chaos and uncertainty of the war, as well as of hospital life itself. The non-combatant and neutral observer will never be able to fully comprehend the catastrophic horror of war. Borden seeks to bridge this gap by using an abrupt, staccato and repetitive style, depersonalised and unconventional. She understood that a new experimental form was needed to record her experiences – not just of the war, but from her position as a female in this male-dominated sphere.

If men have been destroyed by the war, what have women become? If our notion of humanity has been extinguished, what are we left with? The idea of an 'us' and 'them' of the sexes has been overturned. Now the alien to be feared – the 'other' – is the technological advancement which prolongs this annihilation. While their new roles provided a release of female energy, a revolution in socio-economic expectations, and a shake-up of the gender divide, they were not

[63] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, p. 43.
[64] Marcia Phillips McGowan, '"Have I No Sanctuary to defend?"' *War, Literature and the Arts*, 162, (2015), p. 187.
[65] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, preface.

without sacrifice. Nurses faced the paradox of their role as both healer and facilitator of destruction.

In this dichotomy, Borden offers an objectified version of herself through the eyes of her patients. 'Her delicate body dressed in the white uniform of a hospital was exposed to the view of the officers and the regiment. Her head was bound close with a white kerchief. A red cross burned on her forehead. She was a beautiful animal dressed as a nun and branded with a red cross.'[66] As a patriarchal mark of ownership, the branding of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – particularly those viewed as outspoken and independent, alongside those accused of witchcraft – denoted their sin. Mary's depiction suggests a contradictory aberration, this signifier of depravity at odds with the sanctity of the saviour figure. In 'Sacred Skin: The Religious Significance of Medieval Scars', Kathryn Dickason explores the medieval notion of scars as transformative symbols of both sin and sanctity. Dickason posits that for devout medieval women, scars signified proof of their religious beliefs, existing because of their passage from darkness into the light. 'In a mystical context, women's scars could provide proof of the intimacy of a mystical encounter.'[67] Equally, scars are seen as a badge of honour – as Christ's wounds symbolise his divinity, the bodies of men mutilated in battle bear the outward signs of their courage. Their wounds 'function as a religious sign as opposed to a mere sign of injury.'[68] Borden elevates the position of women in war by denoting the nurse's scars as both a mark of her service and of her piety. The contradictions of Mary's position are apparent. Her innocence is exposed to the male gaze, her attire is corporeal, yet her purpose – a divine figure, with the ability to both sustain and end life – is omnipotent.

Women in the war years trod a liminal space. In 'Constructions of "Home", "Front," and Women's Military Employment in First World-War Britain', Krisztina Robert considers the theory of heterotopic space, in which recognised locations are requisitioned for another purpose. She observes the 'places of otherness, both imagined and real, that exist on the sidelines.'[69] Borden's hospital is one such site, whether in a field in Flanders, behind the lines on the Somme, or in a typhoid hospital in a repurposed casino in Northern France. Borden and her nurses are the custodians of these spaces, but their presence is temporary, their roles undefined. As the boundaries of war move, so must they. As non-combatants, their experiences were not viewed as authentic, yet their roles made them vital participants.

When women occupied the previously male-dominated world of war, they became eyewitnesses to the atrocities inflicted on the male body. Laurie Kaplan notes the disconnect between the familiar form of autobiographical memoir and its content: the visceral reality of

[66] Ibid., p. 28.
[67] Kathryn Dickason, 'Sacred Skin: The Religious Significance of Medieval Scars', *Signs and Society*, 10.1 (2013), p. 23.
[68] Ibid., p. 31.
[69] Krisztina Robert, 'Constructions of "Home," "Front," and Women's Military Employment in First World War Britain: A spatial interpretation', *History and Theory*, 52.3, (2013), p.322.

male mutilation.[70] This is the focus of Borden's attention. Her journey through the hospital portrays soldiers as misshapen commodities: faces torn apart, bodies irreversibly damaged, reduced to the vulnerability of an animal. It requires us to challenge accepted female norms of subject matter and expression.

The male body's relationship to the machine came into sharp focus in the First World War. The conflict's technological advancements increased its ability to kill and maim, as well as to destroy the psychological integrity of the self. Modernity can therefore be aligned with the destruction of the male, a debate taken up by Rita Felski, Allison Pease and Celia Marshik, amongst others.[71] Men sent to the trenches are likened to clothes being repeatedly washed and mended, before they are finally discarded through overuse:

> You sew up the tears and clip the ravelled edges again and again, just as many times as they will stand it. And then you throw them away. And then we send out men to the war again and again, just as long as they will stand it; just until they are dead, and then we throw them into the ground.[72]

The stretch of road from the battlefield to the hospital is a purgatorial production line, transporting the wounded to be repaired, and then back to the front.

Bodies at war, both injured and dead, consume war writing – unsurprising, given that half of all British dead left no identifiable trace. While these remains – whole or in parts – were intensely distressing for those still fighting, they were also macabrely useful and even comforting. War memoirs describe ghoulish scenes of long-deceased comrades holding up trench walls. Petrified limbs protrude from seams of hardened mud, a border between the living and the dead, lingering and not to be forgotten. The remains of previous battalions are as prevalent as the rats. Unburied, they create a connection with the landscape and serve as a perpetual reminder of the stalemate of war, where months and years are spent fighting over the same small stretch of soil.

In *Modernism, History and the First World War*, Trudi Tate refers to Borden's representation of the body and its parts on the operating table as 'an eroticised horror,'[73] suggesting an uncomfortable and sordid delight in such intimate scenes of injury and trauma. Her depictions of the body are graphic and voyeuristic. It is an exhibition piece, reduced to bones, muscles, sinews and blood, into which Borden ghoulishly gazes. 'We dig into the yawning mouths of his

[70] Laurie Kaplan, 'Deformities of the Great War: The Narratives of Mary Borden and Helen Zenna Smith', *Women and Language*, 27:2, (2004), pp. 35-43.
[71] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Harvard University Press, 1995) and Celia Marshik and Allison Pease, *Modernism, Sex and Gender* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).
[72] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, p. 79.
[73] Tate, *Modernism*, p. 84.

wounds […]. We plunge deep into his body […]. His body does not belong to him. It belongs to us for the moment.'[74] The trope of the soldier ceasing to exist is well-established, but when used here, it suggests more than just army institutionalism. We – the surgeon, the nurses, the observer – are complicit in our lust for ownership, addicted to exploring and experimenting on the shattered body. Borden's language suggests a vampiric bloodlust. Ghouls prey on the transformed soldier, without whom they cease to exist.

In a section written shortly before publication, Borden admits with the objectivity of hindsight: 'looking back, I do not understand that woman — myself — standing in that confused goods yard filled with bundles of broken human flesh […]. I think that woman, must have been in a trance or under some horrid spell.'[75] The suggestion of a transformative enchantment is intriguing, as is the description of her surgeon as a 'wizard.' Perhaps the mysterious performances at the hospital are simply cunning sleight-of-hand tricks, concealing (and condoning) the war's appalling handiwork. The depiction of men being cooked back to life conjures the unsettling notion of a Frankensteinian metamorphosis and a reversal of the natural order. Unsurprisingly, Borden has lost her appetite:

> I do not want any supper. I am not hungry. I am not tired, I am busy. My eyes are busy and my fingers. I am conscious of nothing about myself but my eyes, hands and feet. My feet are a nuisance, they are swollen, hurting lumps.[76]

She watches herself travel robotically around the wards, fuelled by the adrenaline rush of responsibility. She observes herself objectively: 'she moves ceaselessly about with bright burning eyes and handles the dreadful wreckage of men as if in a dream.'[77]

While women were experiencing the demands and suffering of working in munitions factories, driving ambulances and nursing near the front lines, their male counterparts found themselves quite literally stuck in the mud, providing food for the war machine and sustenance for the earth and the creatures that lived off it. The composition of the landscape shifts as bodies are buried and resurface. This recurrent movement is inevitable, a reminder of the life cycle and of our symbiotic relationship with the environment. Traditionally, the earth is a place of sanctuary and growth. But in this space, humans and their mechanical creations churn up and destroy the natural order. Distortions of cognitive and geographic space exist in hastily built environments within the war-torn landscape. Dugouts, trench systems and temporary hospitals re-order the terrain to adapt and prepare for a new purpose. Trenches provide temporary safety but are also a prison; the earth protects but is also a grave. The living and

[74] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, pp. 80-81.
[75] Ibid., pp. 98-99.
[76] Ibid., p. 101.
[77] Ibid., p. 99.

the dead coexist, and mud slurps and smothers, an omnipresent and unavoidable organic antagonist. Potentially as dangerous as the mechanical creatures of land and sky, mud can both nurture and extinguish life, transforming itself from benign irritant to threat. Liquid mud solidifies as it wraps around the body, a malign and unnatural substance, divesting men of their individuality.

In 'The Song of the Mud', first published in the *English Review* in 1917, Borden combines unconventional absurdity and claustrophobic menace. Mud is a living creature, insinuating its way into the armies of nations, a furtive and destructive force. Fascinating yet repulsive, with the ability to both disguise and protect, it is amalgamated with the excrement of battle. Coating and concealing the broken machines, human waste and mutilated bodies of men and horses, it provides an armour that transcends rank, race and gender. A French soldier is transformed into a king under its mantle, in a gleefully parodic swipe at the absurdity of the conflict:

> His head is crowned with a helmet of mud.
> He wears it well.
> He wears it as a king wears the ermine that bores him.
> He has set a new style in clothing;
> He has introduced the chic of mud.[78]

In 'The City in the Desert', Borden shies away from confirming her location, drifting through the surreal landscape as it slips away from the earthly constraints of wire and iron. Her voice is that of an alien visitor to an unknown and inhospitable land. She questions our place in time and space, using a psychogeographic approach to connect humanity's relationship with the environment with its effects on our emotions and behaviours. Biblical philosophy and evolutionary teachings collide, as Borden remarks on the collapse of the natural order and the disruption of the established rationale of science.

> Perhaps there has been a new flood, since Noah, and you and I slept through it. Perhaps a new race of men has been hatched out of the mud, hatched like news, slugs, larvae of water beetles […] a silly shelter against the wrath of God.[79]

We are presented with an in-between zone, an uninhabited pause in temporal existence, 'where a flood has passed and another flood will come.'[80] Borden proceeds to play with the trope through an allegorical reading that echoes the Biblical catastrophe. The Flood marks the regeneration of humanity and creates the potential to begin anew. However, after the flood

[78] Mary Borden, *Poems of Love and War*, ed. by Paul O'Prey, (Dare-Gale Press), p. 28.
[79] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, pp. 74 – 75.
[80] Ibid., p. 75.

waters recede in Borden's portrayal, all that remains is a space between the ebb and flow. The discarded remnants of war plummet into a rupture in time, leaving a landscape where redemption and renewal seem a distant dream.

Spectral figures carry mysterious parcels of 'shameful merchandise,' 'stuff,' 'heavy brown bundles' and 'inert lumps,' only discernible by their labels. These shapes are men by association, but with none of their attributes: they don't walk or talk, they don't protest, and they lie inert. They have returned to the soil, encrusted with mud and rusting in the backwash.[81] The closer we move towards them, the more we see them for what they are: 'broken and tied together with white rags,' 'without arms and faces,' 'dreadful holes.' The receding ocean of armies has left behind a burial ground: 'They are lost men, wrecked men, survivors from that other world that was here before the flood passed this way, washed up against the shore of this world again by the great backwash.'[82]

As with her female contemporaries, Borden's response to trauma – of those around her and her own – is complex and bound up with the expectations of and limitations on her sex. She is responsible for the workings of her hospital, where she must leave subjective emotions aside. Disregarding fear and disgust, Borden continues to attend to the wounded and the dying, clean and replace dressings, support her staff and remain in control.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva draws on psychoanalytic theories to explore the socio-cultural phenomenon of abjection. Read as a primal response to traumatic experiences, Kristeva suggests that human reactions such as fear, horror and disgust are abject. They precede the establishment of social norms and indicate the fragile veneer separating cultured society from our uncivilised predecessors. Our revulsion response indicates a rejection of the unpalatable reality of existence, and perhaps a fear of the unknown – a loss of identity, the transformation of the self, and the ultimate degradation of death. In the decaying body, individual identity disappears. Empty vessels in a deserted landscape, they serve as a reminder of the purgatorial zone between the living and the dead:

> The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. […] Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identify that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.[83]

[81] Iron, the most common element on earth, corrodes the waste of war and returns it to the soil.
[82] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, p. 76.
[83] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (Columbia University Press 1982), pp. 3-4, 71.

Contemporary feminist criticism acknowledges the power of Kristeva's work but also questions a narrow focus on the abjection of the maternal. Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous Feminine*, 1993) expands on Kristeva's theory of the patriarchal abjection of the female body, in relation to cinematic horror depictions. Feminists such as Imogen Tyler (*Against Abjection*, 2009) question Kristeva's focus on patriarchal depictions of the female body as abject, arguing for a wider definition. The abject must surely include a broader social shift. However, Kristeva's theory remains pertinent when applied to the breakdown of order, the transformative state from living body to corpse, and the liminality of existence in the war zone. In the transitory field hospital, we are forced to confront the abject. Through the eyes of nurses and surgeons, it becomes the focus of our attention.

Mary Borden came to the war as a fiction writer and society heiress. Meanwhile, by the time Ellen La Motte volunteered in 1915, she had trained as a nurse, supervised at a hospital and established herself as a specialist in the treatment of tuberculosis. Although she had published a medical textbook two years previously, she was not a novelist. While she would later publish some fiction stories, her writing remained largely within the sphere of medicine and social reform. These interests form the foundation of her approach in *The Backwash of War* (1916). From the outset her message is clearly stated, providing a vivid and pointed critique of patriarchy and patriotism. Having met Borden via their mutual friend Gertrude Stein, La Motte decided to join her younger countrywoman at the latter's hospital in Belgium. Although easy to read in parallel – similarly structured and detailing comparable events – there are clear distinctions between their texts. *The Backwash of War* is significant for its direct gaze. La Motte's satirical voice and open criticism of the politics of war indicate her attitude toward the treatment of soldiers as a commodity. We are forced to look at mangled bodies and relentlessly violent images of physical and mental trauma: an amalgam of displaced limbs, bodily fluids and relentless misery. By contrast, the challenging imagery in Borden's work is softened by the narrative's poetic flow and a reminder of the selfless care the soldiers receive.

In '"Gripping, Grewsome, Great": Re-Encountering Ellen La Motte's The Backwash of War through the Lens of Obscenity', Layne Parish Craig notes La Motte's 'sardonic wit' as a cornerstone of her work as a Modernist. Although acerbic humour is central to her work, this device is unlikely to be a conscious drive towards a specific artistic movement. La Motte's medical background placed her in a unique position in comparison to her literary nursing contemporaries, none of whom had previous medical knowledge before volunteering. In contrast, La Motte's years of experience had exposed her to far more than her Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) colleagues. It is likely that, to some extent, it inured her to the relentless sickness and injury of wartime nursing. While the tone of LaMotte's work is calmly unshakeable, her strident satirical voice criticises the politics of warfare and the treatment of soldiers as a commodity. It is no surprise that the text was banned upon publication in Britain and France. It received the same fate from the American government in 1918 and was not republished until 1934.

La Motte was uncertain as to the reasons for the initial censorship of her book, noting in the introduction to its 1934 publication that she had not been given 'official notice' as to the decision, and offering the acerbic comment 'The Government, it appeared, did not care for the book.' Craig notes the assumption that La Motte's obvious opposition to the war was the primary reason for the book's suppression, but adds that the text's 'vulgar physicality' clearly played a part. While modern mechanised warfare necessitated – and in part produced – the stylistic challenge of Modernist expression, society appeared unable to stomach the stark realism of its attendant creativity. The contemporary reading public (and specifically, the paranoid American government) were not quite forward-thinking enough for brutal truths, especially at the hands of women. Transformed from the Angel in the House into Boadicea with a bedpan[84] La Motte, Borden and their nursing colleagues faced public outrage at the audacity of their honesty.

In La Motte's depiction of the brutal reality of war, she observes the 'awful interval, between life and death.'[85] Similarly, Borden writes:

> My hands could instantly tell the difference between the cold of the harsh bitter night and the stealthy cold of death […]. I could tell from the way they twitched, from the peculiar shade of a pallid face, from the look of tight pinched-in nostrils, and in other ways which I could not have explained, that this or that one was slipping over the edge of the beach of life.[86]

In this moment, we are reminded of the constant requirement of the female war worker to exchange her humanity and sense of self for detachment and duty, and to transform herself into a machine in order to keep the repressed horror of the abject at bay.

While Borden and La Motte wrote from personal experience, novelist and journalist Evadne Price chose the diaries of an unknown female ambulance driver and assumed the pseudonym Helen Zenna Smith to voice her response to the war. When an enterprising publisher approached Price to write a pastiche of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1929, with the 'quiet' to be replaced with 'quaint' and to be penned by 'Erica Remarks,' Price refused to be a part of this cynical cash-in. Instead, she vowed to create an honest female interpretation and swiftly produced a part-memoir-part-fiction hybrid. *Not So Quiet*, published in 1930, became an immediate bestseller. It is noteworthy for several reasons. It is not solely a unique example of female anti-war dialectic, but is also unique in its challenging style and

[84] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (1854); Penelope Gilliatt 'The Redhead', in *What's It Like Out?* (1968).
[85] Ellen La Motte, *The Backwash of War* (Putnam 1916), p. 86.
[86] Borden, *Forbidden Zone*, p. 95 – 96.

unvarnished presentation of the physical and psychological transformations inflicted by the conflict on its female participants. Through a first-person narrative, Smithy (also known as Nell) charts the experiences of a group of female ambulance drivers on the French front as they face the privations, frustrations and danger of their position. The storyline relentlessly explores the grinding minutiae of daily life at the camp. Descriptions of inedible and unidentifiable food, lice, illness and the biting cold accompany scenes of fear and revulsion at relentless injury and death. Simultaneously, Smithy delivers a forceful critique of armchair Nationalists and the vanity of authoritarianism.

While Borden's critical voice is nuanced, disguised under layers of poetic prose and an intentionally disingenuous tone, Price's condemnatory account leaves no room for misapprehension. Any naïve preconception of the glory of war is refuted in her blunt assertion that its reality is just 'vomit and blood,'[87] and in her candid avowal of patriarchal culpability:

> Our enemies aren't the Germans. Our enemies are the politicians we pay to keep us out of war and who are too damned inefficient to do their jobs properly. After two thousand years of civilisation, this folly happens. It is time women took a hand. The men are failures.[88]

Nell is so traumatised by the death of her best friend Tosh that she is no longer able to sleep or to fulfil her role as a driver. She is tormented by nightly visions of death and mutilation. The ghosts of past events and future imaginings stalk her dreams:

> Whenever I close my aching red eyes a procession of men passes before me: maimed men; men with neither arms nor legs; gassed men, coughing, coughing, coughing; men with dreadful burning eyes; men with heads and faces half shot away; raw, bleeding men with the skin burned from their upturned faces; tortured, all watching me as I lie in my flea-bag trying to sleep […] an endless procession of horror that will not let me rest.[89]

Time ceases to be linear. The past will not stay in its place, and spectral visions are as substantial as the corporeal. As memories and dreams in the form of 'ghosts' repeatedly encroach on Nell's waking life, she becomes less able to comfortably exist in the present. 'I'm only twenty-one and nobody cares because I've been pitchforked into hell, nobody cares because I'm going mad, mad, mad,' Nell screams.[90] Nightmares and reality have become interchangeable. Repeated images of ghosts and madness provide a sense of the psychological

[87] Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet* (Virago 1988), p. 57.
[88] Ibid., p. 55.
[89] Ibid., pp. 162 – 163.
[90] Ibid., pp. 33 – 34.

devastation caused by the war's apocalyptic events, as well as a scathing reproach of the society that has caused it. Young men and women have been transformed into empty shells, tormented by visions of death and destruction, while war is seen as glorious to those back home. Nell repeatedly ponders life after the hostilities, noting the irreversibility of the social changes brought by war. She asks: 'What is to become of us when the killing is over.'[91] Haunted by her generation's lost future and their sacrifice of freedom, she acknowledges that '[t]here is no lasting happiness for this stricken generation of mine […] I am content to drift along in the present. The past has gone; I have no future … I want no future.'[92]

The displacement experienced by demobbed nurses is explored in several texts of the post-war years. Although infrequently reprinted, these remain an important contribution to the body of work written by women in direct response to their wartime experiences. Both Borden's novels of the period and those of her female contemporaries present a world of difficult adjustment and social silencing. Women were expected to resume their pre-war responsibilities and disregard the independence they had been offered during the previous four years. Lines demarcating the division of gender roles were blurred during the war, but with its cessation, women were once more relegated to life at home.

Published a few years after *The Forbidden Zone*, *Sarah Gay* (1931) continues Borden's preoccupation with the role of women in wartime. Personal upheaval amid the theatre of war is the novel's central theme. The 'freedom, exhilarating activity and romance'[93] inspired by the conflict brings a level of hedonism into the lives of its protagonists, who in turn make impulsive and dramatic choices. Sarah begins as a stable and proficient nurse – 'strong, serious, quick, and not squeamish' – but an infatuated affair, the cruelty of her husband and the judgment of her peers, set against the turbulent backdrop of war, serve to undermine her confidence and lead to the unravelling of Sarah's sense of self.

Like Mary, Sarah struggles with a conflict between her desire for liberty, self-expression and the demands of society's expectations. Although the narrative voice remains objective, Borden deftly portrays the dislocation facing women after the war. Laurie Kaplan notes the psychological effect of demobilisation on women, observing that '[w]hen their units were disbanded, fictional nurses returned home along with their real-life colleagues and found domesticity claustrophobic, alienating and a source of social displacement.'[94] In America, the novel was published as *Sarah Defiant* – an indication of the heroine's personality and her attitude to social pressure. After defying convention and leaving her husband and young children behind to join the war effort (a choice generally only afforded to men, and in direct

[91] Ibid., p. 167.
[92] Ibid., pp. 203.
[93] Mary Borden, *Sarah Gay* (Heinemann 1931), p. 17.
[94] Laurie Kaplan, 'When the War Was Over: The Return of the War Nurse', in *Writings of Persuasion and Dissonance in the Great War* (Brill 2016), p. 65.

parallel with Mary's life), Sarah finds herself alienated. She is punished by her husband's controlling patriarchal actions and humiliated by her lover's romantic dalliances. Sarah is oppressed and controlled by men of social standing, their superior public positions providing a smokescreen to their controlling behaviour.

Although initially empowered by the war, women such as Sarah – and Mary – found themselves acquiescing in its aftermath, despite the emasculation and struggle for social acceptance of their male counterparts. Finding a return to domesticity claustrophobic and limiting, female writers of the 1920s and 1930s exposed 'the myth of the return home and the happy family reunion,'[95] in which women found themselves socially demoted: 'virtual nobodies […] invisible.'[96] In the case of *Sarah Gay*, the heroine returns to a life of abusive domesticity, one which she can only escape through the death of her husband and an illicit affair. None of these women expresses satisfaction in their post-war narratives; the tone of the inter-war years is one of resignation and pessimism.

Mary Borden was not alone as a female writer whose war experiences informed her post-war writing. In *We That Were Young* (1932), Irene Rathbone provides a semi-autobiographical account of her encounters and those of her cousin and friends as VAD nurses and YMCA workers. Stripped of her newfound independence, she finds herself set adrift, time suspended, and the future uncertain:

> And suddenly it came over Joan that though this was the Present it was already the Past […]. This moment lay in the past. The ghosts of five blue English girls would haunt forever, in a sunshine that would never fade, the old ivy-hung courtyard. The life of the village would go on as before, but this house would stand empty, given over to ghosts.[97]

Like Borden, Rathbone employs imagery of unnatural mutations and grotesque monsters to express her anger and frustration. The war is 'obscene', destroying everything in its wake, just as Borden's 'regiment of monsters' creeps malevolently over the land, their iron teeth bared, 'crushing under their bellies whatever stood in their way.'[98] Both women explore the consequences of war on both the natural and manufactured environment, and the change to their own status in its aftermath. Returning to a world in which they struggle to adapt, and in which 'pre-war interests had vanished almost as though they had never been,'[99] Rathbone's is a novel of loss. It mourns the vacuum left by the war, and the struggles of demobilisation into a society ill-equipped and unwilling to face and adjust to the challenges of trauma. 'The results

[95] Ibid., p. 66.
[96] Ibid., p. 68.
[97] Ibid., p. 406.
[98] Borden, *Poems of Love and War*, p. 21.
[99] Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young* (Virago 1988), p. 430.

of it were all around, distressing, insistent; and the men who for so many years had been heroes were now "returned soldiers", a problem to their country, if not a bore.'[100]

Rathbone's novel ends in 1928 – on the tenth anniversary of the armistice – as Joan looks back on her generation's transformation and faces the ghosts of the past. She and her contemporaries have been irreversibly shaped by the conflict; their youth and innocence exchanged for cynicism and experience. Their sacrifices and the trauma of handling the human wreckage of war have changed their perspectives on both their writing and their place in the world. As they step out of the war zone at the front and back to no woman's land at home, some of their battles are only just beginning. The date of the novel's closure not only marks a decade since the end of the war, but also the advent of the Equal Franchise Act, reducing women's voting age to twenty-one. On the partial suffrage that women had been granted ten years previously, Rathbone's mouthpiece Joan sardonically remarks: 'the vote was given to some women over 30 in 1918 'as a reward for "war service", rather like a chocolate is given to a child who has behaved unexpectedly well under trying circumstances.'[101] Joan expresses the continued inequity of suffrage, where women were 'rewarded' rather than respected, pacified by, yet inferior to, those with the power to bestow such a prize. Their years of service and sacrifice did not appear to warrant equality.

Injured ex-servicemen faced the same fate of embarrassment and displacement under the guise of compensation. The paradigm of masculinity was challenged in the war years, the enthusiasm of widespread enlistment and jingoistic depictions of the Allied Powers' undaunted strength and virility surrendering to the figure of a vulnerable, injured soldier, passive under female control. While the dead were being venerated, their surviving comrades found themselves commodified and financially categorised by their deficits. One in six adult men was killed or wounded in the war, and those who did survive found themselves dealing with an increasingly bureaucratic and restrictive reparation system. Calculations of war pensions were based on the level of disfigurement. The percentage of pension provided was based on absence: the loss of two or more limbs warranted a full payment, a leg amputated above the knee received 60%, while one below was reduced to 50%. Even the number of fingers lost, and the hand affected, impacted the amount of compensation. Shell shock had its distinctions – reparation dependent on whether it was temporary (and thus potentially a pre-existing mental health condition) or as a direct result of enemy action.

In the novel *Jane--Our Stranger* (1923), Borden explores familial and female relationships, the restrictions of marriage, and the displacement of her titular character, an American set adrift in upper-class Parisian society. For Jane, as for Mary, the war brings belief from the confines of her existence and a chance to reinvent herself:

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

> The War came — and with it the end of a world. I sometimes think that God's final Day of Judgment will not be so very different. The Edict will go out from Heaven. Life will stop. Humanity suddenly arrested on the edge of time will look over the precipice of Eternity.[102]

Like Mary, Jane acts accordingly, exchanging the limitations of marriage and motherhood for a nurse's uniform, and finds release in the all-consuming responsibilities of war. She experiences solace in turning her prison of domesticity into a sanctuary of recuperation. 'I enjoyed filling the place with rows of white iron beds and glass-topped tables and basins and pails and bottles and bandages. It had been a hateful house, it made a good hospital.'[103] Her satisfaction in the role of cleaner, nurse and carer echoes Borden's sentiments in *The Forbidden Zone*: 'And I was happy. It seemed to me that the crazy corded bright hot shelter was a beautiful place.'[104] Some of the most powerful sections of the novel lie in Jane's caustic observations on the failings of the post-war world:

> And the peace they had fought for became in the hands of diplomats and politicians a tawdry thing […]. The war was not a fine thing. […] It was an obscene monster. […] Courage, faith, hope, self-sacrifice, all the dreams of men were poured into its jaws and disappeared. Nothing was left but broken men, and a ruined earth. […] Reparation! Everyone was talking of reparation! […] I wanted to get out of this crowd of jabbering diplomats. I wanted to get away and think things out, but I couldn't.[105]

Jane's disgust at society's blind allegiance to those who instigated the conflict is evident. Her war is a monster, crawling out of the land, devouring the remains of civilisation in its rabid jaws, juxtaposed with the 'jabbering' diplomats,' whose own mouths work overtime as they apportion blame and shirk responsibility. If war is a malign being, so too are those who encourage and continue it, indistinguishable monsters both at home and abroad. She sees no glory in victory, witnessing only the human waste and suffering of conflict. Jane is Mary – an American adrift in Europe, an outsider whose allegiances are challenged and who must express what she sees. Rathbone's Joan is equally irritated by the pomp and symbolism of the armistice:

> For the ceremony was at the same time beautiful, futile, and a reproach. It was also a species of let off. "Remember for two minutes;

[102] Borden, *Jane--Our Stranger* (Heinemann 1924), p. 316.
[103] Ibid., p. 317.
[104] Ibid., p. 97.
[105] Ibid., pp. 322 – 324.

> you can then forget, and resume". As though one wanted to remember — in that fashion; as though one wanted to forget.[106]

The frustration and uncertainty generated by this momentary temporal pause create an interval in which memories of the past crowd the present. In these purgatorial two minutes, a tidal wave of suppressed emotions threatens to obliterate any attempts at peace and healing in the interim years of the war's unpleasant aftermath. This annual interlude of memorial encouraged obligatory introspection and a rising sense of dissatisfaction as time passed. In *The Crowded Street* (1924), Winifred Holtby's heroine Muriel Hammond pronounces her disappointment with the post-war year in which the token acknowledgement of the two-minutes silence does not mitigate the oppressive months in between: 'months of intoxicating rapture, disorganisation, irritating delays, and disillusionment.'[107] Observing the 'pessimistic endings' of these novels, Kaplan suggests that women's lives were once again spoiled, not only by war but also by its aftermath, 'the long, stagnant weekend between the wars.'[108] Unable to adjust or communicate their experiences to those left at home, female writers increasingly began to express their own responses to the war and its disheartening aftermath.

Although *The Forbidden Zone* and *The Backwash of War* – emblems of forgotten areas and disregarded people – are not completely verifiable versions of truth, they were reality for La Motte and Borden. The latter's refusal to tone down her manuscript implies the veracity of her text, as does the censorship which governments exercised to shield the innocent public from these authors' unpalatable truths. Their unashamed and grotesque displays of fragmented bodies illustrate the intersection between the medical gaze and trauma theory. Through a fetishised emphasis on the shocking and the abnormal, they seek to make sense of what they have witnessed. This is a challenge for the reader. By their nature, memoirs are subjective, and if edited after the event, these recollections can – intentionally or otherwise – be dramatised. In recording a personal experience, there will inevitably be a level of inconsistency and omission, the narrator treading a line between fact and fiction as they seek to relay and make sense of events.

Their shared location automatically creates joint experiences, and reading both women's texts concurrently gives a congruency to their accounts, helping to resolve any ambiguity as to their reliability. La Motte's language is professional, consistent and tinged with scathing irony. Her portraits are penned with an objective and brutal tone. Meanwhile, Borden tempers her critique with poetic language and an ever-changing narrative voice, drawing her reader in through her crafted depictions. As American female writers adrift in Europe, working and living in a male-dominated field, they record their impressions of the tumult of war, employing new

[106] Ibid., p. 463.
[107] Ibid., p. 258.
[108] Kaplan, 'When The War Was Over: The Return of the War Nurse', p. 77.

forms of expression in an attempt to make sense of their own experiences and come to terms with their trauma.

So, which comes first – subject matter or style? Carol Acton suggests that writers such as Borden used their work to communicate the traumatic events they witnessed, with the resultant dislocation of style and language being unconscious symptoms of shell shock. In an opposing reading of trauma and narrative structure, Margaret Higgonet argues that Borden's language and style are deliberately curated and articulated. Borden utilises Modernist techniques to express traumatic events and to analyse their impact and consequences. Although both readings hold weight, it is also important to take into account Borden's unique position at the hospital as both observer and participant, and the significance of space and distance in war writing. The soldiers Borden looks after have come from battle. They have witnessed events that have taken place elsewhere and which she is unable to imagine or describe. She sees only the aftermath, with anything preceding this moment existing in a forbidden zone – unspoken and unrepresented.

Borden desired to present the unvarnished reality of war – evidenced by her refusal to adhere to the restrictive retractions requested by Collins when she first approached them to publish *The Forbidden Zone* in 1917. The variety of styles and subject matter in Borden's poetry and prose makes any attempt to neatly compartmentalise problematic and unnecessary. She is best read from a more fluid, less binary position, the movement of her language creating a series of 'impressions' and experiences. She writes in a dynamic, free-flowing style – as evidenced in both her published and private writing – and as such, her accounts provide a reactive in-the-moment narrative of her experiences. While she was both a Suffragette and a feminist, she was also a nurse, novelist, poet, lover, wife and mother, and her works should be read as representative of all of the different strands of her life: of dynamic expressions of her personality, experiences and beliefs, rather than solely formulaic exemplars of Modernist practice.

It is via the voices of these women that we gain insight into the experiences of female non-combatants behind the lines. For emancipated women like Mary Borden and Ellen La Motte – American citizens who chose to help the French and English armies in Europe – this necessitated direct involvement with the unmentionable and unpalatable realities of war: the repellent, festering landscape and the surviving victims, disabled, mutilated and helpless. Exploring the displacement experienced by demobbed nurses and ambulance workers, women writers portrayed the quiet desperation of those who faced danger, trauma, and loss while fulfilling their duty. On returning home, they discovered that their newfound skills were largely unwanted. From positions of life-saving power, they were expected to transform back into their pre-war selves, resume former responsibilities and refute the independence they had experienced. Adrift, demoted and displaced, they found themselves invisible once again. By writing about their experiences, they sought a voice for their anger and an outlet for their

grief. When finally published, these women's experiences began to be acknowledged as authentic records of service – different to those of their male contemporaries, but equally worthy. By the time that the 'long stagnant weekend' was over, and the Second World War had begun, the generation of women who had come of age in 1914–18 was looking for fresh challenges and new responsibilities.

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The Dirt Woman

Imogen Dobson

Under a shroud of clouds and trembling rain, you pick your way over the darkened pavement. The street is illuminated by streetlamps and dapples of moonlight, yet somehow the area is as black as pitch. You are aboveground, but once you spot the park, you feel as if you are descending into the subterranean.

For a moment you are bathed in the light of the full moon. The hair on your arms stands up. You are suddenly reminded of werewolves, and against better judgement, you let out a small, cynical chuckle. Like those mythical creatures, you too are transformed during the night. You are no longer a young woman, a mother, a person, at least not to others roaming in the dark. You are the dirt woman.

The sound of your laugh travels, startling those nearby. A man furtively emerges from an alleyway with his hood up and belt unbuckled. Instinctively, you turn and spy a straggly-haired girl he left behind, kneeling near a wheelie bin. She is starved down to slats and is preparing a tourniquet. Darkness eats your bones and your blood chills.

An open window grabs your attention, and you cannot help peering inside. The dimly lit room is a poisoned lung: all browns and reds and filled with vape smoke. Within the cracked walls, men are sprawled on maroon leather chairs, leering and laughing amid the thrum of rap music. Young girls with bodies as thin as wishbones circle the room, sitting on laps and pouring whiskies. Baggies of white powder are brought out, and someone rushes to close the curtain. Colour leaks from your heart and you quickly move along.

It is not like your home is any better. It is a dingy flat for you and your daughter, with leaky pipes and scratchy upholstery. A young man is growing weed on the roof, the old woman downstairs often mutters racist epithets, and the screaming matches from the couple across the hall are worthy of *Jeremy Kyle*. But it does not matter, because you are not the dirt woman there.

A car slices through the road, rattling roof tiles as it passes shops with spiderwebs of smashed glass. You shiver as you remember how you used to work inside. The walls were rough and grainy like dried skin, and the rumpled bedsheets looked like torn flesh, but it was easier to service a client there, because you knew there was someone else looking out for you, another girl in the flat.

Make no mistake, you changed there too. You do not need to be outside to be a dirt woman. Your skin would shed, leaving a blank slate behind. From there you would paint an alluring smile on your face, dress your voice in silk, and perform for men with manes of hair, leonine smirks, and pointed teeth. Your transformation hurt, but it became easier to manage. Always a knife, but a knife through hot butter.

One time a client brought a Tupperware box to the flat. It was filled with dirt, and he asked you to eat it for him. You refused, but he insisted.

'Just a spoonful, please. I'll pay extra.'

His tone was smooth and well-practised. Honey with a forked tongue.

So you did it. You chewed the soil, which squelched in your mouth and burned your throat, and then you swallowed, fighting every urge in your body not to gag. The dirt woman incarnate, you realised after. There is no metaphor.

Your friend told you to never let him back in and forced you into the bath. Later that week she took you to a march in central London. You did not show your faces, donning carnivalesque masks and feathered outfits instead. Using words like weapons, you shouted and stamped your feet and demanded change right with her, and you even made the news, but nothing came of it. The police formed a kettle and arrested some of you instead.

This police reaction made you miserable, but the worst was yet to come. According to the authorities, your arrangement in the flat constituted a brothel. One stormy evening, when you were lucky enough to not be working, the flat was raided by the police. They claimed your friend had been sex trafficked, and she was deported back to the country she had escaped from.

The memory burns in the hollows and dells of your mind.

Afraid of impending raids, you now submit yourself to the streets. Of course, camming is easier, but you cannot afford to pay the provider this month.

What would your daughter think, to know that her mother transformed into the dirt woman every night? She was too young to understand now, but that could change in a few years. You picture slipping quietly back into your flat and treading to the bathroom, where you usually scrub yourself clean by the basin. The swill and scrap and semen falls away, and Mummy resurfaces. But what if she saw? Imagine: just as you reach for the bar of soap, the door creaks open, and she catches you there with your ruffled hair, running mascara, and wide eyes.

'Who are you?' she would ask. 'Where's Mummy?'

Usually, when you are the dirt woman, your thoughts rarely drift to your daughter. But tonight, only a few days after the loss of your friend, paranoia and fear lives under your skin. You scratch nervously at your wrists.

Kerb-crawling is just as illegal as brothels, so when a car slows down, drinking in your body as your jacket flaps open like a bird's wing, you only have a split-second to decide whether to service him.

There is every chance he could be a serial killer. Jack the Ripper is hardly a shadow lost to the mists of time. Your mind races to the legislative updates, news stories, and general alerts regularly posted on activism forums and threads. For instance, you recall the murder of Lenuta Haidemac. Her killer admired the infamous Victorian so much he scrawled 'Jack' onto her lifeless torso.

Only yesterday, in the gloom of the overhanging park, just behind a railing enveloped in nettles, you blew a guy with balls shrivelled like cooked mushrooms. Your knees, uncomfortably situated amongst the swollen tree roots, almost gave out. When his searing lust was spent, he only paid you half the promised amount. When you objected, he threw you to the ground and kicked you in the stomach. At least you did not die during the assault, like Daria Pionko.

Even without the fear of self-incrimination, nobody would care about a complaint you could submit. The ex-Chief Constable of the Wiltshire Police unashamedly admitted that he takes reports from sex workers less seriously than other victims.

The dirt perceived by them – the low-life murderers as well as the police force – sticks to your body.

You see, a dirt woman can be anything, and you can do anything to a dirt woman. You can do all those horrible things you want to do to other women, lily-white women, except with a dirt woman, nobody minds.

It has always been this way. At least, that was what a stuffy literature professor told you at the protest. She said that in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest surviving works of literature, a temple harlot is sent to tame a wild man. The harlot leads him to the city and teaches him the ways of civilisation. But the wild man contracts a disease and curses the harlot: she will be adored, but she will also sleep on a dunghill forevermore, with thorns and brambles piercing her feet.

You recall those days before life tipped you over into the black expanse of poverty. Your mother took you to the National Portrait Gallery, where you observed a painting from the Georgian Era. It was of a heavily made-up, naked woman, standing by a broken chamber pot in a dirty room, washing her filthy white dress by hand.

'Who is she?' you asked.

'A whore,' your mother replied.

You can see the same clumsy symbolism online, from both men and women: just peruse the comment section of any prostitution article in the local newspaper.

The driver of the car clears his throat, pulling you away from your oppressive thoughts.

In fear of police sanctions, and a desperate urgency to feed your daughter, there is no time to cross-examine a beckoning wad of cash or take the spiders of panic running up and down your back seriously.

So your lips quirk into the smile of the dirt woman, and you get in his car.

Critical Commentary

This short story explores the dangers sex workers in England face because of social stigma and aggressive criminalisation laws. These forces transform sex workers into dehumanised symbols like dirt, exacerbating their suffering. In this commentary, I will develop the themes addressed in the story. Also, I must briefly clarify that while this story is fictional, certain details give it verisimilitude. For instance, the prejudiced statement made by the ex-Chief Constable was Mike Veale, and the deaths of sex workers Daria Pionko and Lenuta Haidemac occurred in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

In England, sex work is regulated through a legal framework known as partial criminalisation. Sex work activists Juno Mac and Molly Smith state that 'the acts of buying and selling sex are legal, but almost everything else is criminalised: for example, soliciting and kerb-crawling, working indoors with friends, or facilitating sex work.'[109] Criminalising related practices has adverse consequences for sex workers, like the protagonist in the story, who must work in high-risk locations with dangerous clients to avoid the police. Sexologist Jacqueline Comte suggests that positioning sex work as a crime 'causes sex workers to be infinitely more vulnerable to theft, rape, and brutalities from clients', and reinforces their vulnerability by 'forbidding sex workers from organizing themselves into teams and receiving clients in business premises, even though this type of work organization would offer much greater security against potential violence from clients.'[110] The fear of police raids and dangerous clients encroach onto the protagonist's life to such an extent that they may as well live under her skin.

Instead of approaching sex workers as diverse individuals that come from all socioeconomic backgrounds, policymakers tend to assume all sex workers are vulnerable women that need to be rescued from poisoned, rotting brothels. Consultation papers like 'Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution' (2004) and 'Tackling the Demand for Prostitution: A Review' (2008), which Sarah Cooper claims is part of the 'prostitution legislation [that] may have indeed increased throughout the last decade', illustrate the growing victimisation of sex workers.[111] For instance, the cover illustration of 'Paying the Price' is a drawing of a depressed child in front of a broken window, which may signify a broken home and an emotionally 'broken' inhabitant, and implies they need to be fixed or protected. Similarly, 'Tackling the Demand for Prostitution' repeatedly urges 'to protect vulnerable individuals.'[112] While sex

[109] Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 87.
[110] Jacqueline Comte, 'Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research', *Sexuality & Culture*, 18.1, (2014), pp. 202 – 203.
[111] Sarah Cooper, *Regulating Women: Policymaking and Practice in the UK* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), p. 69.
[112] 'Tackling the Demand for Prostitution: A Review', in Dataset Explorer <https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2008-2766/DEP2008-2766.pdf> [accessed 11 October 2025].

trafficking is an important issue, the all-encompassing depiction of sex workers as trafficked or coerced generally lacks nuance. On the one hand, sex workers that have not been directly exploited still lack agency, as there are social, economic, and individual forces that lead them to sex work. But on the other hand, policymakers and their legislative papers tend to consider agency and victimisation as a dichotomy and rob sex workers of their autonomy entirely, as with the protagonist's friend, who is wrongly accused of being trafficked.

This dominant legal attitude aligns with the Nordic model, or myopic Scandinavian legislation that promotes the decriminalisation of women who sell sex and the criminalisation of clients and pimps.[113] This model rusts quickly, as it does not recognise or resolve the maelstrom of poverty and drug addiction, which generally gives rise to sex work. Instead, it transforms sex workers into victims and makes it more dangerous for sex workers when soliciting clients. Unfortunately, English policy is drifting further and further towards this model. In other words, so-called protectors of women ignore the bigger picture and leave sex workers to a sparse existence, one paltry breath after another.

Beyond legal battles, sex workers have been historically dehumanised in the cultural imagination, particularly through concomitant symbolism such as dirt and disposability. After all, the title of this story comes from activist Andrea Dworkin's reflection that sex workers "live […] the literal reality of being the dirty woman. There is no metaphor. She is the woman covered in dirt.'[114] Admittedly, it is common to ascribe this imagery onto marginalised groups in general, as sociologist Imogen Tyler claims in her analysis of migrant and working-class populations in Britain.[115] But sex workers have generally been closely aligned with dirt magery too, especially in both literary and sociopolitical discourse. For instance, historian Judith Walkowitz in *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992) examines how literary prostitutes are constructed as physically and morally unclean and are associated with hidden space. She suggests that '[Charles] Dickens' elision of prostitution and excrement was symptomatic of a middle-class concern with immorality, city waste, pollution, and infection.'[116] As an example, dirty water imagery is often evocative of fictional sex workers' degraded lives. Martha in Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850) contemplates submerging herself in the Thames; John Everett Millais' 1858 etching 'The Bridge of Sighs' captures an unnamed woman gazing in despair at the waters, contemplating suicide; and Maggie in Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) succeeds in drowning herself. Similarly, the protagonist in my story no longer feels like herself, but the living personification of dirt, readily abused by clients and authoritative bodies. It is

[113] Gunilla Ekberg, 'The Swedish Law that Prohibits the Purchase of Sexual Services: Best Practices for Prevention of Prostitution and Trafficking in Human Beings', *Violence Against Women*, 10.10 (2004), p. 1191.
[114] Andrea Dworkin, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy', Michigan Journal of Gender and Law, 1:1 (1993), p. 11.
[115] Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013).
[116] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 22.

worth noting that this pejorative symbolism is shifting in contemporary literature, which I examine in my PhD thesis.

Furthermore, aligning sex workers with dirt is such a potent image that hygiene practices tend to emerge in wider political discourse on sex workers. This functions to marginalise sex workers not only imaginatively, but geographically, politically, and socially too. For instance, after the Yorkshire Ripper murdered sex workers, he told his brother, 'I were just cleaning up streets, our kid. Just cleaning up streets', as cited by Mac and Smith.[117] Additionally, Cooper observes the months prior to the Olympics in London in 2012 'police underwent a "cleaning up" of the local boroughs, with the number of arrests for public prostitution in Tower Hamlets in the first few months alone far exceeding the previous yearly total.'[118] The language of 'cleaning' to describe these initiatives was quoted by various newspapers at the time.[119]

Sex workers and their allies, like *National Ugly Mugs* and *English Collective of Prostitutes*, are fighting tirelessly against stigmatisation of sex work and for the decriminalisation of the practice.[120] They host marches similar to the one described in the story. While decriminalisation does not entirely take the risk aspects out of sex work, it generally suggests that sex workers can work without fear of police sanctions or government regulation.[121] Comte argues that 'to fight abuses of power and to prevent the physical violence and psychological wounds that sex workers unfortunately still too often become victims of, it is absolutely necessary to decriminalize sex work.'[122] Decriminalisation acknowledges that criminalising sex work harms sex workers, and it also increases the workers' safety, as they can conduct their labour with others and report cases of sexual abuse and sex trafficking without fear of self-incrimination. The effectiveness of decriminalisation is highlighted in Mac's reflections on New Zealand, where sex work has been decriminalised since 2003:

> New Zealand hasn't actually seen an increase in the amount of people doing sex work […] decriminalising it has made it a lot safer. But the lesson from New Zealand isn't just that its particular legislation is good,

[117] Smith and Mac, p. 100.
[118] Cooper, pp. 59 – 60.
[119] Hannah Furness, 'Prostitutes "cleaned off the streets ahead of the Olympics"', in *The Telegraph* <https://telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9180739/Prostitutes-cleaned-off-the-streets-ahead-of-the-Olympics.html> [accessed 27 June 2024]; Jamie Doward, 'London 2012 Olympics: Crackdown on brothels "puts sex workers at risk"', in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/apr/10/brothel-crackdown-london-olympics-risk> [accessed 11 October 2025].
[120] 'NUM statement to the GMB in support of full decriminalisation of sex work', in *National Ugly Mugs* <https://nationaluglymugs.org/2021/07/19/num-statement-to-the-gmb-in-support-of-full-decriminalisation-of-sex-work/> accessed 11 October 2025]; 'Decriminalise Sex Work' in *English Collective of Prostitutes* <https://prostitutescollective.net/petition/> [accessed 11 October 2025].
[121] 'The Facts', in *DECRIM NOW* <https://decrimnow.org.uk/the-facts/> [accessed 11 October 2025].
[122] Comte, p. 213.

> but that crucially, it was written in collaboration with sex workers, namely, the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective.[123]

In other words, New Zealand legislation takes an empathetic approach and listens to real sex workers. In my story, I chose to use the second person, because the universality allows readers to see themselves in the narrative, intensifying empathy for the protagonist.

Ultimately, this short story and its commentary acknowledge that sex work is gendered, stigmatised, and precarious labour. It is entrenched in misogyny and capitalism and fortified by violence. But reflections on the practice should not be confined to morality discourse, and the lives of real women should not be transformed and mythologised into dehumanising symbolism. When investigating sex work, it is critical to examine the micrology of women's lives, or their personal, small-scale experiences, as well as the conditions of wider society. For many people, sex work is an economic survival strategy, or a form of labour that puts food on the table for families. The fight for the rights of sex workers is impassioned and dedicated, but amidst the juggernaut of neoliberalism, it is like dropping bundles of kindling on a barely smouldering fire. But with more awareness and empathy, an auspicious future can hopefully emerge for sex workers.

[123] Juno Mac, 'The laws that sex workers really want', January 2016, by *TEDx Talks*, 17 min., 40 sec., <https://www.ted.com/talks/juno_mac_the_laws_that_sex_workers_really_want> [accessed 12 October 2025].

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Boundary Layers

Philippa Johnson

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in the scurrying buffets above the cliffs
& further out the wind unfurls
purple across the channel's grey greens
waves catch threads of the clouds' dragged rain-cloaks
while emptiness shoves to claim the vast space unimpeded
the squall fills April's lungs tumbling the gorse-gold slopes

cloud-hems snag on oak crowns
& the jag of the church-spire
tatter on banks of hazel that crouch the steeps
with thin backs turned
to the squalls that land & tangle on the hill's greened back
in a tousle of chestnut branches & last years' pinecones
trunks like tide-palings strain the gusts to moaning eddies
twigs hooking at the gusts
to slow the wild outbursts
to whorls

at the woods' fringes
softening labyrinths of rowan tame the gale
& light rain tangles in constant-driving horizontal
to tunnel through green-spiked gorse-runs
soaked vaulting that baffles blusters
each gust scent-heavy & salt-wild
coiled by bracken
reined by heather-knots
into humid backwaters

where taller grasses lean
grain-heads comb energy
out of the hooley to form a warm pelt
stalks felting wind-strands with cross-hatching
to trot down a rodent-track in small prints
a muscle-bunch at each waft of predator
mottle-drops & creaks from overhead

rivers between pebbles & sandstone grains
deltas where lichen runnels the damps

a held moment
puddles of air
& the pause
of drips

beneath
leaf-breath
the scent of minerals
a micro-stillness clings to forests of moss
a closeness of air trapped between filaments
slowed by scales & spicules
water molecules spun & stretched
pores drink spores swim & drift
climb columns of clotted green
& haze osmose
capillary
to tip

Critical Commentary

The view from North Hill, above Minehead, is always astonishing, whatever the weather: the scents of sea and bracken, the constantly lively winds, the valleys stretching towards the Iron Age hill fort of Bat's Castle, Dunkery Beacon in the distance. In the other direction, Pen-y-Fan meets the grey haze at the farthest reaches of vision across the Bristol Channel in Wales. The steep wooded cliffs plunge on towards Lynmouth, and the coast softens as it sweeps from Minehead towards Blue Anchor and Bridgewater. Flatholm and Steepholm gem the blue-brown ribbon heading towards the Atlantic. While it is always breathtaking, familiarity or the huge scale of this landscape can leave one disengaged, 'othered' by the stretching hills, or more self-aware and almost self-centred – despite having tried to 'experience nature.'

My poem *Boundary Layers* is an imagining of the transformation of the reader from a macro- to a micro-participant within the landscape, to take the viewpoint of a place from a broad vista steadily down, smaller and smaller, until it might cease to be a landscape at all but rather a series of micro-encounters with the co-existent 'more-than-human.'[124] This shift of perspective is an attempt to recalibrate my own tendency to overwhelm into a sense of belonging within this place. 'Stories [transform] an abstract homogeneous space into place,'[125] and this poem is a story by which I try to reengage with the vast complexity of this coastline. To wander through the countryside consciously aware of one's entanglement with every more-than-human other would be impossible to sustain, but an engagement with that suspension is what Nolan terms the 'ecocentric perspective,'[126] where the human is part, but not centre, of the place. I would suggest that not just fauna but flora is equally a 'vibrant site of interconnection between the human and non-human in which the human relinquishes some of his or her detached superiority: "We can think of the wild as the commons, the everyday affective site of human-nonhuman entanglement".'[127]

The term 'boundary layer,' a meteorological and fluid mechanics term, refers to any transitional area between two or more zones where the currents of wind or fluid generate frictional drag at their interfaces, or where a fluid or the atmosphere moves across a surface. This drag, and the resulting turbulent effects, is caused by the different properties of the layers, or the projection of objects into them, changing the speed and behaviour of those currents. In *Boundary Layers*, I use this term both literally and metaphorically to explore the way the coastal winds are slowed by the trees, then bushes, leaves, and down to the tiniest projections into those currents, but also to consider the way our environment affects us, right down to the

[124] Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[125] Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape Places, Paths and Monuments* (Berg Publishers, 1994), p. 32.
[126] Sarah Nolan, *Unnatural Ecopoetics: Unlikely Spaces in Contemporary Poetry* (PhD thesis, University of Nevada, 2015), p. 38.
[127] Lorimer, quoted in Jos Smith, 'The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place', *Environmental Cultures*, viii (2017), p. 76.

isotopic traces in our teeth of where we have lived. For example, the air in a city catches on the corners of buildings, eddies in the dusty pockets of between-spaces, rushes headlong through passageways. On hillsides, trees catch the breeze and rein it in, slow and soften it, creating a creaking whispering. On the scale of moss, the cushions and fronds stroke the air, effect a subtle drag with their filaments and shaggy branchlets, trapping the breeze until it is a still-moving close breath of green. Boundary layers, therefore, are a concept that can be applied at all scales, and it is the dynamic inter-relationality that these layers represent that I wanted to use as a framework for shifting the reader's perspective into the miniature.

Therefore, the boundary layer as a concept is in this poem a fluid mechanics metaphor for the interdependencies of relational ontology, where no layer is separate but affects and is affected in return. This strengthens the more-than-human agencies explored, as I have attempted to show that scale is not a definitive marker for agency: the mosses affect the atmosphere held between their *seta* as much as the pinecones affect the wind's flow through the trees and bring a sound from/revealing that interaction. There is co-existential interference both vertically (through the layers) as well as proximally/horizontally. The rain is a vertical 'constant' through (and containing) various boundary layers and the wind is more oblique, like the trees which affect their neighbours and are in turn affected by them. Boundary layers as an image explores the processuality – the interrelated complexities – of flora and fauna with larger bodies such as the troposphere or sea, where the interfaces reveal not just the trees but the way the wind affects them, and the way they in turn affect the flow of the wind, which then filters down and across the landscape as a whole. The trees are not explored out of relation with their atmospheric entanglements, but as agential, both 'upwards' in relation to the wind and 'downwards' in relation to their interference effects on the wind and therefore their agential role in sheltering and supporting other beings. This equally applies to the hazels, rowan, gorse, grasses and mosses: their agency is affective in the layer(s) above and below as well as within the stratum within which it mainly 'lives.' This applies equally to geological formations, the seas, and the weather, reflecting and reasserting the processual interconnectedness and interdependencies within which flora and fauna exist, within the framework of the perceived 'landscape.'

Boundary layers are, effectively, ecotones between land and air, littoral zones of wind, where each layer is literally entangled with the more-than-human elements below it – branches, thorns, the filaments of lichen – which reflects Jos Smith's exploration of 'entanglement,'[128] that close interplay between all elements, and in the Anthropocene especially between the human and more-than-human. One could see a boundary layer between text and reader, and between text and material reality even: 'Together, poetry and geology bring on a hiatus in these patterns, a space for reflection on our conscious relationship, and unconscious entanglement, with the earth.'[129] The words of a poem create a frictional interface resulting in

[128] Ibid. p. 10 and following.
[129] Ibid., p. 182.

changes in the way the environment is perceived. Changes in our understanding then bring other meanings into play, re-readings allowing the words themselves to be disturbed by the reader's engagement with them, and this turbulence leads to new ways to read both the words and our environment.

The form of *Boundary Layers* effectively echoes littoral currents, the buffeting zone where the breeze is caught and dragged by hills and woods and attempts to reflect the swells and lulls of these eddies. In this way, I am drawing on what Weston shapes as

> textual ecology – the shape of the poem on the page, the spatial and sonic relationship that its parts bear to one another – mimics or otherwise expresses the ecology that the poem describes. … [F]reer verse style reflects real-world ecologies better by escaping the artificial, cultural constructs of metered verse, and replacing them with more 'natural' free verse rhythms.[130]

As Professor Suzanne Keen said in her lecture, 'Nurturing the Reading Self Through Immersion in Reading' (2025), with the ability to see things from other perspectives comes the opportunity to change perspective: 'perspective-taking generates an internal model of what the character might be experiencing.'[131] The imagination is given the opportunity to look at a place from different angles, and this facilitates the development of empathy, according to Keen: to see a place through another's eyes, inevitably a result of imaginative reconstruction, can awaken a consideration of different value-bases. Moss may be moss, but to a mite, it is a provider of shelter, sustenance, where sporophores protect with their giraffe-necked stems the inhabitants gathered around their interlinked bodies. The worth of any gorse-bloom can be considered in far greater depth if it is the last source of nectar before exhaustion.

The ecocentric thought is 'to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected.… And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up.'[132] As such, I have avoided the traditional 'lyric "I"'[133] that acknowledges the presence of the human writer and creates an anthropocentric lens, in order to create a sense of '"implacement"… [where] the person observing the landscape becomes "integral" to it, rather than outside.'[134] My challenge was to convey a sense of belonging in each 'layer,' where the perspective shifts from the vastness of the troposphere down through the interference of the trees, then gorse, and down to the scale

[130] Daniel Weston, 'Contemporary Poetic Ecologies and a Return to Form', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 4 (1), (2016), p. 1.
[131] Prof. Suzanne Keen, 'Nurturing the Reading Self Through Immersion in Reading' (lecture, University of Exeter, March 2025).
[132] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 1.
[133] Harriet Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes: experiment and environment in contemporary poetry', *Jacket*, 32 (2007) <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-tarlo.shtml>
[134] Casey, in David Utsler, 'Re-Placing Displacement', *Environmental Hermeneutics in the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2025), p. 205.

of small creatures, mosses and eventually to the scale of spores. By dissociating the reader from any fixed size, my aim was to integrate them into a dynamic ontological framework, whereby the poem as perception of existence is the only static referent. While the decentralisation which results from universal entanglement has the effect of displacing the situatedness of knowledge, I feel that a sense of place is valuable where the specificity of the location is seen as a lens through which observations, descriptions, narratives, or studies can be made as ways to re-position the reader as a co-existent with the subjects being observed. To ignore or deny my humanity, the fingers with which I am typing, or the human brain, which is working on pulling the words together, would be both a conceit and disingenuous, but I can attempt to play with the depth of focus in order to suggest a decentralisation of human agency. Intra-relatedness will facilitate the acknowledgement of both entangled and separated subjects, and their agency within the perceived landscape, but this poem acts as intentionally both an exercise in shifting perspective, and play – and thoughts and feelings and new images emerge validly through play. My move away from the use of the 'lyric "I"' is intended as a signal to suspend the sense of a human physicality in the perception and visualisation of the subject matter, an invitation to yield some element of human hegemonic centralisation in favour of seeing oneself as just one co-existent part within a far larger and more complex dynamic than is commonly, consciously, sustained.

There is an inherent danger of the poem settling into a mere description without a sense of shrinking or becoming so unfamiliar that the reader is jettisoned in the process. I wanted to convey a strangeness, a dislocation, but only into a new sense of relative perception. As such, I have tried to use specific details such as plant names or parts to anchor the poem, the perspectival shifts thereby becoming more centred on the strata of each boundary layer and their interfaces without being limited by a single viewpoint. Furthermore, by moving away from a fixed narrative viewpoint, I aim to acknowledge my consideration of the objects of my study as active and therefore agential co-creators in the generation of the poem and its narrative, and thus the ontological inquiry that it explores. The inherent ethical questions arising from this co-attribution concerning the non-human agents in my poem are consistent with any writing that seeks to explore the material-discursive processes of co-creation. The question of respectful attribution of validity and mutual dependency is a constant check to anthropomorphisation or personification, but where clarity and relatability are required to sustain a meaningful image, such techniques can be judiciously engaged with and tested for usefulness. As such, I have aimed to employ a 'politics of citation' which 'does not ignore and thereby contribute to the erasure of'[135] the more-than-human, a danger inherent in much written work whose subject is the environment.

Grammar and punctuation likewise proved a challenge. My earlier versions of this poem were consciously grammatically fluid, where the lack of punctuation was intended to reinforce a

[135] Rosiek et al., 'A Review of Posthumanist Education Research: Expanded Conceptions of Research Possibility and Responsibility', *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 48, (Sage, March 2024), p. 222.

turbulence of meaning, having a destabilising effect on both the meaning and therefore the reader. Another example of this instability is where nouns could be verbs or *vice versa* such as in 'baffles', 'blusters' or 'runnels.' Lines 2 and 3 started out as:

> & further out the wind here unfurled
> purples the sea's skin
>
> but became
> & further out the wind unfurls
> purple across the channel's grey greens

In this case, my re-working included more specific colours, tighter tense control and revised lineation to support image integrity, but I did want to retain the lack of structural punctuation to preserve a sense of slipperiness and entangled spaces. Likewise, the decision to avoid punctuation except for the entangling hyphen seeks to convey a fluidity that is only possible for the wind, water, and the imagination. As inspired by Harriet Tarlo,

> …the more dynamic, open form style of writing, which makes use of the whole page-space to create, is particularly suited to reflecting on and engaging with the spatial. For me, this has indeed been the openness of a field, moorland, cliff or hillside, those spaces in which we see human and non-human elements at work as on a canvas in the open air. Here, poets might even attempt to embody the vast, complex, inter-related network of vegetation, insect and animal life that such a space contains, and to reflect intelligently upon it.[136]

This textual space bridges the perceived divide between external and internal engagement with place. Russo refers to 'poetry as a form of inhabitance,'[137] where the mind is able to dwell in the spaces created by the combination of words and form and meet the more-than-human through imagination and memory. I have aimed for a combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar, to invite the reader into a new relationship with their surroundings from different perspectives, and to remind ourselves of the thrill of sensing grass on the tender soles of our sock-blinded feet. A challenge lives in the wild mixture of rain and the heavy coconut scent of gorse, in writing about them as part of an experiential and dynamic interaction with the physical environment which is so often seen as 'other,' as 'nature,' or 'the countryside,' and therefore wrapped around us rather than the setting in which we already live in and move through. As such, I have striven to move away from objectifying description and towards enough of a detail-tethered narrative of the central idea that the poem neither alienated the

[136] Tarlo, 'Radical Landscapes'.
[137] Linda Russo, 'Place-relation ecopoetics: A collective glossary', *Jacket2*, (2026) ≤https://jacket2.org/commentary/place-relation-ecopoetics-collective-glossary>

reader through inaccessible grammatical complexities or destabilising lineation. It will be down to the individual reader to judge whether that balance has been achieved effectively enough to result in a piece that is both intellectually and aesthetically pleasing.

As I work on this poem, I have given my grand-daughter a bug-eye toy, where the lens is multi-faceted: a new perspective in every fractal moment.

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‘Who will take the madness from the trees?’: Transformative Ecologies of Surrealism in the Anthropocene

Shannon L. Fox Ashover

Now the air can narrow its limits
by two degrees and the result will not
be long in coming.[138]

The above lines of Meret Oppenheim’s poem ‘If You Say the Right Word, I Can Sing’ serve as an inadvertent foreshadowing into the fate of the Anthropocene long before the weight of the current climate crisis became note of public concern. Although Oppenheim’s poem was first written in the early 1930s, her poem hauntingly anticipates current discourse on the climate change limits put in place by The Paris Agreement in 2015. The international treaty hoped to limit rising global temperatures by 1.5°C, declaring the point of no return to be no more than a 2°C increase, at which point the predicted ecological damage will verge on an extinction-level event.[139] Oppenheim is not intentionally predictive, of course, the assumption is not that she can poetically predict the future of climate change treaties as early as the 1930s. The humour and marvellous nature of a modern reading of ‘If You Say the Right Word, I Can Sing’ lies in the surrealist’s fascination with mysticism and the unknown in their dismissal of absolute scientific reason.

As discussed by Donna Roberts in her paper ‘Surrealism: The Ecological Imperative’, surrealism ‘sensed in the increasing dominance of the scientific view the dangers of a gross reductionism: reducing non-scientific modes of thought, whether religious or mythological, to mere superstitions, and the poetic to the negative domain of the economically useless.’[140] Prior to the birth of surrealism, the forward momentum of the age of the Enlightenment and the celebration of rationality and scientific thought drove the surrealist movement to explore mental spaces that rejected logocentric rationality. Psychoanalyst Joseph Dodds indicates in his book *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos*: the age of Enlightenment ‘to which [Sigmund] Freud pens his psychoanalytic flag’ was ruled by ‘modernity, patriarchy,

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[138] Meret Oppenheim, ‘If You Say the Right Word, I Can Sing’, in *The Milk Bowl of Feathers: Essential Surrealist Writings*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws and trans. by Catherine Schelbert (c. 1933; New York: New Directions, repr. 2018), p. 63, 1-15 (pp. 13-15).

[139] United Nations, The Paris Agreement (Paris: United Nations, 2015), p. 3. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2016/02/20160215%2006-03%20PM/Ch_XXVII-7-d.pdf> [accessed 2 August 2023]

[140] Donna Roberts, ‘Surrealism: The Ecological Imperative’, in *Surrealism: Key Concepts*, ed. by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 217-227 (p. 217).

industrialism and capitalism.'[141] Inspired in part by Freud's work on the unconscious mind and dream states, surrealism found its footing as a separate movement outside of Dadaism in psychoanalysis. Although surrealism was greatly inspired by the rationalist pursuits of psychoanalysis, a field which prescribes and labels a person's perception or reaction to their reality, it sought to explore rather than define these ontological boundaries.

While surrealism has no specific aesthetic style, the movement is often laden with disorienting or disturbing imagery. These commonalities are due to the resulting trauma of widespread violence and poverty caused by both World Wars. This era saw a huge global upheaval due to accelerated modernity, as well as the ever-enclosing space of urbanization. Today, the threat of an ongoing climate disaster resulting in loss of life, home, and habitat has caused increasing feelings of ecologically charged anxiety and trauma. The surrealist's fascination with the unconscious mind and madness creates a space for a new perspective on ecological and global anxieties in a modern context. Such similar feelings of rising global pressures allow for an inspection of ecological anxiety, human activity upon the world at large, and what it means to live in the Anthropocene epoch.

This paper performs an ecocritical reading of the surrealist poems 'If You Say the Right Word, I Can Sing' by Oppenheim, 'The Waterfall' by Paul Magritte, and 'Self-Shadowing Prey' by Gherasim Luca, all of which appear in the anthology *The Milk Bowl of Feathers: Essential Surrealist Writings* edited by Mary Ann Caws. The chosen texts will be analysed with a sense of metamorphosis in mind. Theories on the Anthropocene, naturalism, the art of translation, and psychoanalytic theories on civilization, the doppelgänger, and the shadow-self, enable a close reading of the ecologically charged poems. In his personal exploration of the term surrealism, the often-named 'father' of surrealism André Breton describes the pursuit as a marriage of the opposing states of the dream (or the unconscious) and reality, perceptions 'which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*.'[142] This surreality allows the irrational, the nonsensical, and the repressed thoughts and images to leak into a person's perception and experience of reality.

Metamorphic Alchemy

The surrealist movement came into being during major discoveries of modernity in technological advancements and in the workings of the human mind with psychoanalysis. These accelerated societal changes altered the collective sense of self and sanity. A point of surreality is often the inner self, particularly in the scope of metamorphosis and duality, or the doppelgänger, as it relates to Jungian theories of the shadow-self. The shadow-self, which Jung also referred to as 'the anima or animus, the animal trickster, the wise old man or woman, and

[141] Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 31.
[142] André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism,' in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (1924; Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, repr. 1972), pp. 1-47 (p. 14).

the Self', is vital in the process of 'individuation.'[143] According to Leon Schlamm in the *Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Religion*, to undergo the process of individuation 'is to divest the self of its false wrappings of the persona, the mask the personality uses to confront the world, and the suggestive power of numinous unconscious contents.'[144] The individuation process is a journey of self-realization, one in which the shadow-self plays a vital role in the attempt to bridge the gap between the known self and the unconscious self.[145] The attempt to face, accept, or honour the darker parts of the self in the absurdist fashion — meaning to neither correct nor rationalize it — is a core concept of the surrealist motivation. Such transformational topics are an integral part of many works of surreality.

Surrealist works are often rife with images of duality and the alchemical. Metamorphosis is a constant presence in the natural world: from the changing of seasons, life cycles, and the continuous process of Darwinian evolution. Coupling naturalist Charles Darwin's theories of evolution with Freud's works on the unconscious mind, including the latter's concepts of 'dream states, free association, and sexuality', Walter Kalaidjian suggests the surrealists were able to delve into a realm of animal or animalistic comparisons with human nature.[146] The surrealist's interest with symbolism, mythology, and the occult often performs a marriage of mysticism in an observational way not unlike the scientific method, nor unlike alchemy's formulaic method like similar to that of chemistry. As Oppenheim's work, in particular, speaks to the theme of transformation, it should be no surprise that one of her major influences was Jung and his work on dreams and the unconscious. According to Brice Cruger, Oppenheim's father often attended Jung's lectures and brought his teachings home, resulting in Oppenheim keeping a dream journal from as young as fourteen.[147] Jung's own book *Psychology and Alchemy* connects symbolism, religious allegory, the unconscious, and the alchemical. Much of Jung's research presents intertextualities between psychoanalysis and alchemy.

The concept of dualities and opposing states, be that of mental or physical, were often discussed by Jung in regard to alchemical texts and artworks. As stated by the Jungian psychoanalyst Stanton Marlan in his book *Jung's Alchemical Philosophy: Psyche and the Mercurial Play of Image and Idea*:

> One of the major orienting concerns of Jungian psychology and of alchemy has been the unification of opposites and the attempt to come to terms with binaries. The notion of the Philosophers' Stone and

[143] Stanton Marlan, *Jung's Alchemical Philosophy: Psyche and the Mercurial Play of Image and Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 249.
[144] Leon Schlamm, 'Individuation' in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. by D. A. Leeming (Boston: Springer, 2014)
[145] Marlan, p. 249.
[146] Walter Kalaidjian, 'The Surrealist Bestiary and Animal Philosophy' in *Surrealism*, ed. by Natalya Lusty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 272-90 (p. 274).
[147] Brice Cruger, *Meret Oppenheim: Defiance in the Face of Freedom* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 9.

> the Self represent the goals of the alchemical and psychoanalytic processes respectively.[148]

The attempt to bridge seemingly opposing concepts speaks to a desire to remove the anthropocentric perspective of living organisms, which posits humans as hierarchically above other forms of life. According to Roberts, the current examination of an environmental consciousness is evident in the surrealist's precognition 'in grasping the most basic ecological premises of Darwin's thought on the continuities between humans and non-human life forms.'[149] As both a writer and visual artist, Oppenheim's works often unites organic and inorganic worlds, which are often laden with concerns pertaining to the bestial or ecological.

The convergence of the human and the animal is often present in surrealist writing. To quote Breton, regarding their hybridity and metamorphic appearances, 'The flora and fauna of Surrealism are inadmissible.'[150] The first stanza of Oppenheim's poem 'If You Say The Right Word, I Can Sing' further explores this concept of transformation:

> If you say the right word, I can sing
> you the praises of the raven with its changeable
> and shimmering feet.
> I love these cold flowers of laughter
> best and their nodding shadows that shine in
> the dark.[151]

The botanical imagery of 'cold flowers' shining in the dark suggest the secrecy of such masquerades, held in stealth, when celebration was kept within small and trusted circles. Cruger notes Oppenheim's draw to the 'appeal of transformation – costume parties, masquerades, concealment and conquest, sensuous abandon and the glaring light that obscures all shadows', which became ever apparent during the First World War as the enjoyment of life withdrew into private spaces.[152] The laughter which shines in the dark is a juxtaposed imagery of light and dark; a feeling of warmth and companionship when happiness would be hard to find. Surrealism often ties together conflicting imagery, allowing the beautiful and horrific to create a feeling of the uncanny. This linguistic play of juxtaposing imagery is a cornerstone of surrealist poetics and the marvellous.

Also characteristic of surrealism, Oppenheim's poem opens with a linguistic challenge: 'If you say the right word.'[153] Surrealism performs a play on language, reworking and combining

[148] Marlan, p. 4.
[149] Roberts, p. 224.
[150] Breton, 'Manifesto,' p. 40.
[151] Oppenheim, pp. 1-6.
[152] Cruger, p. 48.
[153] Oppenheim, p. 1.

imagery to form new words or phrases. As the French philosopher George Bataille, favoured by Breton in his own philosophies, states in his book *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, 'I cannot consider someone free if they do not have the desire to sever the bonds of language within themselves.'[154] In order to achieve a state of automatism, the writer must remove themselves from the laws of language as well as society. Oppenheim's mention of the raven's 'changeable' feet suggests metamorphosis.

Herbert Silberer, psychoanalyst and colleague of Freud, notes the use of bird and animal imagery used to describe different stages of the alchemical process when forming the alchemical philosopher's stone.[155] At one stage in the creation of the philosopher's stone, the combined ingredients begin to burn and turn black. This resulting substance is named the raven or ravenhead. Unlike ceremonial magic practices, alchemy does not involve the process of speaking spells aloud. However, it follows a recipe or formula in the process of creating and distilling, as it is an early form of chemistry. Therefore, to 'say the right word' or to follow the alchemical text correctly would result in the 'raven with its changeable | and shimmering feet,'[156] or the black substance in the process of creating the philosopher's stone. This substance, too, will transform or change into the next stage of the alchemical process.

It should also be noted that, as carrion birds, ravens are a part of the metamorphosis of the natural life cycle, whereby they break down the waste of decaying bodies to be turned into food for plants living in the soil. During the Early-Middle and Medieval period of England, ravens in mythology were often associated with warnings of an oncoming battle.[157] As such, corvids are often seen as symbols of death. While the hovering figures of ravens above an army before battle would be seen as an ominous sign, a gathering army of humans also signals the inevitable profit of a meal after the slaughter. The raven's intelligence has provided it a place in many mythological tales, including the Norse god Odin's confidants who perch on his shoulders in his throne room.[158] As Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton note in their paper 'The Mutable, the Mythical, and the Managerial: Raven Narratives and the Anthropocene', mythological tales are a beneficial tool for reframing the ecological crisis, shifting away from the negative and fear-focused narrative of the Anthropocene.[159] Thornton and Thornton indicate that '[f]olklore and traditional mytho-historical narratives offer an

[154] George Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson, (London, New York: Verso, 1994; repr. 2006), p. 49.
[155] Herbert Silberer, *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts*, trans. by Smith Ely Jelliffe, (1917; New York: Dover Publications, repr. 1971), p. 98.
[156] Oppenheim, pp. 1-3.
[157] Mohamed Eric Rahman Lacey, *Birds and Bird-lore in the Literature of Anglo-Saxon England* (London: University College London, 2014), p. 12.
[158] Marijane Osborn, 'The Ravens on the Lejre Throne: Avian Identifiers, Odin at Home, Farm Ravens', in *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, ed. by Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. T. Williams (Rochester: Boydwell and Brewer, 2015) pp. 94-112, (p. 94).
[159] Thomas F. Thornton and Patricia M. Thornton, 'The Mutable, the Mythical, and the Managerial: Raven Narratives and the Anthropocene', in *Environment and Society*, 6.1 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), pp. 66-86 (p. 68).

alternative approach to framing anthropogenic and other causes of environmental change, one that has existed since the dawn of humans' capacity to historicize their lives and place in the cosmos.' This places the raven of folklore at the centre of the Earth's new state of reality. Thornton and Thornton describe ravens as trickster animals, highlighting their innovative adaptability. Their paper includes the stories from the early Holocene in East Asia and the Pacific Northwest, which celebrate a raven 'trickster-demiurge' with talents of ingenuity in moments of chaos. In these tales, the raven acts as a modern allegory for both human and ecological adaptability in the face of a new environmental reality. Returning to Oppenheim's imageries of the raven, her poetics describe the current state of ecological crisis in the most hopeful sense. Combining Thornton and Thornton's celebration of the raven's adaptability with that of the alchemical ravenhead, the current state of the ecological crisis is simply in the first stage of its metamorphosis. The next stage of ecological change is currently an unknown.

The Self-Shadow and Linguistic Transformation

Jungian scholar and ecopsychologist Mary-Jane Rust states in her paper 'Shadow and Earth: Eco-Psychology and the Future of the Planet' that '[p]art of our psychological task at this time is to face our ecological Shadow in all its many dimensions.'[160] As discussed, Jung often refers to the unconscious as the shadow-self, or the parts of the self that a person sees as negative and inferior. Marlan notes: to 'recognize the shadow side of one's "self" is to acknowledge a complexity, split, or tension in one's own identity.'[161] The concept of the shadow-self is present in the very title of Luca's poem 'Self-Shadowing Prey'. A poem that plays with the double-meanings of words, the concept of self-shadowing in Luca's poem indicates a shadow-self in conversation with the double or the doppelgänger. This relates to Freud's theories on the uncanny alongside Jung's works on the shadow-self; as the double image of the self as both shadow and prey alludes to predator and prey as the same entity. As Freud postulates, perceptions of the self can result in strong feelings of the uncanny, particularly in the mirror's reflection. To perceive the external self in reflection, thus viewing the self as an object, involves 'the idea of the "double" (the *Doppelgänger*), in all its nuances and manifestations—that is to say, the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike.'[162] Often, when faced with the sudden appearance of oneself in a looking-glass or window's reflection, a person will jump with fright at the sudden an appearance of another person, particularly one who looks identical to oneself. This brings to mind reaction videos of mirrors placed in forested areas to see how wild animals will react to their own appearance, and whether they will recognize their own reflection as themselves or simply see another creature.

[160] Mary-Jane Rust, 'Shadow and Earth: Eco-Psychology and the Future of the Planet', in *Jung's Shadow Concept: The Hidden Light and Darkness within Ourselves*, ed. by Christopher Perry and Rupert Tower (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023), p. 180.
[161] Marlan, p. 249.
[162] Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919; London: Penguin Books, repr. 2003), p. 142.

The predator-prey context in 'Self-Shadowing Prey' is deeply entwined with bestial imagery. Conversely, the concept of the self-shadow in prey animals relates to the camouflage tactic termed 'countershading' by the American naturalist and artist Abbott H. Thayer in 1896, which is discussed by researcher Hannah M. Rowland in her paper 'From Abbott Thayer to the Present Day: What Have We Learned About the Function of Countershading?'.[163] On the convergence of the surrealist movement and the presence of camouflage, Ann Elias states 'the poetic and psychological power of natural camouflage including animal mimicry [. . .], an art form of paradox and irony' presents a 'rightness for Surrealism.'[164] As discussed by Rowland, rather than similar adaptive protective forms like mimicry or camouflage, countershading tricks the eye via optical illusion of light and shadow:

> Just as painters produce the illusion of three dimensionality on a flat canvas through shading, Thayer argued that nature created the opposite effect with countershading—making three-dimensional bodies appear less round and less solid. [. . .] Countershading is hypothesized to obliterate the perception of the three-dimensional structure of an object when viewed from the side (*self-shadow* concealment of form or 'flattening') by reducing the visual cues of shape.[165]

Just as Thayer merged the natural world with concepts taken from visual art to create the countershading hypothesis, a cursory glance at Luca's 'Self-Shadowing Prey' reveals multitudes of ecologically charged linguistic choices to convey a poetic riddle.

'Self-Shadowing Prey' first appeared in Caws' translation of Luca's collected works titled *Self-Shadowing Prey*, which is a translation of one of his final works titled *La proie s'ombre*. In the introduction of the collection, *Self-Shadowing Prey*, Caws speaks of the 'impossibility of the task' of translating Luca's work, as many of his works are 'not so clearly constructed', playing on the 'complications of language' even within the title of the collection itself:

> For, immediately, the title: *La proie s'ombre*, you see what you cannot do. 'The Prey,' fine, but *s'ombre*? Is it a question of a somber

[163] Hannah M. Rowland, 'From Abbott Thayer to the Present Day: What Have We Learned About the Function of Countershading?', in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 364.1516 (Bethesda: National Library of Modern Medicine, 2009), pp. 519–527 (p. 519).
[164] Ann Elias, 'Camouflage and Surrealism', 24 (Colorado Springs: War, Literature and the Arts, 2012), pp. 1-25 (p. 9) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1447096858/fulltext/1D907FDB41244FB8PQ/1?accountid=14540> [accessed 10 August 2023].
[165] Rowland, p. 522 (emphasis added).

> something, or then something shadowing itself, in a kind of neologistic stupor of a noun gone verb like?[166]

It is interesting, then, that Caws chose a title so similar to a description of Thayer's countershading theory.

The translator of a poem is in a similar position of artistry as the poet themselves, particularly in the case of absurdist and puzzling works. The version of Luca's poem as it appears in *The Milk Bowl of Feathers* is, in fact, the final page of a longer poem titled 'The Forest' found in *Self-Shadowing Prey*. 'The Forest' is several pages long and runs in a circular, repetitive riddle of stanzas. The original French version of the poem titled 'La Forêt' is also included in Caws' translated collection *Self-Shadowing Prey*, and it provides the reader a glimpse into the shadowy world of linguistic concealment both within Caws' translation and Luca's syntactic tricks.

Luca cuts and rearranges letters within the words of the poem like a collage. The poem plays with visual emphasis by writing certain words in all capital letters and repeating words like 'TREE', 'BRANCH', and 'EARTH', all of which are ecologically charged. The opening of 'Self-Shadowing Prey' begins with the verse:

> At the heart of the word TREE
> the head of the word BRANCH
> chopped off
> Lost head
> errant heart[167]

If compared to the French version on the final page of 'La Forêt', an emphasis of italicized letters accompanies the capitalized letters. In place of the word 'TREE' is the French counterpart 'AR*B*RE'[168] with Luca's emphasis on the letter 'b'. Similarly, the English word 'BRANCH', French '*B*RANCHE', indicates significance of the letter 'b' in the same line.[169] Placing the French words within the lines of Caws' translation, the poem begins to take form beyond the English meaning: 'At the heart of the word [AR*B*RE] | the head of the word [*B*RANCHE]'. The centre of the word *arbre* is the letter 'b', which is the same letter *branche* begins with. To take this literally, the heart of the first capitalized word is how the second begins.

[166] Caws, 'Introduction', in *Self-Shadowing Prey*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2012), pp. i-x (p. i).
[167] Gherasim Luca, 'Self-Shadowing Prey', in *The Milk Bowl of Feathers: Essential Surrealist Writings*, ed. and trans. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 2018), pp. 54, 1-23 (pp. 1-5).
[168] Gherasim Luca, 'La Forêt', in *Self-Shadowing Prey*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2012), pp. 158-172, 1-164 (p. 142).
[169] Luca, 'La Forêt', p. 143.

This pattern of slicing words from root to stem to find the core (or head, or heart) of related words (a branch to a tree) continues throughout 'Self-Shadowing Prey'. In Caws' translation, the following lines are particularly quizzical in English:

> The block of the surface of the word EARTH
> which, drunk with wood, ERRS without a T
> in the tempest of the word VERSE without a head[170]

However, if the capitalized letters are analysed in their original French, the challenge of Caws' translational task is truly appreciated. Replacing the capitalized words with their French counterparts, the poem reads thus:

> The block of the surface of the word [TERRE]
> which, drunk with wood, [ERRE] without a [T]
> in the tempest of the word [VERRE] without a head[171]

If dissected, *erre* fits within the words *terre* and *verre* with the removal of their first letters. The beauty and tragedy of translation is often the missing or replaced pieces that get swept away and made anew. Here, Caws has made the tough decision to replace the French *erre* with 'errs' to fit it within the word 'verse' to align it with following stanza, or the 'word VERSE [VERRE] without a head,'[172] or *erre* without the letter 'v'.

Similarly, the word 'errs' is syntactically similar enough to the ear for the previous stanza's word 'earth' to fit within the lines. However, now the letter 'T' in the English translation no longer fits. For, if the word *erre* is put through a rough translation, you get the present tense of the verb 'to wander.'[173] Put together with the estimation that 't' translates to the informal 'you' in French,[174] the verse then becomes: 'The block of the surface of the word EARTH | which, drunk with wood, [WANDERS] without [YOU].'[175] If 'you' is taken as humanity, the Earth continues to wander through space, drunk with arboreal vegetation untouched by human activities. The concept of an Earthly consciousness is significant to the surrealist critique of an anthropocentric view of other organisms. Such a perspective opens questions between the activities of humanity and the impact on the Earth as a whole.

Civilization, Watery Infrastructures, and Questions for the Anthropocene

[170] Luca, 'Prey', pp. 11-13.
[171] Luca, 'La Forêt', pp. 152-54.
[172] Luca, 'Prey', p. 13; Luca, 'La Forêt', p. 154.
[173] 'Errer', in Collins French to English Dictionary <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/errer> [accessed 25 July 2023].
[174] 'Te', in Collins French to English Dictionary <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/te> [accessed 25 July 2023].
[175] Luca, 'Prey', pp. 11-12.

According to Roberts, ecologists first raised the need to erase the lines between humanity and other living creatures when Darwin first relayed his theories on evolution, which in turn 'emphasized the need for a renewed sense of human humility.'[176] Roberts goes on to indicate that the surrealist 'critique of rationalist and scientific hubris was at times inflected with an aggressive anti-anthropocentricism, emphasising automatic and instinctual behaviour that cast doubt upon human exceptionalism.'[177] Correspondingly, the human-centric term *Anthropocene* for the Earth's current epoch was first coined by Nobel prize winner chemist Paul J. Crutzen and marine scientist Eugene F. Stoermer to describe the geological impact humans have had upon environmental and geological structures.[178] Through the study of carbon dioxide and methane found in polar ice samples, Crutzen and Stoermer theorized that this new epoch began in the late eighteenth century, which sees a higher presence of carbonic pollutants. Crutzen, cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty's paper 'The Climate of History: Four Theses,' correlates elevated carbonic emissions with James Watt's innovative design of the steam engine in 1784, which became one of the most significant inventions to accelerate humans' ability to close temporal and spatial gaps through travel.[179] Such feats of modernity drastically advanced the growth and migration of humanity.

According to the historian Chakrabarty, human activities like the increased burning of fossil fuels caused by modern technology and population growth lead to the conception 'of a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet'. Chakrabarty acknowledges the complexities of naming an entire epoch after humanity, both in the hubris of allowing humans to be the central focus of a geological era, and the acknowledgement of the impact humanity has upon the planet. Chakrabarty states, as mammalian creatures, humans have always been biological agents; however, naming the current epoch the Anthropocene after humanity is to label humans as geological agents as well, magnifying the 'imagination of the human.'[180] He asserts that naming humans 'geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species.'[181] By linking the word Anthropocene to human alteration of global environmental conditions, humanity is comparable to an asteroid in both power and destructive capability. The contemplation of what it means to be the locus of an entire epoch aligns with the surrealist critique of logocentric hubris, capitalism, and greed. As such, Magritte's poem 'The Waterfall' acts as a mirror for the trappings of the Anthropocene and surrealism's rejection of it, both for its effect upon ecology and on other human beings.

[176] Roberts, p. 223.
[177] Ibid, p. 223.
[178] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', in *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 197-222 (pp. 208-9).
[179] Paul J. Crutzen, cited in Chakrabarty, p. 209.
[180] Chakrabarty, pp. 206-7.
[181] Ibid, p. 207.

The final lines of Magritte's poem end with a series of questions directed toward the Anthropocene itself. He questions what it means to be a human living within the inescapable realities of modern society:

> To live must one eat?
> What term does one apply to the liquids one drinks?
> Can one drink sea water?
> How do men obtain water?
> [. . .] Have you ever wondered where the water comes from that
> you drink?[182]

Magritte first asks what it means to be a biological agent or a living organism. He asks, do humans need to eat or drink, and what must they drink? These are the basic questions of survival. He asks the physicality, significance, and linguistics of characteristics of water, or at least drinkable water. Humans are biological agents and must live as such. From the evolutionary allegory of the fish crawling on land to eventually become our bipedal ancestors, all life on Earth begins in water. Paul Shepard indicates that the life of all humans even now begins in water, as the 'fetus is suspended in water, tuned to the mother's chemistry and the biological rhythms that are keyed to the day and seasonal cycles.'[183] For Magritte to then ask, 'How do men obtain water?'[184] and 'Have you ever wondered where the water comes from that | you drink?'[185] is to go beyond the necessities of survival and further into the infrastructural questions of a civilization.

The necessities of urban living require an intricate network of pipes underground and water treatment facilities for fresh water and sewage. More often than not, the citizens of a community will not on an average day consider the source of water that comes from their taps. The amount of energy consumed, the natural resources and construction materials needed, and the time and labour put into building a network of hidden waterworks is not something that is ordinarily considered daily. Rather, accessible fresh water is an often invisible necessity of an industrialised civilization. As biological creatures, humans have separated themselves from ready access to fresh water by building houses and communities far from accessible sources. While potable water is a basic human requirement for survival, it is also a commonly monetised privilege. This allocation of a basic human right as a privilege relays the imbalance of responsibility and power that comes with naming this geological era the Anthropocene, as it allows for both a level of import and social responsibility on humans as a collective.

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[182] Paul Magritte, 'The Waterfall', in *The Milk Bowl of Feathers: Essential Surrealist Writings*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws and trans. by Clara Cohen (1940; New York: New Directions, repr. 2018), pp. 56-57, 1-27 (pp. 19-27).
[183] Paul Shepard, cited in Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos*, (London: Routledge, 2011).
[184] Magritte, p. 22.
[185] Ibid, pp. 26-7.

However, as a collective, human activities such as cracking open the Earth for mining, clear-cutting landscapes for logging, and the constant burning of fossil fuels have resulted in changes to the 'chemistry of our atmosphere'. This has caused the 'sea level to rise, ice to melt, and climate to change', which, according to Chakrabarty, has proved 'that we have indeed become geological agents.'[186] However, as Rust indicates, the current global economic systems have allowed only a tiny percentage of humans to control the Earth's resources, meaning 'the carbon emissions of the world's richest 1% are double the amount of the world's poorest 50%.'[187] The capitalist ownership of land and natural resources to do with whatever the owner sees fit has seen the massive loss of biodiversity throughout the globe.

Like Magritte's 'The Waterfall', Oppenheim's poem poses a series of questions directed towards human activity and the Anthropocene. Unlike Magritte's open-ended enquiries, Oppenheim's poem closes with 'answers to these and other questions.'[188] Following the question 'Who will take the madness from the trees?', the final question the poem asks is: 'How does one downfall advise the next?'[189] The topic of downfall brings to mind the trappings of a civilization, particularly the downfall of a society and how this relates to the concerns of the Anthropocene. As a downfall connotes a significant destruction, this could be the destruction of empathy with scientific rationalism, environmental destruction, or the literal downfall of a civilization. Freud's theories on civilization as a construct, particularly regarding aggression and the libido, indicate a conquering drive that works against itself. As he states, '[T]he natural instinct for aggression in all human beings, the hostility of one against all and all against one, opposes this program of civilization', which relies on community and cooperation in order to thrive.[190]

No civilisation is without stratification, whether in the form of the monarchy, the bourgeoisie, or the tiny percentage of the current population that control the world's resources. The topic of hierarchies is relevant to Luca's linguistic trickery in 'Self-Shadowing Prey' in the lines, 'the word PREY without head or tail | kills the word KING in its body and soul.'[191] By playing Luca's linguistic and Caws' translational games, the capitalized words 'PREY' and 'KING' are replaced with their French counterparts in 'La Forêt' as '*P*ROIE' (prey) and 'ROI' (king).[192] In its literal sense, the word *proie* read without the first or last letter (head or tail) is the word *roi*. To further dissect the verse, right away the word 'king' is relevant to the hierarchies of civilization, particularly in the context of prey that 'kills the word KING'.

[186] Naomi Oreskes, cited in Chakrabarty, p. 206.
[187] Rust, p. 193.
[188] Oppenheim, p. 10.
[189] Ibid, pp. 7-9.
[190] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by Ulrich Baer (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930; New York: Warbler Press, repr. 2022), p. 50.
[191] Luca, 'Self-Shadowing Prey', pp. 19-20.
[192] Ibid, 'La Forêt', pp. 160-61.

If 'prey' stands for the subjects of a monarchy, then the subjects without 'head or tail', living in squalor or without access to resources, will inevitably lead to the end of the monarchy. An infamous example of a monarchy's fall by the hands of their own subjects is the eighteenth-century French Revolution, which ended with the public execution by guillotine of King Louis XVI and queen consort Marie Antoinette. Execution by guillotine again relates to Luca's poem, predominantly in the lines 'chopped off | Lost head'[193] and 'no head, no fall,'[194] along with the mention of an 'Axe without head 'or handle.'[195] While 'chopped off' and 'lost head' quite literally refers to execution by beheading, the phrase 'no head, no fall' alludes to the concept that, without an absolute figurehead of state, there would be no downfall of a civilization.

Here, Luca argues against absolute power (such as a centralised monarchy) to avoid falling prey to Freud's libidinal desire to conquer. The concept of 'no head' also relates to surrealism's protest against absolute rationality, indicating that without the blind faith in scientific rationality there will be no inevitable downfall, as there will be no rationalizing away actions or decisions that are morally inept. Furthermore, while Luca's mention of the axe indeed relates to the blade of the guillotine, it also brings forth ecological concerns of the logging industry. For, the axe without a head (of state, or the mental state of rationality) or handle, meaning the body made of the same wood it fells (or the subjects of a state), is not an axe. The imagery of an axe without a head or a handle transforms the object anew outside of the realm of human usefulness and asks the question as to whether it still is an axe without its parts. An axe without a blade is simply a piece of wood and thus returns to the imagery of the tree (or branch).

On the image of the blade, the beheading of Louis XVI was due not only to public unrest from the dissatisfaction with feudalism, but in the monarchy's frivolity and vanity. The topic of vanity returns to the mirror and the hubris of self-obsession. In Pierre Mabille's essay 'Mirrors' in the surrealist magazine *Minotaur*, he describes an obsession with mirrors in the seventeenth century whereby people would line the walls of entire rooms with mirrors.[196] Mabille relates this phenomenon to Louis XVI's own grandfather:

> In the Versailles of Louis XIV, a man who declared himself made in the image of God, from whom he claimed to hold his delegation of power, was unable to accept the boundaries of walls. They had to reflect his features in a way that courtesans would later imitate. Equally, in gardens where nature had been rigorously pruned, mirrors of water

[193] Ibid, 'Self-Shadowing Prey', pp. 3-4.
[194] Ibid, p. 15.
[195] Ibid, p. 17.
[196] Pierre Mabille, 'Mirrors', in *The Surrealism Reader: An Anthology of Ideas*, ed. by Dawn Ades, ed. and trans. by Michael Richardson, trans. by Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), pp. 49-59 (p. 53).

> reflected the man and his palace. This desire to demonstrate his power, and continuously assure himself of it, belongs to all civilisations.[197]

The self-obsession beheld by those who are given unlimited power and praise has been witnessed countless times throughout human history. As Mabille indicates, Louis XIV's egoism could not be contained to his human subjects, as he imposed his control over his ecological subjects, too, by pruning the palace gardens, and rearranging the plants and water features for aesthetic purposes. In the case of the French monarchy, the myth of divine power and worship ended in their own downfall. Magritte's 'The Waterfall' addresses these concerns of pride and vanity with the imagery of a peacock strutting around a yard, which is aptly symbolic of a jewelled king strutting through his palace gardens.

The second stanza of 'The Waterfall' is cut into to two columns, visually informing the reader of an internal and external dialogue. The first column can be viewed as the workings of the unconscious or the Jungian shadow-self repressing the verbs of action from coming into being, such as 'I beat', 'I flatter', 'I mislead', 'I hurt', 'I cure', and so on.[198] The second column describes the scene mentioned above, whereby the speaker relays the attempted placation of a buffoonish peacock:

> [. . .] A vain peacock was walking
> [. . .] proudly in the middle of the barnyard.
> [. . .] He strutted, shirked, puffed,
> [. . .] and said: 'Me, I'm our Father.'
> [. . .] A modest one-eye answered
> [. . .] gently: 'You are Mister
> [. . .] Peacock.'
> [. . .] To keep on talking about yourself, do nothing
> [. . .] With a boob or a fat sap
> [. . .] You'd better know at least how to keep quiet[199]

Relating this passage to Mabille's description of Louis XIV, for the peacock to proudly declare 'I'm our Father' is like a king declaring himself a god, as the word 'Father' is often used in place of the word 'God'.

To describe the speaker who answers the peacock as a 'modest one-eye' alludes to an impoverished or lower-class citizen, who attempts to treat the peacock with gentleness. This gentle response could indicate an empathetic intelligence, or a hesitance to speak against a king (or peacock). The peacock is itself a symbol of vanity, as Magritte indicates, as well as

[197] Ibid.
[198] Magritte, pp. 5-17.
[199] Ibid, pp. 5-16.

royalty and pride. Furthermore, the term 'peacocking' is commonly used to describe one who draws attention to themself by way of dress and appearance. Taking this into account, particularly when the speaker calls the peacock 'a boob' and a' sap,' the poem suggests that a loud, ignorant, and vain person is nothing more than a peacock strutting about who should 'at least know how to keep quiet'. Relating this to Magritte's questions on the Anthropocene — for instance 'How do men obtain water?'[200] — the poem is a direct order to the modern bourgeoisie or the wealthy 1% who commit the greatest ecological crimes: if you can't be useful and help the problem, at least stop adding to it and 'keep quiet.'[201]

Pertaining to Freud's theory on the libidinal drive to consume and control, the myth of abundance is the very foundation of capitalism, which assumes a consumer-based economy runs with no end to resources. However, even while considering the destruction humanity has caused to ecological systems, humanity has in no way harnessed or subdued the Earth, as humans too are subject to the catastrophic global shifts caused by anthropogenic interventions. As Freud indicates, humanity 'will never completely dominate nature; our organism, since it is a part of this nature, will always remain a transitory structure, limited in adaptation and performance'.[202]

As such, if human activities do lead to a total ecological downfall, the biological agents that are humans are going down with it. Thus, in the scope of the climate crisis, Oppenheim's question as to how one downfall can advise the next is answered:

> Now the air can narrow its limits
> by two degrees and the result will not
> be long in coming.[203]

Although it would surely be bold to state that Oppenheim's poetic prowess is psychically predictive, there is an uncanny connection between the above lines and current dialogues on the climate crisis.

The current state of ecological thinking is that if humans cannot limit their carbonic emissions to prevent further damage and higher temperatures, then the resulting ecological collapse will not take long. This is especially concerning considering The Paris Agreement's warning against a 2°C global increase.[204] Indeed, put in poetic form, if human activities do not cease the rise of global temperatures 'by two degrees' then the 'result will not | be long in coming.'[205] Unfortunately, the hopes of The Paris Agreement have already proven to be an

[200] Magritte, p. 24.
[201] Ibid, p. 17.
[202] Freud, *Civilization*, p. 20.
[203] Oppenheim, pp. 13-15.
[204] United Nations, p. 3.
[205] Oppenheim, pp. 14-15.

underestimation of the environmental damage caused thus far.[206] The terms 'climate change' and 'global warming' are often associated with melting ice caps and dumps of fresh saltwater into the oceans. In the modern context of rising temperatures and floods of melting ice, the line in Magritte's 'The Waterfall', 'you have the waterfall' certainly takes on a dark meaning, with 'you' being humanity and 'the waterfall' the ice melt.[207] Consequently, the fallout from anthropogenic climate change has surpassed the scope of human control.

In her line of questioning, Oppenheim first asks, 'Who will take the madness from the trees?'[208] Here, trees can simply be seen as the state of the natural world, or all ecological systems on Earth. The topic of madness is an often rehearsed one for surrealists, and to pose it toward environmental questions is not entirely out of context, as the speed of modernity would have been showing signs of pollution and ecological transformation. If madness for trees is ecological destruction, then, in this context, asking who will take their madness is to ask: who will halt the suffering of the natural world? Her 'answers to these and other questions'[209] include the statement above:

> Now the air can narrow its limits
> by two degrees and the result will not
> be long in coming.[210]

In the modern context, to take the madness from the trees is to limit humanity's carbonic emissions, and thus the rise in global temperatures.

Conclusion

The works of Oppenheim, Magritte, and Luca all share an inquisitive, absurdist spirit concerning the workings of the human and ecological world they inhabit. An ecocritical reading of these poems allows a concurrent perspective between ecology, civilization, and modernity. Both Freud and Jung's psychoanalytical theories lend insight into the poems' observations of society at large, and feelings of the uncanny. Although circumstances have changed since its conception, the surrealist movement's argument against rationality and the hubris of a purely scientific intellect has not lost significance. As indicated by Breton, surrealism's fascination with the natural world centred on observing and experiencing ecology as part of the poetic process, rather than as protective pursuit.[211] Moreover, Breton is clear in

[206] World Meteorological Association, 'Global Temperatures Set to Reach New Records in Next Five Years', (United Nations, 2023) <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/global-temperatures-set-reach-new-records-next-five-years> [accessed 23 June 2023].
[207] Magritte, pp. 2-3.
[208] Oppenheim, p. 7.
[209] Ibid, p. 9.
[210] Ibid, pp. 13-15.
[211] André Breton, 'On Surrealism in its Living Works', in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (1953; Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, repr. 1972), pp. 295-304 (p. 304).

stating that surrealism sought to disprove the attitude 'that man enjoys absolute superiority over all other beings, or put another way, that man is the world's crowning achievement—which is the most unjustifiable sort of postulate and the arrant abuse that anthropomorphism can be charged with. This rejectionist attitude against placing humanity in a hierarchal position above all other life forms postulates itself alongside current concerns of the climate crisis.

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When Ayyappa Blinked

Bhavika Sachan

When they burnt his eyelashes, the air smelled of oil, coconut husk, and fear. He was seven, a thin boy with eyes too large for his face, eyes that saw everything and understood nothing. His aunt held him down with one hand, and his uncle whispered prayers into his ear. His grandfather muttered something about *drishti*, about the evil that eyes can carry when they shine too brightly. His mother sobbed helplessly at the threshold of the courtyard, watching the *pooja* unfold.

The flame of the oil lamp flickered close to his face. His eyes screwed shut against the heat. There was a snap, a hiss, a white-hot bloom of pain that seemed to reach behind his ears. Then only smoke rising in ribbons.

They said it was for his good, that a child born under Ayyappa's star carried the power to bring both fortune and ruin, and such a child must be humbled before he grew. He did not understand humility that day. He only knew that the world smelled like burnt hair and hot tears, "Why was I burnt? What did I do to deserve this? What is the meaning of all this?" Ravi prayed for meaning and cried himself to sleep.

That night, he dreamt of a forest, green and dripping with rain. A dark-skinned god with sandalwood smeared across his chest stood before him, barefoot, carrying a bow strung with light. Ayyappa did not speak. The god blinked in empathy, slowly, and from that blink, a single lash of gold fell onto the boy's cheek.

"You will carry this," the god's voice said, sounding not in words but inside his skull, like thunder pressing against bone. "For every lash that falls, another heart will be mended, and something of yours will be spent to mend it. You will not choose when. You will not always understand why. But you will not be able to look away."

Ravi woke with the taste of metal in his mouth and the smell of camphor lingering in the room.

…

Years later, when he looks in the mirror of his small flat in Edinburgh, he still sometimes touches the fine, faded ridges along his eyelids where the skin never quite recovered its softness. He wonders whether that night in the courtyard happened exactly as he remembers it, or whether memory has sealed over its sharpest edges the way scar tissue closes a wound.

Under the faint puckering of old scarring, his eyes are still the same eyes his mother used to say could hold the whole world: large, dark, faintly sacred even now as though something of the god's had survived beneath the damage.

The man he sees now wears a neatly pressed shirt, his ID card swinging from a blue lanyard with *Leonardo – Aerospace, Defence and Security* printed in white. His Tamil vowels have been softened by years of speaking English for other people's convenience. His desk is an island of wires, sensors, and circuit boards. His colleagues call him "Ravi" because "Ravichandran" is too long to pronounce in meetings.

Every morning, as he combs his hair, he watches an eyelash tremble on the edge of his lid. They grow and fall in a rhythm he cannot explain, like a secret pulse. Sometimes he feels the faintest twinge before one falls, a warmth just behind his eye, as if someone had brushed his soul with fire. He no longer tries to stop it. The falling of a lash always means someone, somewhere, will need him soon.

At first, it was small things. A stranger at the bus stop fainting from low blood sugar. A neighbour locked out of her flat. A student lost in the fog, asking for directions to the university. He would find himself there, without planning to, as if drawn by invisible strings, and he would help. Always help. His hands, his mind, his words: they never failed. Once, on the night bus, he noticed a young woman breathing slow to almost nothing. Her lips faintly blue, from an overdose. He held her hand and gently spoke her name, as though he had known it all his life, until the colour crept back into her face. By the next stop, she woke up and got off without a word. Another time, he leapt into the Water of Leith to pull a drowning dog ashore.

But for all the miracles that unfolded around him, no one stayed. The woman on the night bus never looked back. The neighbour moved away. The dog belonged to someone else. Gratitude came and went like mist.

In his twenties, he had tried to resist the pull. Newly arrived in Edinburgh and exhausted from a sleepless week, he had stayed in, drawn the curtains of his room, and told himself that just once he would let the lash fall and do nothing. He deserved one peaceful night as an ordinary man. The hours that followed appeared fragmented in Ravi's memory: a sharp ringing in his ears, a hot burning, pressure behind his eyes, and three days he could not account for. Weeks later, he found a stranger's obituary in a local newspaper he had no memory of buying. The guilt that he could have helped but had chosen not to grew cracks in his heart. He never tried resisting again.

Some evenings, when the rain smudged the lights of Edinburgh into watercolours, he would walk to Calton Hill, look down at the city, and wonder if kindness had an end. His colleagues spoke of pubs and promotions, of lovers and ski trips. Ravi spoke little. They liked him, in a

distant way. He was reliable. Good-natured. The kind of man who volunteered for extra work and never complained. But no one asked who burnt his eyelashes as a child, or why he never seemed to get tired of helping others. No one knew that he had not cried since he was seven years old – not at his mother's funeral, not once in the loneliest years of his twenties, not even when his own body ached with a grief he could not name – simply because the falling of lashes would not make way for tears. No one knew that when he slept, he sometimes dreamed of the god again. Ayyappa, seated cross-legged beneath a forest canopy, blinking slowly, the golden lashes falling like rain.

Once, during a performance review, his supervisor said, "Ravi, you're too generous with your time. You can't save everyone, you know."

He smiled then, the polite smile that hid exhaustion, confusion, and something like defiance.

No, I can't save everyone, he thought. *But the lashes keep falling anyway.*

That night, as he washed his face, he found one caught on his fingertip. Long, black, and shining. He held it up to the light. Outside, sirens wailed faintly. Another accident, another cry in the city's restless heart. He sighed and reached for his coat.

…

Ravi returned in the middle of the night; his shoes wet from Edinburgh's endless drizzle. The flat smelled faintly of solder and instant coffee: the scent of his small, ordered life. He switched on the yellow lamp by the window and stared at the city below: the sleeping stone buildings, the dim buses, the fog pressing its cool hand against the glass.

But something inside him felt misaligned, like a machine running just out of rhythm. He had helped again that evening: a cyclist hit by a car on Lothian Road. The man had lived, his breathing restored under Ravi's palms, but that look – the wide-eyed shock of someone who had seen death and would forget it by morning – stayed with him.

He sat at his desk, rubbed his temples, and noticed another lash on his sleeve. He brushed it away. It disappeared midair, as if swallowed by the dark.

The phone buzzed. The screen lit up with a name he hadn't seen in years. Rani. *Tatta*'s caregiver.

He hesitated before answering. The connection crackled; behind her voice, he could hear the hum of crickets, the metallic rhythm of night in Tamil Nadu.

“Sir…your grandfather, he isn’t well. The doctors say maybe a week.”

Ravi closed his eyes. The room was suddenly too small, too clean. His grandfather, the man who had ordered the burning of his eyelashes, was dying.

“I’ll come,” he said simply.

“Come soon,” Rani whispered. “He keeps calling your name in his sleep.”

When the call ended, Ravi sat very still. The streetlights outside flickered: an old city glitch, or something else. For a long time, he did not move. Then the thought rose all at once, unbidden, sharp and painful as the old burn itself: *why did no one stop him then?*

At dawn, he packed without thinking. Passport, laptop, a small copper pendant of Ayyappa he had not touched in years. As he zipped his bag, he noticed in the mirror that his lashes had grown again: thick, dark, almost luminous, the way they always did within a week or two of a lash falling, as if his body already knew what awaited him in Tamil Nadu.

On the flight to Chennai, sleep came in shards. When he finally dozed off, he saw the forest, dripping green, thick with cicadas. Ayyappa stood again beneath the canopy, bow slung over his shoulder, watching without judgment.

Ravi wanted to ask when it would end. This compulsion under the guise of kindness, this need to heal, to fix, to mend everyone but himself. But the god only blinked, and with that blink, the dream dissolved into a cloud.

When he awoke, the flight attendants were serving coffee. The man beside him smiled absently, scrolling through his phone. Outside, the horizon blushed gold.

By the time the plane descended into Chennai, the heat hit him like an old punishment.

The airport smelled of dust and jasmine, a scent he had forgotten could make his chest ache. Rani met him outside, her sari hem darkened by sweat, her eyes kind and afraid.

“He speaks little,” she said as they drove through the narrow streets. “Sometimes he thinks you are still a boy.”

Ravi looked out the window. The world passed by in fragments: posters of film stars half-torn, temple towers painted in gaudy blues, an old woman selling betel leaves by a rusted gate. Every sight carried an ache of recognition.

When they reached the house, he paused before entering. The doorway still had the red handprints from the long-ago *pooja*. At the threshold, he thought he heard his mother sobbing; an old grief, thin and distant, caught for years within the house's walls. His uncle stood near the inner room. Their eyes met only briefly before his uncle looked away, with the practised reflex Ravi knew all too well: the instinct to leave the past undisturbed, to keep all secrets buried.

Inside, the fan groaned against the ceiling. His aunt, old and tired, was nursing his grandfather's sickly figure.

Tatta lay thin as paper on the cot. His eyes opened, cloudy yet searching.

"Ravi?" the voice rasped.

Ravi nodded, sitting beside him.

The old man whispered, "They told me…you were touched by the god. That-"

"*Tatta*," Ravi interrupted softly, "Don't."

But the old man kept speaking, words breaking between breaths.

"We thought we could contain it…such eyes…god's jealousy…we feared what would happen…we wanted you to survive."

Ravi looked at his grandfather: frail, fevered, human. The old explanations no longer fitted the world he lived in, and yet, in that moment, they made a strange kind of sense. He felt forgiveness rise in him before he had decided to offer it, surprising him more than the confession itself had. But what is forgiveness? Is it the same as kindness? Is it fair to those who live on?

Tatta gasped for breath, "He's coming!" And he started beating his chest with his wrinkled hands. He struggled against his own weight on the cot, battling a baseless fight of his own. The medic rushed, the household wailed. Outside, thunder rolled.

As monsoon clouds gathered, Ravi stepped into the courtyard, going numb against all sounds, weakly reaching out to the air that shimmered with the smell of wet earth:

"…take me away from here…"

He looked up at the first hard drops of rain, wounding the barren earth. Lightning cracked across the sky, and for a heartbeat, he thought he saw eyes in the clouds: calm, unblinking, old as the hills.

A child's cry came from the lane beyond the house. Then another. A mother shouting in panic. Ravi ran, unaware where his limbs were taking him; unfeeling, unconscious of his own acts. The street had begun to flood; water rose around his ankles, carrying plastic bottles, flowers, dead leaves. In the distance, a small form struggled against the current, a child swept from the steps of the temple pond.

Ravi plunged into the water. It was warm, alive, pulling him down. He reached the child, lifted him onto his shoulders, and stumbled toward the stone steps, where a man was already wading out to meet them. The man's hands closed around the boy and hauled him clear of the current. He cried out for help, the child gasping in his arms. By the time he reached back for Ravi, the current had surged again, and Ravi had gone under. He fell backward, struck his head on a stone, and everything went white. But the lash slipped quietly from his eyelid, soft and golden. It floated briefly on the water before dissolving, returning to where all golden things go.

When he opened his eyes, the world was silent. The rain had stopped. The sky glowed a strange, pearly grey. He stood in the courtyard, but the air was dry, the walls bright as bone, and his body was cold and painfully numb. He fought against the pain and staggered towards the flooded street that seemed to press against the house's walls. But the street had mingled into the forest of his childhood dream, as if the old and the new worlds had folded into one another, and neither landscape seemed less real than the other.

Ayyappa stood before him. The god of his dreams seemed older somehow, or perhaps only more solid, no longer half-glimpsed but something, finally, fully present before Ravi. So close that Ravi could see the grey ash worked into the lines of his palms.

"Why did you choose me?" he asked. "There are so many who could serve you better. Why bind me to a kindness that empties me?"

The god blinked, slow as dawn.

"You asked for meaning," the voice echoed. "You have not stopped asking."

Ravi shook his head. "But I am alone."

"So are the gods."

He closed his eyes, and for the first time in years, his eyes bore tears. Each one burned as it fell, salt and ash.

Ravi's voice broke.

"Take it back."

The god's eyes softened. "This is your *vratham*. To give without hoping to receive, to heal without hoping to be healed."

The god blinked slowly. The silver rain began to move again, melting into a cascade of gold. And when Ravi blinked in return, he found himself back in his room in Edinburgh. His clothes still damp, his palms smelling faintly of river water. The rain tapped gently at the window. On the desk lay his ID card, his watch, and a single golden eyelash. He looked at it for a long time.

It was beautiful. It was cruel.

The heater hummed. The world had continued. Outside, through the window, the streetlight flickered as though trying to remember him. But no one saw the man by the window. If anyone had looked closely, they might have noticed that his eyes, the eyes that had once seen gods, no longer held any reflection.

They were dark, infinite, and very still.

Critical Commentary

'When Ayyappa Blinked' explores Ravi's transformation as an imposed rather than a freely chosen condition. Set between Tamil Nadu and Edinburgh, the story asks how inherited myths persist within diasporic life, not as static remnants of a lost homeland but as active and sometimes troubling structures through which the self is understood. It is a work of imaginative fiction inspired by a real-life anecdote. Its ritual, divine visitation, and eyelash-vow are therefore fictional inventions rather than documentary or theological representations of Ayyappa worship. Magical realism provides the appropriate mode for this inquiry because it allows the sacred, the psychological, and the ordinary to coexist without resolving their different claims to reality.

The story may be situated alongside South Asian fiction in which myth enters into dialogue with modernity, migration, history, and fractured belonging. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), although formally and historically distinct from the story, demonstrate how mythic and historical frameworks may complicate narratives of secular or individual progress.[212] In a related theoretical register, Ravi's experience is illuminated by Vijay Mishra's concept of the "diasporic imaginary," in which an ethnic community continues to understand itself through inherited memory and cultural narrative long after physical departure from a homeland.[213] Ayyappa does not remain confined to a remembered Tamil past but follows Ravi into the ostensibly rational world of Edinburgh, suggesting that migration changes the forms through which belief is encountered and negotiated rather than leaving it behind.

The central concern of the story is its fictional reimagining of *vratham*: an austere vow. In the devotional context of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, *vratham* denotes a time-bound period of discipline and self-restraint, conventionally observed for forty-one days in spiritual preparation for pilgrimage.[214] The practice is associated with the worship of the South Indian Hindu deity, Ayyappa, commonly understood as the son of God Shiva and God Vishnu in his Mohini avatar.[215] The short story consciously reverses the meaning of *vratham*. Ravi's austere vow is not chosen, does not have a defined conclusion, and cannot be completed through ritual discipline. It is imposed upon him in childhood through fear and violence, and later framed by Ayyappa as an obligation to give, heal, and serve without expecting anything in return. The

[212] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981); Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).
[213] Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[214] Information and Public Relations Department (Kerala.gov.in), 'Rituals | Sabarimala', Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha Temple, 2026 <https://sabarimala.kerala.gov.in/index.php/rituals> [accessed 8 August 2026].
[215] Prinjal, 'Lord Ayyappa Swamy: Story, Significance & Temple', *Prinjal Global*, n.d. <https://prinjaljewels.com/blogs/rudraksha-jewelry/lord-ayyappa-swamy-story-significance-temple?srsltid=AfmBOooBkEDj8qu-ejsmWbL3YAZ1qHBZTxRS1gvIDg9MCBvG8Owohh9D> [accessed 11 August 2026].

story uses this gap between *vratham* as a voluntary vow and Ravi's fictional involuntary burden to question how sacred vocabulary may be mobilised across generations within families to make coercion appear protective.

This inversion becomes especially significant in the grandfather's explanation that the burning was intended to 'contain' Ravi. The family's generational fear of a child born under Ayyappa's star transforms an act of bodily harm into a gesture of care. Roland Barthes's account of myth is instructive here: myth works by making historically constructed values appear natural, inevitable, or self-evident.[216] In the story, astrology and divine jealousy offer the family a language through which their fear may be made to appear necessary. Yet the narrative does not dismiss faith itself as irrational or inherently violent. Ayyappa remains emotionally and morally ambiguous, not merely punitive. His admission that the gods, too, are 'alone', gives him an unsettling affinity with Ravi's own isolation. The critical focus is therefore on the unexamined transmission of belief, and on the way fear can distort sacred meaning when it becomes detached from consent, responsibility, and care.

The opening ritual establishes transformation as bodily inscription. Ravi's burnt eyelashes and scarred eyelids are not only symbols but material reminders of an event that cannot be fully assimilated into ordinary memory. Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as an experience that returns belatedly – often through bodily or repetitive symptoms – clarifies the structure.[217] Ravi's inability to cry, his compulsion to answer the call of every falling eyelash, and his exhaustion are all consequences of a past that has not been resolved into narrative knowledge. He does not consciously choose kindness. Rather his body is pulled towards need before his mind can consent. Kindness is therefore complicated: conventionally redemptive, it becomes a form of repetition, isolation, and depletion.

Ravi's profession intensifies the story's magical realist form. His work in aerospace engineering is defined by circuits, sensors, calibration, and rational causality. Yet his body follows another system of causation: an eyelash falls, a stranger requires help, and an involuntary pull begins. Faris identifies the "irreducible element" of magic as central to magical realism: an event or presence that cannot be satisfactorily explained by empirical knowledge yet remains embedded within a recognisable material world.[218] Ravi's workplace provides this realist anchor while Ayyappa's interventions and the golden eyelash remain irreducible. The story, therefore, stages not a simple opposition between modern reason and inherited religion, but the coexistence of incompatible epistemologies. Neither the technological world of Edinburgh nor the mythic world of Ayyappa fully accounts for Ravi's experience.

[216] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), pp. 142-44.
[217] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.
[218] Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nahville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), pp. 7-47.

This tension also informs Ravi's diasporic identity. Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'third space', and Stuart Hall's account of identity as continually produced through difference and displacement, are useful here.[219] The abbreviation of Ravichandran to Ravi, his softened Tamil vowels, and his unobtrusive place in a Scottish workplace indicate the everyday accommodations of migration. However, the story refuses to make diaspora a simple narrative of assimilation, nostalgia, or cultural loss. Edinburgh becomes a place where Tamil memory, trauma, divine obligation, and technical labour overlap. Myth survives not because Ravi has failed to modernise but because the pressures of modern rationality and diasporic life do not erase the emotional and bodily histories through which a subject has been formed.

Ravi's return to Tamil Nadu brings this structure into focus. His grandfather's confession complicates a simple opposition between oppressive tradition and an innocent descendant. The old man believes he acted to protect Ravi. This resonates with Connerton's notion of 'habitual memory' through which the past persists in embodied and performative practices even when its historical origins are no longer consciously known.[220] The ritual surrounding Ravi is thus reproduced through an unspoken and misguided inherited fear that has become habitual within the family across generations. Ravi's movement towards forgiveness remains equally unsettling. The scene asks whether forgiveness can be freely chosen when Ravi's capacity to give has itself been shaped by trauma and divine obligation. The story remains uncertain as to how far Ravi can distinguish his own moral desire from the compulsion imposed upon him since childhood.

The ending withholds resolution. Ayyappa does not remove Ravi's burden; he renames it as *vratham*. Ravi returns to Edinburgh wet, exhausted, and alone, while the golden eyelash remains as material evidence that the encounter cannot be easily dismissed as dream or psychological breakdown. The final image of his eyes does not clarify what, if anything, the encounter has altered. By stopping only in the immediate aftermath of the vision, without showing how Ravi will live with its consequences or what follows next, the narrative suspends him in between mythic and secular temporalities. This uncertainty is integral to the story's treatment of transformation. In refusing closure, the story remains an unfinished negotiation among trauma, family, faith, displacement, and the myths that continue to outlive their own explanations.

[219] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 36-39; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-37.
[220] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 72.

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Seeds in Dry Ground: A Creative and Critical Exploration of Transforming Ethnographic Research into Fiction

Stuart Busby

From Fieldwork to Fiction

This piece emerges directly from my own doctoral research and published work on educational leadership and inclusion in Tanzanian schools. The short story that follows is not an imaginative departure from this research, but a reworking of it. It represents an attempt to translate empirical fieldwork into a narrative form that foregrounds experience, emotion, and lived complexity.

The story draws on themes, patterns, and observations presented in Chapter 8 of *Contemporary Educational Management in East Africa: Tackling Challenges of Inclusion, Leadership and Digital Integration*, a volume I co-edited and contributed to. Rather than reproducing specific cases, I have constructed composite characters and situations that reflect recurring dynamics across multiple school contexts. In doing so, I have sought to preserve both ethical integrity and analytical depth while allowing space for creative interpretation.

The accompanying critical reflection does not aim simply to restate the arguments of the chapter. Instead, it examines what happens when I, as a researcher, move beyond conventional academic writing and engage in fiction as a methodological practice. This process raises important questions about representation, voice, and knowledge production. It also invites reflection on how the act of writing differently reshapes my own relationship to the research itself.

The short story can therefore be read as both an outcome and a method. It is a narrative artefact, but it is also a mode of inquiry, one that explores how meaning shifts when data is reimagined through storytelling.

Seeds in Dry Ground

Chapter 1. Morning Hunger

Each morning, before the sun rose fully over the Indian Ocean, Neema woke to the same quiet ache.

It began low in her stomach. Not sharp. Not urgent. Just there.
She lay still beside her brother, listening. Goats shifting outside. Her mother moving slowly. The absence of cooking.
“Neema,” her mother called gently. “Wake up.”
“I am awake.”
“There is nothing this morning,” her mother said, still kneeling by the charcoal stove. “But you must go.”
Neema dressed in her faded uniform. She smoothed the collar without thinking.
“I will try,” she said.
Outside, the sandy path stretched towards the school.
She passed Amina on the way.
“You are coming?” Neema asked.
Amina hesitated, then nodded. “Yes.”
They walked together in silence.

Chapter 2. Headteacher Moshi

The school courtyard stirred with movement.
Children gathered beneath the neem tree. Dust lifted as they shifted and laughed.
Neema spotted Samson near the classroom.
“Good morning,” she said.
He smiled, slightly late. “Good morning.”
“Come,” she said. “We sit together.”
She slowed her pace for him.
At the office door, Headteacher Moshi observed.
He noticed the quiet signs. Slower steps. Thin faces. Eyes that drifted.
“Neema,” he called.
“You are well?”
“Yes.”
He nodded, though he was not certain.

Chapter 3. The Kitchen

The smell came first.
Porridge.
Children turned toward it.
At the edge of the courtyard stood a rough structure. Smoke curled upward.
“Listen,” Moshi said, raising his voice.
“This kitchen is for you. Each morning, you will receive porridge.”
A boy asked, “Where is the money from?”
Moshi smiled. “From us. And from what we can grow together.”

A line began to form.
Neema held out her cup.
The porridge was warm.
Real.
She swallowed slowly.
“It is good,” Amina whispered.
Neema nodded. For a moment, the world steadied.

Chapter 4. Change

The porridge did not solve everything.
But it changed something.
Neema began to follow lessons again. She raised her hand.
At home, her mother watched her.
“You seem stronger.”
“There is food at school,” Neema said.
Her mother paused. “Then the teachers are doing more than teaching.”

Chapter 5. Shauri Arrives

Madam Shauri arrived on a motorbike, dust rising behind her.
“I am here to learn,” she told the school.
She visited every classroom.
She noticed broken desks, shared books, tired teachers.
And she noticed the kitchen.
“These matters,” she told Moshi. “More than policy will admit.”

Chapter 6. The Garden

“We must grow food,” Shauri said.
“The soil is poor,” a teacher replied.
“Then we improve it.”
They began digging.
Children laughed as they learned.
The garden became part of the school.

Chapter 7. Painting Day

The old storeroom was cleared.
Parents arrived with paint.
Children dipped brushes.

Neema helped mix colours.
“What are you painting?” Amina asked.
“Something brighter,” Neema said.
By evening, the walls held new life.

Chapter 8. The Support Unit

“You help Samson,” Shauri said.
“I like to,” Neema replied.
“Then we build a space for children like him.”
The support unit was small.
But it mattered.
Samson began to smile more.

Chapter 9. Tensions

Not everyone agreed with the changes.
“We need food, not walls,” a man said.
“And the children?” another replied.
Voices rose.
Moshi stepped forward.
“We cannot wait for others. We must begin ourselves.”
The crowd quietened.
But the disagreement lingered.

Chapter 10. The Dry Season

The heat pressed down.
Water grew scarce.
The porridge thinned.
Teachers spoke quietly.
“How long can we continue?”
Neema saw their worry.
She understood, even if no one explained it.

Chapter 11. Mango Season

Then came the mangoes.
The old tree filled with fruit.
Children laughed, juice running down their wrists.
Sweetness returned, briefly.

Chapter 12. Amina

One day, Amina did not come.
“She is to be married,” someone said.
Neema visited her.
“I wanted to stay,” Amina said quietly.
Neema did not know how to answer.

Chapter 13. The Rain

Rain came suddenly.
Children ran into it, laughing.
The garden revived.
But the roofs leaked.
“We start again,” Shauri said.
“With what?” Moshi asked.
“With what we have.”

Chapter 14. A Letter

A letter arrived.
Official words. No immediate help.
“It means they are listening,” Shauri said.
Moshi folded it carefully.
“We still continue.”

Chapter 15. The Festival

The school opened its gates.
Parents came. Children performed.
Neema stood to speak.
“In hard times,” she said, “we shared what we had.”
The crowd listened.
Then they applauded.

Chapter 16. Under the Mango Tree

Afterwards, Moshi and Shauri sat quietly.
“This change is not ours,” Moshi said.
“No,” Shauri replied. “It belongs to everyone.”

Chapter 17. Dreams

That night, Neema dreamt of planting seeds.
They grew into something strong.
She woke with a sense of possibility.

Chapter 18. The Future

Life did not become easier.
The porridge continued, but thinner some days.
The garden produced unevenly.
Samson arrived early.
“I want to help,” he said.
“Then we help together,” Neema replied.

Chapter 19. The Gift

After class, Shauri gave Neema a notebook.
“What will you write?” she asked.
Neema hesitated.
“I am not sure yet.”
“Start with what you see.”
Neema nodded.
What she saw was not simple.
But it mattered.

Closing

There was no single turning point.
No moment when everything changed.
Instead, people remembered small things.
Food shared. Work continued. Voices raised, then softened.
The school held.
Not because things became easy.
But because people refused to let it fall apart.
For Neema, that was enough to imagine something beyond the present.
Not certainty.
But possibility.

Critical Reflection: Writing Fiction as Method

Why Write This Story

Writing this story changed my understanding of my own research.

When I first conducted fieldwork, I focused on identifying patterns, themes, and structures. I was attentive to policy frameworks, leadership practices, and systemic constraints. When I later wrote Chapter 8,[221] I shaped those findings into a coherent academic argument. That process required selection, abstraction, and a certain distancing from the immediacy of experience.

Writing fiction required something different. It required me to return to moments that had not always made it into the formal research account. Small interactions. Emotional undercurrents. The texture of daily life in schools. In doing so, I found that aspects of the research which had seemed secondary became central.

For example, the experience of hunger emerged more forcefully in the story than in the chapter. While Chapter 8 acknowledges food insecurity as a structural issue, fiction allowed me to explore how hunger feels, how it shapes concentration, relationships, and identity. In writing Neema's perspective, I became more aware of the embodied dimensions of inequality, which are difficult to capture in conventional academic prose.

This process did not replace the original research. Instead, it reframed it. Certain themes became more urgent. Others appeared more contingent than I had previously assumed. Fiction acted as a form of analytical return, prompting me to reconsider what I had prioritised and why.

Positionality, Ethics, and Representation

Before turning to theoretical framing, it is important to address my position as the author of both the research and the story.

I write as a researcher based in the United Kingdom, working with Tanzanian educational contexts. This positionality carries both access and risk. While my research relationships have been built over time and grounded in collaboration, I remain aware that I am interpreting and representing experiences that are not my own.

[221] Stuart Busby, Christina Raphael, and Chrispina S. Lekule, eds, *Contemporary Educational Management in East Africa: Tackling Challenges of Inclusion, Leadership and Digital Integration* (London: Routledge, 2025).

The decision to write fiction intensifies this ethical complexity. Fiction involves invention, selection, and voice. It raises the question of whose story is being told, and for whom.

To address this, I have avoided representing any single individual. The characters in the story are composites, constructed from recurring patterns across multiple sites of fieldwork. Dialogue is imagined but grounded in observed interactions. Events are plausible rather than documentary.

This approach aligns with ethical principles outlined in my research practice, which emphasise respect, non-extraction, and reflexivity. However, fiction still introduces interpretive layers that cannot be fully stabilised. The story reflects my reading of the data, shaped by my own experiences, assumptions, and affective responses.

Writing in the first person here allows me to acknowledge that presence more directly. Rather than presenting the narrative as neutral or authoritative, I recognise it as situated and partial.

Why Use a Single Source

The critical reflection draws primarily on Chapter 8 as its theoretical and empirical foundation. This is an intentional decision.

The purpose of this piece is not to produce a broad literature review, but to explore the relationship between one body of research and one creative response to it. By limiting the reference base, I can examine more closely how specific concepts, such as inclusion, leadership, and systems thinking, are transformed through narrative practice.

That said, this approach sits within a wider methodological conversation about creative and arts-based research. Scholars such as Laurel Richardson and John Van Maanen have long argued that writing itself is a method of inquiry, not simply a mode of reporting.[222] Engaging more fully with this literature is an important next step, but here the focus remains on the internal dialogue between my empirical work and my creative reworking of it.

Fiction as a Way of Knowing

Chapter 8 presents findings through thematic analysis, drawing connections across interviews, observations, and policy contexts. Fiction, by contrast, operates through narrative coherence.

[222] Laurel Richardson, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

In writing the story, I found that narrative required me to make different kinds of decisions. Instead of grouping data into categories, I had to consider sequence, perspective, and voice. I had to ask not only what happens, but how it is experienced.

This shift revealed something important. Theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality or systems theory can describe complexity, but they do not always convey its immediacy. Fiction offers a way of holding multiple pressures together within a single lived moment.

For example, Neema's experiences bring together gender expectations, economic hardship, and educational aspiration in ways that are difficult to disentangle. This reflects the overlapping dynamics described in Chapter 8 but presents them in a form that is felt as well as understood.

In this sense, fiction does not simplify theory. It redistributes it.

Intersectionality as Lived Experience, Not Framework

When I wrote Chapter 8, I described intersectionality as a necessary framework for understanding how poverty, gender, disability, and geography interact in shaping educational access and outcomes. I argued that 'no single factor adequately explains exclusion, since vulnerability emerges through overlapping structural and social conditions.'[223]

At the time, this felt analytically precise. However, when I came to write the short story, I realised how distant that formulation was from lived experience.

In fiction, I could not rely on conceptual language. I had to show how intersectionality operates within a single life. Neema became the point through which multiple pressures converge, not as separate categories, but as simultaneous realities. Her hunger is not just economic. It shapes her concentration, her sense of self, and her relationship to learning. Her gender does not appear only in explicit moments of discrimination. It is present in the quiet uncertainty surrounding her future, particularly when Amina is withdrawn from school.

Writing Amina's storyline forced me to confront this more directly. In Chapter 8, I discuss how 'economic precarity intensifies gendered expectations, often leading to early withdrawal from schooling for girls.'[224] In the story, this becomes a conversation between children, framed through confusion and partial understanding. The abstract becomes intimate.

[223] Stuart Busby, 'Community and Inclusion: Working With the Local Community to Overcome the Challenges of Supporting Children With Additional Needs in Tanzanian Schools', in Stuart Busby, Christina Raphael, and Chrispina S. Lekule, eds, *Contemporary Educational Management in East Africa: Tackling Challenges of Inclusion, Leadership and Digital Integration* (London: Routledge, 2025).
[224] Ibid.

Similarly, Samson's presence reflects my analysis that disability intersects with infrastructural limitations and social attitudes, often resulting in exclusion even where enrolment is technically achieved.[225] Yet in the story, Samson is not a case or category. He is a child whose experience depends on peer relationships, teacher responses, and everyday interactions.

What changed for me through writing fiction was not my understanding of intersectionality as a concept, but my sense of its weight. It is one thing to analyse overlapping structures. It is another to inhabit them, even imaginatively, through narrative form.

Postcolonial Dynamics and the Politics of Voice

Chapter 8 engages with postcolonial theory to examine how educational systems in Tanzania are shaped by global policy flows, donor agendas, and historical inequalities. I note that 'policy discourse often travels more quickly than resources, creating disjuncture between expectation and implementation.'[226]

In the short story, this insight is reflected in subtle rather than explicit ways. The letter from the district office is one example. It is formal, distant, and ultimately noncommittal. When I wrote that scene, I was drawing directly on moments in fieldwork where schools received communications that acknowledged their situation without materially changing it.

However, the process of writing fiction also led me to reconsider the question of voice.

In Chapter 8, my writing is mediated through academic conventions. Even when I quote participants, their words are framed by my analysis. In the story, I attempted to decentralise my own voice by allowing characters to speak through dialogue and action. External actors are largely absent, not because they do not exist, but because I wanted to centre the agency that I repeatedly observed in schools and communities.

This reflects my earlier claim that 'leadership practices are deeply embedded in local relational contexts and cannot be fully understood through externally imposed models.'[227] However, fiction allowed me to go further. It enabled me to represent disagreement, frustration, and tension without resolving them into neat conclusions.

For example, the community meeting in Chapter 9 of the story emerges from my observations of how policy ideals can produce friction at local level. In Chapter 8, I describe how 'inclusive

[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.

practices may be contested when resources are scarce and priorities compete.'[228] In the story, this becomes conflict, raised voices, and uncertainty.

Writing this scene made me more conscious of how easily academic prose can smooth over disagreement. Fiction resists that smoothing. It requires the messiness to remain visible.

Systems Thinking Re-Examined Through Narrative

Systems theory is central to my analytical framework in Chapter 8. I argue that schools function as 'interdependent ecosystems in which changes in one domain, such as nutrition, have cascading effects on learning, attendance, and community engagement.'[229]

When translating this into fiction, I initially encountered a conceptual tension. Systems thinking, as articulated by Meadows,[230] deliberately abstracts relationships in order to reveal underlying patterns and structures, prioritising the general over the particular. By contrast, narrative, drawing on Ricoeur's theory,[231] works in the opposite direction, configuring meaning through specific characters, events and contexts, and thus particularising experience rather than abstracting it.

The turning point came when I stopped trying to represent the system explicitly and instead focused on small interventions and their effects. The school kitchen became the first of these.

In Chapter 8, I note that teacher funded feeding programmes serve as 'critical nodes within fragile systems, supporting not only pupil wellbeing but also broader engagement with schooling.'[232] In the story, I show this through Neema's changing capacity to concentrate, her mother's reaction, and the broader shift in the school environment.

Similarly, the garden is not presented as an initiative in isolation. It links to food provision, curriculum, and community participation. The specialist support unit connects disability inclusion with teacher practice, parental involvement, and spatial reorganisation within the school.

What fiction allowed me to do was to extend systems thinking across time. Rather than presenting relationships as static, I could show how they evolve, strengthen, or weaken.

[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (London: Earthscan, 2008).
[231] Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative and Temporality', in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[232] Busby.

At the same time, narrative exposed the fragility of these systems. When the porridge becomes thinner during the dry season, the entire structure is placed under strain. When tensions arise in the community, the relational foundation of the school is tested.

Writing these moments made me more attentive to the temporal dimension of systems. In the chapter, I emphasise interdependence. In the story, I became more aware of precarity.

Leadership, Care, and the Limits of the 'Hero' Narrative

One of my concerns in Chapter 8 was to challenge dominant models of leadership that focus on individual authority or charismatic intervention. I argued that effective leadership in the contexts I studied is 'relational, distributed, and sustained through everyday practices of care rather than singular acts of transformation.'[233]

In developing the characters of Moshi and Shauri, I remained conscious of the risk of reproducing the very 'hero' narratives I sought to critique. As Brooks argues, narrative form is often structured around a centralising logic that privileges identifiable protagonists and coherent trajectories of action.[234] Fiction, in this sense, tends to gravitate towards figures who appear to drive change, reflecting readers' expectations for agency and resolution rather than collective or distributed forms of action.[235]

To resist this, I made deliberate choices. Neither Moshi nor Shauri is presented as solving the school's challenges. Their actions are significant, but always partial and contingent. Much of what is achieved emerges through collective effort.

The Festival of Renewal is a key example. It is not led by a single figure. It grows from a suggestion made by Neema, developed through teachers, and realised through community participation. This reflects my argument in Chapter 8 that 'distributed leadership structures are more adaptive in resource constrained environments, as they draw on collective capacity.'[236]

What changed for me through writing this was my appreciation of how easily narratives slip into simplification. Even when I intended to foreground collective practice, I found myself drawn towards moments of individual action.

[233] Ibid.
[234] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
[235] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).
[236] Busby.

Revising the story required me to continually pull back from that tendency. In doing so, I gained a clearer sense of how deeply embedded the 'hero leader' model is, not only in policy discourse, but in storytelling itself.

Emotional Knowledge and the Limits of Academic Writing

Perhaps the most significant shift for me in writing this piece relates to emotion.

In Chapter 8, I acknowledge that poverty affects cognition, behaviour, and educational outcomes. I cite evidence that 'food insecurity undermines concentration and contributes to inconsistent attendance.'[237] However, these statements remain at a distance from lived experience.

Fiction allowed me to approach this differently. Writing Neema's perspective required me to consider how hunger feels over time. Not just its physical effects, but its emotional and psychological dimensions.

Similarly, moments of hope, receiving porridge, participating in the painting day, being given a new exercise book, took on a significance that would be difficult to justify within academic conventions. Yet these moments are not incidental. They are central to understanding how educational environments function.

This resonates with arguments in the wider literature that writing is itself a mode of inquiry. Laurel Richardson suggests that writing can 'produce knowledge, not just report it,' while Van Maanen highlights the interpretive nature of ethnographic representation.[238]

Engaging in fiction made these methodological claims tangible for me. I was not simply describing emotional dimensions. I was working through them.

Policy and Practice Reconsidered Through Narrative

Writing the story did not lead me to entirely new policy conclusions. However, it did change the way I understand the urgency and framing of these issues.

In Chapter 8, I argue that school feeding programmes should be understood as foundational to educational access and attainment. I describe them as 'essential interventions that support both cognitive development and sustained engagement with schooling.'[239] Writing the story

[237] Ibid.
[238] Van Maanen, John, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
[239] Busby.

deepened this understanding. It made clear to me that food is not simply an enabling factor. It is part of the emotional and relational fabric of schooling.

The same is true of disability inclusion. In the chapter, I emphasise the need for flexible provision that responds to local context. In the story, the creation of the support unit emerges not from a policy directive, but from observation, care, and improvisation. This does not diminish the importance of formal policy. Rather, it highlights the gap between policy frameworks and lived implementation.

Leadership is another area where my perspective has shifted in emphasis. While I continue to advocate for distributed and relational models of leadership, writing the story made me more aware of the emotional labour involved. Supporting pupils, negotiating community tensions, and sustaining initiatives under conditions of scarcity requires not only organisational skill, but resilience, empathy, and persistence over time.

Perhaps most significantly, the narrative reinforced the importance of community engagement as a dynamic and sometimes fragile process. In Chapter 8, I describe community participation as a strength within many school contexts. In the story, I was able to explore how that participation is negotiated, contested, and occasionally strained.

This leads to a broader reflection. Policy discourse frequently privileges the identification of scalable solutions, seeking to abstract from context to enable replication across settings. By contrast, narrative foregrounds specificity and situated experience, resisting easy generalisation. As Flyvbjerg argues, context-dependent knowledge is central to understanding human practice, precisely because it cannot be reduced to universal rules.[240] The value of the story therefore lies not in offering a model to be replicated, but in illuminating guiding principles, such as care, trust, adaptability, and collective responsibility, that can inform practice in context rather than prescribe it.

Limits of This Approach

While the process of writing fiction has proved valuable, it is important to recognise its limitations. First, fiction is inherently selective, shaped by decisions about what to include, what to omit, and how events are framed. These choices are unavoidably influenced by the researcher's own perspective and cannot fully capture the diversity of experiences within Tanzanian schools. As Leavy notes, arts-based research always involves interpretive acts that foreground some meanings while backgrounding others.

[240] Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Second, the use of composite characters, though ethically justified, introduces a further layer of abstraction.[241] While this approach helps to avoid the direct appropriation of individual voices, it also risks smoothing over important contextual differences between lived experiences.

Third, fiction does not replace empirical research. It cannot offer the same level of evidentiary detail or methodological rigour associated with systematic qualitative or quantitative approaches. Rather, as Kara argues, creative methods should be understood as complementary forms of inquiry that extend, rather than substitute for, conventional research practices.[242]

Finally, questions of positionality remain central. As an external researcher, I am interpreting and representing experiences that I do not directly inhabit. Although I have sought to do so responsibly, the work remains shaped by my own standpoint and epistemic positioning.

Recognising these limitations is essential, ensuring that the use of creative methods strengthens, rather than obscures, the ethical and analytical commitments of the research.

How This Process Changed My Relationship to the Research

The most significant outcome of this project lies not in the story itself, but in how the process of writing it reshaped my relationship to the research. Previously, I approached my work primarily through themes, frameworks, and arguments, with an emphasis on clarity, coherence, and scholarly contribution. While these priorities remain important, engaging in fiction required a different mode of attention, one that returned me to the material in a more embodied and sensorial way. As Pink argues, qualitative inquiry benefits from attentiveness to the sensory and affective dimensions of experience, which are often muted in conventional academic representation.[243]

Through this process, I found myself recalling specific moments with greater vividness, not only what was said, but how it felt: pauses in conversation, facial expressions, and the shifting atmospheres of classrooms across the day. Such elements rarely feature in academic prose, yet they are vital to understanding lived reality. This shift also prompted a reconsideration of my analytical priorities. Issues I had previously treated as secondary, such as the emotional effects of hunger or the significance of small acts of recognition, became more central when encountered through a narrative lens.

[241] Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, 3rd edn (New York: Guilford Press, 2020).
[242] Helen Kara, *Creative Research Methods: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edn (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020).
[243] Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2015).

At the same time, the process highlighted the limitations of both forms of writing. Academic discourse can abstract and create distance, while fiction can simplify and personalise complex realities. As Ellis et al. suggest, narrative and creative approaches do not replace analytic forms but rather expand the ways in which knowledge can be understood and communicated.[244]

What this experience ultimately created was a dialogue between forms. The academic chapter and the story now operate in relation to one another: the former offering conceptual structure, the latter providing texture and immediacy. Perhaps most significantly, writing fiction brought greater awareness to my own presence within the research. Whereas academic writing can obscure the researcher behind analysis, narrative foregrounds the interpretive choices involved, making positionality more visible and open to reflection.

This has encouraged me to adopt a more reflexive approach more broadly. I am now more attentive to how my own assumptions, experiences, and emotional responses shape the way I understand and represent the field.

Conclusion: Transformation as Practice

This piece began as an experiment in method. It has become something more than that.

Both the chapter and the story engage with transformation, of schools, of communities, of educational possibility under conditions of constraint. Through writing fiction, I have come to see transformation not only as an outcome, but as a practice.

It is present in the everyday actions described in the story. Teachers preparing food before lessons begin. Pupils supporting one another. Communities negotiating shared challenges. These acts are not dramatic, but they are cumulative.

Writing itself is part of this practice. Moving between forms, between analysis and narrative, has reshaped how I think about knowledge and representation. It has reminded me that research is not only about explaining the world, but also about finding ways to engage with its complexity more fully.

Fiction does not resolve the tensions identified in the research. It does not offer definitive answers. What it does is create space for different kinds of understanding, including emotional, relational, and imaginative.

For me, that space has proven valuable. It has expanded both how I write and how I think.

[244] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12.1 (2011).

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CONTRIBUTORS

Anil Kaan Yildirim (Assistant Editor) is a PhD student in Politics at the University of Exeter. His research explores the definition and management of life, situated at the intersection of theory and philosophy. He is particularly interested in themes of temporality, utopia, and "in-betweenness." When he isn't buried in his studies, he loves taking his 35mm camera out for a walk to see what he can capture. He also has a passion for writing short stories, finding beauty in the narrative both on and off the page.

Bailey Van Den Heuvel (Assistant Editor) is a PhD student in English Literature at Exeter. Her doctoral project, "Werewolves, Wingspans, and Women: Examining the Rise of Monster Romance and its Depiction of Monstrosity, Masculinity, and Heterosexuality in a Post-#MeToo World" examines the post-#MeToo monster romance genre, investigating what its ongoing evolution and commercial success reveals about changing attitudes towards sex, violence, power, and gender in women's popular culture. More broadly she specializes in the popular romance genre. Prior to doctoral studies, Bailey worked for five years in the United States as a secondary school English literature teacher. She also received her MLitt in English Literature at the University of Glasgow in the fall of 2023, and in 2019 graduated with her undergraduate degree in Communication Arts and Literature Teaching with a music minor at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, USA. Outside of her studies, Bailey is writing her own romance novels and hopes to be a published romance author one day. She also loves tennis, animals, and exploring the outdoors.

Bhavika Sachan is a doctoral researcher at the University of Southampton. Her academic and creative practice draws upon South Asian folklore, myths, oral histories, and visual narratives of displacement. She has previously published research on acts of memory in Mamang Dai's *River Poems* and on the representation of caste in graphic novels, examining how visual art intersects with mythic memory, conflict, and resistance in contemporary literature. She is also the author of *Maps Called Souls are Hard to Trace*, a poetry collection that traces how myths and memories shape the emotional cartography of the self.

Chloe Statham Watkins is a University of Exeter PhD student based in Falmouth, Cornwall. Her research explores transatlantic folklore and postcolonial memory in the coastal cultures of Cornwall and the Caribbean. Her scholarly focus is the blurred line between history and fiction, a thread that runs since her BA and MA research where she explored myth and memory from Homer, Herodotus and Ovid to The Brothers Grimm, Mary Wollstonecraft and Hilary Mantel. She has over ten years of professional experience developing educational resources for schools globally, where she specialises in the English-speaking Caribbean.

Helga Henson (Assistant Editor) is a poet from Barnaul, Russia. She has graduated with a BA in World Performance from East 15 Acting School and an MA in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University. She is currently doing research and writing poetry for a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Exeter, centred on surrealism, automatism, and unconscious conceptualisation. Her first collection of poems Everything is Nice, but not Enough was published in 2026 by Thin Man Press.

Imogen Dobson is a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. She gained her BA and MA degrees in English Literature from the University of York and Durham University, respectively. Her research interests include contemporary literature, space, sex work, slave narratives, and intersectional feminism. Her PhD is also in English Literature and focuses on sex work and urban space in twenty-first century British and North American Literature.

Josie Lewis Sullivan (Co-Editor) is a PhD student at the University of Exeter in the Creative Writing department. Her academic work is around the intersection of ethics and temporality with an emphasis on the temporal effects of climate anxiety. Prior to her PhD, Josie received a BA in Drama and an MA in Creative Writing, both from the University of Exeter. Outside of her studies, she pursues photography and spoken word poetry.

Parm Lota is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Exeter. His research focuses on queer aesthetics, nineteenth-century literature, and the politics of beauty and desire. His current project examines his own concept of 'gay beauty' in relation to homoerotic desire and aesthetic theory, with particular attention to figures such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Catherine Belsey, and Walter Pater. In addition to his doctoral research, Parm teaches undergraduate courses in literature and cultural studies and is actively involved in the organisation of scholarly events. His research is supervised by Professor Kate Hext and Professor Angelique Richardson at the University of Exeter.

Paula van Eenennaam Sánchez (Co-Editor) is a PhD researcher in the English Literature Department at the University of Exeter. Her doctoral work examines the representation of trees in North American literature. More broadly, her research interests include ecocriticism, critical plant studies, and new materialist theory. She holds a BA in Publishing Media from Oxford Brookes University, an MA in Comparative Literature from King's College London and an MA in Environmental Humanities from the University of Plymouth. Before beginning her PhD, Paula worked in marketing within the arts, culture, and luxury sectors. She continues to consult in these areas alongside her academic research.

Philippa Johnson is doing her PhD in Creative Writing at Exeter, producing a poetry collection about the female bog bodies, bogs and enmeshedness with/in this landscape. With a background in Anglo-Saxon and Linguistics, she draws on the poetics of early English, Irish and Scottish writing, and combines this musicality with her deep love of landscape to explore

memory, personhood and our complex relationship with the more-than-human. Previously the deputy editor of Exeter's *Exclamat!on Journal*, she writes for local magazines and has been published by *Black Bough*, and in *Nearshore* and *Exclamat!on* journals: she currently teaches at the university and shares her home with a large number of books.

Rebecca Edgerley (Assistant Editor) is a Postgraduate Researcher in Sociology and a Senior Educator Developer at the University of Exeter. She is based in Cornwall, where she supports the learning, teaching, and supervision practice of colleagues and postgraduate teaching assistants. Rebecca's research explores inter-disciplinarity in academia, with a particular focus on how creative methods and approaches shape such knowledge-making practices. She has a 'multi-disciplined' background in English language, literature, Norse and Viking Studies, higher education teaching and administration, and project management for conceptual art and poetry.

Rui Chen (Assistant Editor) is a PhD student in the English Department at the University of Exeter. Her doctoral project explores the intertwined relationships between animal rights, animal morality, carnivory and human social issues – such as racism and sexism – in both apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, through the analysis of literary works. Before beginning her PhD, Rui completed a master's degree in English Literature at the University of Southampton. Outside of her studies, she enjoys spending time in nature and playing tennis.

Sally Hamilton is a PhD candidate in the School of English and Creative Writing at the University of Exeter, focusing on landscapes, liminal spaces and the legacy of Mary Borden's writing of the First and Second World Wars. Her main research interests are First World War literature and art, trauma and shell shock, hauntology, psychogeography and representations of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic landscapes in the twentieth century. She also has wider interests in Holocaust writing, Gothic and the uncanny, Modernism, dystopian literature, cinema and alternative music culture.

Shannon L. Fox Ashover is a Canadian-South African artist, writer, and cryptid. She is a Creative Writing PhD candidate at the University of Exeter, where she is undertaking an interdisciplinary visual art and writing collection on ecology and the absurd. Shannon has published creative writing in places such as *filling Station, EVENT poetry and prose*, *New Forum Magazine*, and *FreeFall Magazine*, among others. Her artworks have been internationally represented in Canada, the United States, and Scotland.

Stuart Busby is a doctoral researcher at the University of Exeter whose PhD explores educational partnerships between England and Tanzania through a Bourdieusian lens, examining how policy, power and identity shape collaborative practice. He has worked in the education sector for 29 years as a headteacher, strategic leader and specialist in inclusion, digital transformation and community engagement. His recent publication in *Contemporary*

Educational Management in East Africa investigates how Tanzanian school leaders navigate the cost of living crisis and foster inclusive, community driven responses. Stuart's research interests include global partnerships, intersectionality, educational leadership and the lived experiences of vulnerable learners.