



Our Time Is A Garden

NEW NATURE WRITING BY WOMEN AND
NONBINARY WRITERS OF COLOUR

EDITED BY ALYCIA PIRMOHAMED

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The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities
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Alycia Pirmohamed (ed.)
*Our Time Is A Garden: new nature writing by women
and nonbinary writers of colour*

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OUR TIME IS A GARDEN is part of a larger research project on radical landscape poetry led by Dr Alycia Pirmohamed, Junior Anniversary Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), University of Edinburgh.

Five workshops were co-facilitated by artists and academics working in various areas of ecological writing. All the writers included in this pamphlet attended this workshop series as either attendees or guest speakers.

The programme was open to poets at all stages in their careers and from any educational background. It aimed to develop writing skills and promote knowledge exchange by sharing interdisciplinary art and research.

Dr Shari Sabeti (University of Edinburgh) joined the course as a researcher of arts education to help explore how these sessions contributed to accessible learning, activism, and a sense of belonging or identity formation for participants.

The workshops also aimed to decolonise the literary arts in Scotland, primarily by supporting the development of, and creating space for, new nature writing by women and nonbinary writers of colour.

This collection was only made possible thanks to the warmth and generosity of an entire community.

We are grateful to our invited speakers: Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo, Samaneh Moafi, Nina Mingya Powles, Churnjeet Mahn and Amanda Thomson. Your openness and willingness to share knowledge with our group in these workshops remains a constant source of inspiration.

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Our time is a garden in which all realities are simultaneously possible.

Sun Yung Shin

PREFACE

At an event I once attended titled ‘Landscape and Literary Culture,’ Aimee Nezhukumatathil said something along the lines of, ‘the trees don’t ask you where you’re from.’

What does it mean to belong somewhere or to something? And what are the consequences of being decentred, perceived as unfamiliar or as a stranger to place?

I think of the ecology textbooks I studied growing up and their emphasis on the human footprint. The human here (at times referred to as ‘man’) was always unmarked by any specific cultural or historical contexts. *Our Time Is A Garden* is a project that came from the question of why I rarely encountered literature where bodies like my body, a brown woman’s body, moved through the natural world. It made me wonder what I have internalised about ecology, about the borders between ‘natural’ and ‘urban.’ About access to green spaces and the bodies that are perceived as belonging within them.

Nature poetry is historically a male-dominated poetics, where women and nonbinary writers of colour have been doubly marginalised. All one must do is look at nature writing anthologies, awards, scholarship, and criticism to see that there is a noticeable gap of these perspectives from mainstream literary culture. In Western/European contexts, the dominance of white, male perspectives in nature writing is so pervasive that it is often a barrier for women and nonbinary writers of colour to even call ourselves nature writers.

This anthology, *Our Time Is A Garden*, is named after a series of online nature writing workshops that took place for women and nonbinary writers of colour based in Scotland in early 2022. The workshops emphasised interdisciplinary knowledge exchange between academics, researchers, and artists, alongside the development of new poetry, to contribute to the decolonisation of nature writing in the UK. To facilitate this kind of collaboration, different guest speakers joined each session, and each workshop began with a 20-30 minute talk on each guest's research and/or artistic practice.

The subjects and themes of these workshops were broad in scope: Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo spoke about colonialism's erasures, thresholds, and dreams as a diagnostic tool; Samaneh Moafi presented some of her work with Forensic Architecture and the Cloud Studies project; Nina Mingya Powles facilitated a conversation on bodies of water, movement, and migration; Churnjeet Mahn outlined her research on queering postcolonial travel writing; and Amanda Thomson discussed her transdisciplinary artistic process and her project, *The Scots Dictionary of Nature*. All these talks are available online through Scottish BPOC Writers Network's YouTube channel and IASH's website.

The writing exercises within the workshops similarly navigated a variety of topics. Across this anthology, the phrase *what do you remember about the earth?* appears and reappears. This question was used as a writing prompt and comes from Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. In the appendix is a note with more information on what prompted and inspired the writing here.

The poetry within these pages excitingly challenges, responds to, and innovates ideas of what nature poetry is and can be. As you flicker through, you will find work that reflects on our relationships to nature and place, that looks toward the natural world for solace in moments of loss and grief, that describes climate crisis and calls for action. You will find work that notices the trees: what they represent, their living portraits, our impacts on them, and what we ask for and what we take.

Alycia Pirmohamed

it transpires

trees are not women
dramatic representation
may make them witness
alongside Castle Terrible
monsterproportionate to events
those who can uproot
splintsplaining elmish panels
plainer than trees they model
shapes that do not tell
of breath
shapes that do
not tell

smol thing atte play

it exists

daffodils are higher than my toes
dandelions higher than my nose
yet I am not buried
what am I?
very smol
on ane hill

it seeks

source of song
snug and bite
boing and flink
flump and fight
is there one pool
where you are all
that swims
that blinks
that hunts
that calls?

it hides

human offering
wildflowers
in eggcups
to look at
been stopped
while alive
smol thing
has eaten
yellow off walls
licked the stone
likes to remain
buttery
uncollected

ANTHONY EZEKIEL (VAHNI) CAPILDEO

Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo's two poems glide into exciting linguistic formations and draw out original and surprising meanings.

'it transpires' begins with the evocative line: 'trees are not women.' This image and its multiple representations are explored in the poem's dynamic vocabulary and compact structure. 'it transpires' uncovers different narratives with each re-read, inviting audiences to consider the natural world and its agency alongside what appears to be a world of human interference, a world of 'splitsplaining elmish panels / plainer than the trees they model.' The language here is striking, challenging, and the poem opens up generously to interpretation. Capildeo's piece sparks moments of understanding, as well as, perhaps more thrillingly, new – even haunting – questions about the shapes that we have made or the stillnesses we encounter: 'shapes that do not tell / of breath / shapes that do / not tell.'

April river

That morning I said *too much* –
it felt like stumbling out into the garden at night

and plunging right into the pond.
Later, *too much* followed us out on the drive

and out through the fields. Followed whilst the heat
made moons of our upturned faces –

as the clouds dandelioned apart.
I wanted to unloosen into the ice

of the April river. I wanted to be a gill.
The water was clear and cold and quiet.

Its depth a boulder against my belly.
My eyes still sticky with pollen.

In the river I found every river
I'd ever touched. Meadowsweet

and wet trouser cuffs.
I wanted to be cleansed. Like blooming silt,

like water over rock. Instead,
the river dappled and deepened its mirror

and I met myself – unchanged.

ROSHNI GALLAGHER

Roshni Gallagher's strong lyrical voice guides readers into the quietly evocative, imagistic world of this poem. 'April river' oscillates between tensions of too much – an overflow, a shock of pond water at night – and more implicit feelings of longing, of what we perhaps might translate as not enough. This sentiment emerges in spaces where the speaker articulates what she still desires: to unloosen into the ice; to be cleansed. This tension builds, finally, into the poem's last line: 'I met myself – unchanged.' What does it mean, at this moment, to come away unchanged? Gallagher asks us to think about what might be fulfilled or unfulfilled in our own journeys across time and through water, as we unfurl in buoyant in between spaces.

'April river' was inspired by Nina Mingya Powles' writing workshop on bodies of water. In the poem, water slips and intertwines with bodily sensation, with changed-unchanged memories of place: 'In the river I found every river / I'd ever touched.'

intertidal

the sun is a white blur in water pulsing pulsing
 as currents cut stretch marks in sand
 light travels along sheer veins sequins
 past algae and kelps bundled sprawling
 wavy at rest I salivate at sea-spray
 (should've brought vinegar and garlic)
 all these sea vegetables some dried exposed
 among rocks scarred by motions
 a small spiral spins open this wrinkly translucence

~

 across a black-winged beach that island
 is a blunt stroke in haze rising slightly before its cliff
 where memory seems world-less
 If I jumped would I forgive myself
 for leaving what would catch me
 rocks laddered creased like faces
 hummocks raw like dough or waves rushing
 towards themselves A person is walking his dog
 slight shadows such brightness

~

the path up this green disc of an island only appears
 at low tide moisture oozes with every step
 boulders pebbles are maps
 pressed together by centuries some salt-rimmed
 barnacled contours resemble burns overgrown terrains
 holding small lakes I walk closer to the soft edge
 of this grassy crag as far as my legs won't quiver
 I can't tell where the atlantic and north sea meet
 The wind dispels nations inside me

Guerilla Gardening

after a walk with Divergent(ists), a group in Edinburgh

These seed bombs are made of dried soil:
where occasional grass protrudes,
faint handprints coat.

Like villains in old films,
who ponder with two silver spheres
as a personality trait, I turn
and turn the mud balls in my palm,

sizing up potential spots

to hurl at: what about this dumping ground
of a playground carousel
behind barbed wires, this hedgerow
by the train station, or this
security camera in a yellow stand,
alone amidst a construction site?

I cast my bombs
into what hasn't been built
behind an old facade that remains
for the city to look the same.

I lose track
of where my wildflowers may land.

Waterlogged

from Hong Kong to Edinburgh

Cloud puffs hovered below,
 their shadows above red tile roofs.
 Vapour condensed on double-paned windows,
 straining to contain
 the bird's eye view of everything,
 faintly outlined in my English books.

The limbo of a long haul
 muffled my fear for other passengers' droplets.
 Pass me the wine. Spill the tea
 at the slightest of turbulence.
 I'd never noticed how dry the air
 in the cabin was until then,

two years since not flying. Last time I flew,
 Mount Fuji stood constant in dense clouds
 at the dawn of news back home.
 I never knew how much rain the sky
 and a person could hold. Perhaps,
 I never will. If I were to make this place

my home, this language I've lived
 outside but scratched at,
 would the news back home get old?
 The day I landed, there's a sudden shower
 in the sun. The city greeted me:
 raindrops in a stranger's copper hair.

TIM TIM CHENG

Tim Tim Cheng's 'intertidal' unspools in three sections, and the poem's structure delightfully recalls its title. Are the gaps perhaps metaphorical representations of the seashore, where algae, faces, or even memories, are covered and uncovered at high and low tide? Each section itself seems to spiral, to 'spin open,' as the poem plays with temporality, pulsing in all directions. 'intertidal' is both a poem of glimpses, of momentary, slight shadows – like the island that is a 'blunt stroke in haze,' the island that only appears at low tide – and of deep, historical, geological time.

This piece asks us to braid together maps of pebbles 'pressed together by centuries' with what might be perceived as more subjective. Vinegar and garlic linger amidst the watery sea-spray; a body repeatedly emerges and disappears, breaking like a wave at the poem's last line:

'The wind dispels nations inside me.'

What do you remember about the earth?

Dry sand runs through my fingers and toes
it pastels my skin, bleaches my
colour, morphs me into the landscape.

This is all I remember from above. as I float
in space. high into universe's darkness.
In this endless milky way, I dream. I
romanticise planet earth. our home. what has been.
the lost love of our lives.

Birds chirp in my ears. Loud. irregular songs
one more beautiful than the other
ears turn, ambitious, pointy, like a dog's.

Greenery high and thick, eating into narrow space,
amidst demanding trees. shades of green
climbing blossomed stems and leafy shallows,
the path is thin, almost none at all.

Maybe it's just the route animals take at
dawn yearning for water, or where
a stream passed through,
once upon a time.

This is all I remember from above.
I float in endless blue. float in space. float high
in the darkness of our endless universe. I
dream, I romanticise planet earth, our
home. the home that has been –
the lost love of our lives.

The colour of the sky balances still in front of me,
a leaf from a nearby tree dances low
solitarily disturbing the surface.
I only know of the fish down low,
so beautiful, we never meet.

This is all I remember from above.
floating in endless blue. in sky. in darkness. in
universe. in dream. in romance.

between planets.

in earth. in soil. our home. the home that has been.
the lost love of our lives.

What do you remember about her?

TITILAYO FARUKUOYE

In Titi Farukuoye's poem, the land – the earth – is in constant transition. It is a deeply sensorial piece, where the poet alters the natural world through a skilful weaving in and out of memory. How did dry sand feel in the past? Which birdsong was more beautiful? Repetition disrupts any notion of linearity as we are asked again and again to 'romanticise planet earth.' The structure of the poem, too, mimics the unreliability of memory. A careful eye notices where these repetitions vary: 'float' becomes 'floating,' the syntax of phrases change slightly to highlight new meaning, new, tender, moments of a lost earth/home. And, caesuras scatter across the page, stopping and starting the narrative like one might enter and exit a recollection.

Titled 'what do you remember about the earth?' after a question asked by Bhanu Kapil in her collection *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, this piece evokes merging ideas of transformation and embodiment. We begin 'amidst demanding trees' and journey from there toward the poem's startling end: 'What do you remember about her?'

Hawthorn Blossom (away with the fairies)

I drink in the scent,
Hawthorn in bloom,
white flower, golden hour,
early summer saffron haze,
the smell is sweet,
like gulab jamun,
like nothing else,
it is the flower of fae,
a blossom on tree of the strange folk,
weird folk,
child stealers,
strange, dangerous, sexy,
magic.

Long before I knew Hawthorn's name,
I dreamed of running away to Elfland,
to be "one of the lucky ones,"
to join the parties, the stories, the celebrations,
even though,
the Fae folk were forced underground,
kept to ruins, forests and caves,
rushing rivers and lonely lochs,
hidden places.

Except on special nights,
when they are given "their space",
and they may dance in the open,
as if they could fit everything they have to experience in just one night.
I write this now,
sipping on the scent,
of the flower now tattooed on my forearm,
and realise,
that ever since I have known that there is more to my life than he and she,
that I don't need to run away with the fairies,

I already am a stolen child,
I am strange, sexy and joyful.
I feel joy in myself like no other,
though now,
I must dance in hidden spaces,
underground bars and special club nights,
to step outside means danger,
to step outside has meant worse,
for too many.
Except on special days,
when we are given “our space”,
to show our *pride*,
and dance in the open.
as if we could show it all in one day.
But when it is not those days,
I, like too many others, must choose my moments,
nails painted or not?
dress or jeans?
It is hard.
It is scary.
And yet,
As I write this,
I know I am never going back,
to the world of the normal folk.
Here I will stay,
and drink deeply from the scent of Hawthorn in blossom,
in the early summer saffron haze.
As I do,
I know,
despite everything,
I am everything I should be.
I am magic.
I am one of the “lucky ones”.

NIALL MOORJANI

The symbol of the Hawthorn is at the heart of Niall Moorjani's poem. The details in this piece are sensuous – the Hawthorn's sweet scent, the 'early summer saffron haze' – and such evocative language invites readers to witness how the Hawthorn blossoms grow and transform, and thus, how the poem, too, shapes new realisations and understandings.

In 'Hawthorn Blossom (away with the fairies),' Moorjani's fantastical imagery invites readers into dreamworlds where we can envision the 'flower of fae' amidst 'rushing rivers and lonely lochs.' These beautifully drawn images are perhaps meant to challenge us too. We are asked to consider larger questions of space and access, of where one might find belonging, recognition, and even, finally, magic. The poem both acknowledges feelings of joy and vulnerability, and repeatedly, Moorjani figuratively contrasts an undercurrent of danger, of 'hidden places,' with an ability to 'dance in the open.' The last few lines are especially moving. Here, the speaker emphasises: 'I am everything I should be.'

Crossing the street for mother's cigarettes

(she is blonde, she is American)
to the shop a block from home
I skip over shrapnel, the vestige
of last night: the curfew and blackout,
the clash I heard through my window,
and wonder at the constitution
of puddles: water, gasoline, blood?
I have been taught to cross this road —
busy with traffic — with care.
Tehran drivers don't watch
for small children. But this morning,
the road is silent. I cross it, first looking
both ways, then again — half expecting,
half willing those cars I can almost still hear
to reappear from nowhere.

Granddaughter, I entered your mother's house

as I entered every house, head covered, shoes off.

I wore a black chador for all my outings.

Your mother said *black is for funerals*.

What she didn't know was that I agreed.

This funeral of a life; I'd been in mourning

since my wedding. I entered my son's house

as a stranger, reading each carpet as I might

almond trees in bloom or bolts of cloth

to determine yield, how much they might fetch.

Your parents prospered, did not always smile.

I placed my shoes at the front door, as is only

proper. *Bebakhshid*, they said. *Beshin eenja*,

pointing to the largest lounge chair. I wanted

to drop to the ground, fold my heels beneath me.

I wanted to speak in the old language, the one

your mother hadn't learned. But instead, I sank

into the seat with a flick of the head, saying

khayli mamnoon, as if grateful, remembering

how hard it is in this foreign land to keep

holding the spine straight, to keep looking down.

MARJORIE LOTFI

In Marjorie Lotfi's two poems, vibrant scenes unravel to present us with a strong sense of place. These scenes are richly described – figurative and literal details come together with a skilful precision.

Inspired by Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo's workshop prompt on thresholds, 'Crossing the street for mother's cigarettes' begins quietly, in parentheses and with what feels almost like a preface: '(she is blonde, she is American)'. What does it mean to be blonde, to be American, in this poem? How does Lotfi articulate the closenesses or the distances felt between family members through the act of crossing a street, a possible threshold, in Tehran? There is also another strand; that of a child navigating a place that is familiar enough for them to have been 'taught to cross this road,' yet perhaps changed by moments of violence – of shrapnel, of clashes outside a window. In this affecting piece, where every line is exact, we encounter remarkable imagery that hints at the story of what happened last night; puddles that are perhaps a mixture of 'water, gasoline, blood' glistening amidst the routine of daily life, familial relationships, and childhood memory.

Waterfall

Suspended
In only air
This body is falling
This body of mine

We fall apart
Together, we fall
Deafening Crashing Downwards
Fervent speed mass haste
No patience in this body
This body of mine

But still, in movement
Suspended in this middle place
The air and me
The rush of sound
Completely submerged
In water, in me

Splashes spray relentless motion
Forever moving
Downwards Wayward Outwards
A careless force

Fervent speed mass haste
No patience in this body
But still, suspended
In this movement
This body is falling
This body of mine

Almost Touching

If touching the earth brings us home
Why can't I touch you?

If touching the earth is how we belong
More than living soaring strong
Butterfly wings of beauty
But I can't touch you

I can't touch you
And I can't access this earth
I am of this world but this world doesn't see me

Butterfly clouds and sweet chamomile
Dancing trees and a springtime smile
Almost reaching
Almost feeling

This world eats me whole
And I can't touch you

Coming Home

When I write poetry the words come out hard and fast
I should slow down. Set the scene
Slip into images then surpass

But as the scenes of the day gone by
Crash past the mottled train windows
In sky blues and concrete greys
Or is it sky grey and just concrete...
My words pick up pace. Lose all grace
The sky falls around me losing it its non-existent blue haze

Trees gather like storms and fall away
Carriage by carriage
Rain drop by rain drop
Through the harrowing tunnel towards a misty sunlight
Hopeful as ever
Broken as ever
The words tumble out
They trip and trail and blunder across the tracks
Receipts of emotional tax
Evidence of
Personality attacks
They say opposites attract...

Sweeping landscapes close in and drift off
Earth bends light to its will
While the sun crashes downwards
Breathing life onto the moon
Starry night oh starry night
Soon
I come to you

NADIA MALONEY

In 'Waterfall,' Nadia Maloney explores the rushing, wayward movements of water alongside instances of suspension and stillness.

Across the poem's five stanzas, readers navigate images of the waterfall – 'Splashes spray relentless motion' – and its association with the speaker's own body that also falls, again and again, throughout the piece. We are propelled forward by the force of the poem's diction as it submerges us in a 'rush of sound,' and in the insistent repetition of the phrase, 'No patience in this body.' Water is the through line and it comes to represent various themes, including togetherness and separation, liminality, one's relationships, and perhaps even the fervent, unstoppable passage of time. In 'Waterfall,' Maloney asks us to imagine what might it feel like to hang momentarily suspended in the air, then crash downwards, to fall and to fall apart.

In the Leftover Space

I picked the flower

and revealed the alternate world. I revealed all
the generations I'd once ushered from a garden pond.
The ghosts scattered like mice between the petioles,
sought more daylight than any ghost is allowed.
The flower receded to wherever displaced atoms go
in this homeland: a corpse planted back into the seed,
so far back into the seed that it became a window
framing all the women that came before. I picked
the flower and planted so far back into the seed.
Elsewhere, a daughter felt hands tug a strand of dark
hair into the varnished alternate world.

All the faces on the overlapping petals. Viola markings.
The wind, for example, still jostles the empty field.

ALYCIA PIRMOHAMED

‘In the Leftover Space’ is a sonnet inspired by the myth of Persephone. It is a meditation on displacement, on crossing the borders of time and space, and on what is and isn’t inherited between generations.

Cetacean stranding

I write you into the spaces of light's fractured
spine, into silent speech, micro
seconds, sounds we cannot fathom –
chiming gulls, keening ships, our own rubbled
conversions. Our ebbing past now impossible to eavesdrop.

We have been transparent wasteland, pebbles
overlapping puddles, snowglobe shards from stained ocean
dawns. Bubbles brine when they touch our words.
Your seaweed sentences crest against my watery bones,
your love lichen.

All my truths have breached. My secrets
are washed-up jellyfish gathered by your feet. I find you
shoreside, planting yourself in sand, time pouring
from your fingers. Low dunes reform
around you. Stars wane in a rockpool.

Sunset stretches you to sea. I gaze at you,
and so does my refracted
reflection, and yours, and both our growing shadows,
all five of us watching echoes of sighs ripple
from your body,

shoulders salted taut as clouds, your eyes
eroded seaglass, your whispers driftwood here and gone
again before I can catch your syllables, snatch
saltspray from the air or notice the water's soft lips
grazing my shins, its sting.

NASIM REBECCA ASL

Nasim Rebecca Asl's 'Cetacean stranding' begins tenderly, addressing a 'you' that is vivid and sensorial: first as light, then as the sound of 'chiming gulls' and 'keening ships.' We are held steady by the weight of the poem's balanced stanzas; these anchor the piece, even as we weave in and out of oceanic scenes and intimate notes. What secrets lay in the depths of this poem, and which truths are articulated and thus wash-up on shore? Asl's lines seem to traverse both discovery and longing – as she tells the story of finding 'you' shoreside, the poem reverberates too with an undertone of loss: 'your eyes / eroded seaglass, your whispers driftwood here and gone / again.'

The imagery in 'Cetacean stranding' is captivating and constantly shifts from moments of stasis and of movement. Bodies and sunsets stretch out to sea, time pours from fingers, and reflections and shadows are constantly evolving.

Letters on the Curtain

The waves are coming again
I try to stay still
I cave I curl
Spiders crawling inside my limbs
I scurry over the ceiling slip through the hinges
A liar dressed as a giraffe offers a ride
I'm stuck in the tree
Heart fire rhythm – vibration
Tamarind desert storm
Slippery tongues slop inside frozen voices
I keep knocking but the door is made of mist
The road map smeared with my menses
The house doesn't exist –
Hollow mother, her mehndi fingers
Hush now baby let me wrap you in sunlight
Joy comes like a waterfall in the cracked belly of the mountain
Gushing, cascading fragrant rays
If I fall, I wake.

Ancient

A half-dead life
Limp and bedraggled
No shoots dried roots
Abandoned
Twirling in the cradle
Orange purple indigo magenta
Birth marks of endless roaming
Rock and rubble a better place
No colour in the grey
Home that other planet
Where nothing grows
Dunes of lava permeate genealogical screams
Galactical skies and volcanic land
Abundance
Hot ash falls like rain
Pyroclastic flows
Death inevitable as dancing in the valley.

Zero

A tiger cruises the banyan tree
The stag reborn plastic tangled in their antlers
The herd confused
Parched thunder snaps away silent stammers
The doe whispers survival into the fawn
Interbeing – plastic in the placenta
Murder the eutopia of the coloniser
A permeation of dispossession
Queering our bodies
Still the tiger prowls
Possession.

NIKKI KILBURN

Both through its tense visual shape and in its language, Nikki Kilburn's poetry teems with energy.

In 'Ancient,' short lines and captivating syntax propel the piece forward, quickly and urgently, until we arrive at its loosened middle: 'Home that other planet / Where nothing grows.' Here the poem slows down, perhaps asking us to reflect on the elusive concept of home, the grey-toned estrangement that echoes in the phrase 'that other planet.' It slows down, too, when Kilburn suggests stasis through her haunting depiction of a place where nothing grows. She makes room here for us to recall the significance of earlier moments, like the poem's play with colour imagery or the evocative line 'Birth marks of endless roaming.'

The latter half of 'Ancient' mirrors the first. 'Abandoned' and 'Abundance' pull the poem's ends together, prompting us to ask what has changed between them, what has grown or not grown on the poem's volcanic lands.

The arms of grief

She finds *you*, prowling in the depth of shadows
the pale crescent moon knowingly follows
eyelids heavy, She feels *your* presence
ascending the velvety realms of darkness
each dreaded footstep furiously pounding in her chest

“There’s a dua for every calamity”

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

muscle memory reminds her,
in the voice of her beloved father

Effortlessly, the Arabic verses roll off her tongue
gently lulling her back to precious sleep

Each morning, *you’re* here
swirling in the peace of her chai

an uninvited guest, creeping up at celebrations
lingering around moments of joy,
perched at the edge of a smile

Sometimes, *you* calmly fade into the horizon
the rhythm of waves roll in, roll out,
synchronising with each baited breath

A guilt ridden storm brews day and night
taunting the heavens to break open at anytime

Momentarily, she sinks into the warmth of a summer’s day
a light breeze caressing sun kissed crowds

They walk together, towards the edge of the page
knowing these pages will keep turning
She’ll find *you*, between every line of this story
and every story, yet to come

Grief is the gentle tugging of every fold of life.

SHASTA HANIF ALI

In 'The arms of grief,' Shasta Hanif Ali interlaces multiple narrative strands to tenderly navigate how one looks for peace amongst feelings of loss.

The beginning of this poem is rich and atmospheric – *dua* is a glimmer of muscle memory amidst the 'depth of shadows' and the 'velvety realms of darkness.' Arabic verses 'roll off' the tongue and fall onto the page, crafting a poem that invites readers to know, intimately, its characters and what might soothe them.

'She finds *you*,' Ali writes, poised in between moments of prayer and the pale crescent moon. '*You*' manifests as multiplicity: at times, it is seemingly an uninvited guest, a flickering presence that lingers at the edges of one's life, sometimes tangible and swirling, other times a fading existence. The emotional tenor of this poem gains momentum in its use of metaphorical language and watery landscapes, the rhythm of waves rolling in and out.

Edinburgh Keek

Fingers o haar crawl in frae th east
spinnin thair flummery webs.
Auld Reekie suspends hersel in a cuil labyrinth
o guissdoon duvets,
and aw is momentarily lost.

Her sleeperie lion, Arthur's Seat, awauks
surveying his drookit hidden city.
May Day lassies will aye find thair way
tae douk in dew-heavy slopes come dawin.

Doon Leith th haar is skulking up th Walk,
burnt awa by a milky sun.
Clovers screich frae dour paving slabs.
Wood sorrels mak a mane wi langsome dirges and
poppies cruin efter th last nectar-starved drummie-bees.

New tae th colony gairden,
a bronze wifie squats alane
wi buttercups caught in her thicket o hair
and wabbit grey syle in her haunds.
She kneads at th lawn wi her bare broun taes,
fresh growth inspected.

Tourin abuin is a black lace elder – *sambucus nigra*.
Bluid-wine leafs spider up an ootwart,
wi ticht wee flouer buds praisin th peelie-wallie blue sky.

TRANSLATION

A stolen glance at Edinburgh

Fingers of east-coast fog crawl in from the east
 spinning their flummery webs.
 Edinburgh suspends herself in a cool labyrinth
 of goose-down duvets,
 and all is momentarily lost.

Her drowsy lion, Arthur's Seat, awakes
 surveying his drenched hidden city.
 May Day lassies will always find their way
 to bathe in dew-heavy slopes come the dawning.

Down Leith the east-coast fog is skulking up the Walk,
 burnt away by a milky sun.
 Clovers shriek from sullen-bleak paving slabs.
 Wood sorrels lament with lonely-slow funeral songs and
 poppies bellow-mourn after the last nectar-starved bumble-bees.

New to the colony garden,
 a bronze woman squats alone
 with buttercups caught in her thicket of hair
 and exhausted grey soil in her hands.
 She kneads at the lawn with her bare brown toes,
 fresh growth inspected.

Towering above is a black lace elder – *sambucus nigra*.
 Blood-wine leaves spider up and outwards,
 with tight wee flower buds praising the sickly-pallid blue sky.

JEDA PEARL

In 'Edinburgh Keek,' Jeda Pearl crafts an enthralling portrait. The title itself suggests this piece is a glimpse at the city. Pearl begins with the chill wind, with 'fingers o haar' crawling 'in frae th east,' and quickly unspools into an ode to Edinburgh.

We watch as the city, first hidden in 'guissdon duvets,' is uncovered. The beautifully depicted haar burns away to reveal other features of Edinburgh, and readers are invited to move along with the mist until it vanishes. The poem eventually narrows its focus: we zoom into a garden that is vibrant with colour – poppies and buttercups burst through the blanket of fog – where a 'bronze wifie squats alane' amidst soil and fresh growth. Yet, threading through these vivid depictions, there is an undercurrent of grief where the aforementioned poppies 'cruin th last nectar-starved drummie-bees.' Pearl's poem offers readers an experience of Edinburgh that is imaginative and poignant with intimate detail. It is a poem that rushes with activity, where sprawl is introduced as flummery webs of haar before it later reappears as black lace elder spidering 'up and ootwart' into 'th peelie-wallie blue sky.'

On my grandfather's terrace

On my grandfather's terrace in Navsari. Mid-Winter. My torso a concave disc, hollowed from the longing. A smooth bowl of a belly, and two soft mangoes perched on top, greeting the wind blowing on my lehnga.

I remember the barely cool of the terrace. I remember the openness and the darkness. The rubble of construction and the flight of bird. A gradient purple-pink in the sky and my dad pointing his finger up at the birds swooping past.

This terrace was a reminder to view things from a bird's eye perspective. Not to get lost in the intertwining staircases of the building and not to settle for the view from the windows. To come up and remember there is flight and there are the never-dying sunsets. That breath can wander more freely from up here.

blue belly

light of the sky
into the dark of the sea
will you remember your nature?
will you follow your reflection?

the pulsing of blue
is in my belly
silk water rippling
is a lullaby lulling
and my heart laps in waves

i am in foetal position
a placenta to the sea
i take from the sea
and it takes from me

must give, must receive
must give, must give

RAHEEMA SAYED

What do we remember about a place? Which details remain stark and vibrant in these rearticulations of memory? Raheema Sayed attends beautifully to these questions in 'On my grandfather's terrace,' where she invites readers into a remembrance of Navsari in midwinter.

'I remember the openness and the darkness' Sayed writes, and this line seems to highlight everything that comes before and after. For example, there is the openness of the speaker's torso, 'hollowed from the longing.' Or there is the suggestion of a coming darkness in the gradient of the sky, its 'never-dying sunsets.' This poem is gilded with detail from 'a birds' eye perspective,' and its depictions of the mangoes, the lehnga, the terrace itself, are so vivid that we cannot help but immerse ourselves in this piece. There is the reminder for both readers and the poem's speaker to look for the best view, to find flight where we can, to let our breath wander freely.

Chimbwido

Murehwa. 1972.

Freedom fighters camped in the dark hills.

Glimmers of a camp fire in the distance.

Fear and excitement dancing in my veins.

The faint sound of singing beckons.

I wrap my darkest *chitenge* around my hips.

Trees,

like guards, motion us forward.

The Calabash of beer still balanced on my head.

As the anxiety sets up home in my arms.

The events in these bushes will reach their ears,

And the Rhodesian boots will stamp out the truth.

But tonight, our defiance seeps into the soil.

As the beat of the drum calls on the ancestors.

What do you remember about the Earth?

The Sun's rays piece through the thatched roof and dance
on her wrinkled face.
She tilts her head up, eyes closed as though praying to the heavens.
Her life began and will end in these lands.
Her ancestors buried in the nearby caves; she loves it here.
The City held no appeal to her when all my eyes could see here
was the absence of comfort.
The kitchen door faces the mountain in the distance.
Living landscapes need not hang on her walls.
I interrupt her breathing.

“What do you remember about the earth, Gogo,
before our eyes were taught what is beautiful?”

Memories in Green

The tender sprouting grass after the first summer rains.
The mulberry trees' leaves gently nestling the budding babies of a fruitful yield.
The expanse of the illegal maize crops flourishing beside the Mukuvisi river.
Gogo's *chitenge* wrapped tightly around her waist,
A kaleidoscope of colour mirrors the leafy crops in her back garden.
Rustling through my drawers for my swimming costume
For the first session of the term.
Walking in the tunnel shade of the large Jacaranda trees after school.
Khaki. Forest. Mint. Jade.

Wilderness

The weeds had long taken root.

A beautiful dandelion nestled in the corner of the windowsill.

The wind blew gently through the open windows and
the puffballs danced in the room.

The pained squeal of the chair, a reminder of what had taken place here.

Stone floors begged for a scrub and cobwebs
enveloped the wooden beams.

The dust had married the skirting boards in the same way
that the sadness dressed her face.

The only sign that love once lived here was a horse in the bedroom.

Hers was a melody of contradictions.

A house strangled by nature and neglect;

Overlooking the vast blue sea that robbed her life of meaning.

BRENDA VENGESA

Brenda Vengesa's poems have a photographic quality to them. Each piece frames a particular instance, or remembrance, with astonishing visual description.

In 'Memories in Green,' observations of landscape unravel beautifully, and the poem captures a vivid, almost playful, scene that takes place 'after the first summer rains.' Vengesa's effortless long lines and lyrical style allow readers to arrive at specific recollections of people and places: the mulberry tree leaves, the illegal maize 'flourishing beside the Mukuvi river,' and Gogo's tightly wrapped chitenge. A 'kaleidoscope' of colour is also apparent in this piece, as leafy crops and river water and swimming costumes braid with one another; we eventually see these colours dart through the 'tunnel shade of the large Jacaranda trees,' until, like the walking figure herself, they become a quickened flash of 'Khaki. Forest. Mint. Jade.'

Living Portrait of a Tree

after Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video installation Horizontal - Vaakasuora, 2011

Girl under tree, looking up.
Gust so strong she puts her palm
on it to steady herself.
Dad remembers running through it
and out the other side.

/ The tree takes the gale into its body, grows into the shape of a wave. /

A single moving image:
purple agapanthus petals
crushed to melting
by the tennis courts,
mint chocolate chip
on her thigh.

/ The tree takes its shape. /

Charred husks of tree
wash up on the beach.
They crumble like brown sugar.
Were they burning when they went
into the sea
or did the burning come before?

/ The gale/girl grows. /

Inside the tree
it's quiet
swaying like tailfeathers
of pīwakawaka
dancing on hot dunes
as if it were made of twitching
birds.

/ Girl holds the wave to her body, grows into the shape of a gale. /

Girl and raincloud
pass through leaves,
through memory and
out the other side.
A southerly storm
brushing against
her knees.

NINA MINGYA POWLES

‘Living Portrait of a Tree’ subverts linearity through its episodic form. Nina Mingya Powles unveils a series of living reflections and meditations that tell the story of the poem’s central image: a tree. The title, too, serves as a reminder that these moments are fluid, dynamic, changing – alive.

Each section – or vignette – captures something distinct about the tree, and readers are invited to consider its long life, its specific impact on human and nonhuman worlds alike. What do different generations remember about this tree? How do we pass through it, under it, around it? Powles juxtaposes the greens of ‘mint chocolate chip’ with the implicit, vibrant, greens we associate with the natural world. She also undercuts this imagery, suggesting something perhaps more imploring, maybe even ominous, through the depiction of ‘charred husks of tree’ washing up on the beach. ‘Did the burning come before?’ This question echoes beyond its stanza, articulating how the poem itself moves through time. Powles’ piece is a response to Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video installation *Horizontal – Vaakasuora*, and thus, it is wonderfully layered and intertextual.

PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo FRSL is Writer in Residence and Professor at the University of York, an Honorary Student of Christ Church, Oxford, and former Visiting Scholar at Pembroke College, Cambridge. A Trinidadian Scottish writer of poetry and non-fiction, Capildeo's interests include traditional masquerade, silence, plurilingualism, and place (for example Launceston, as Causley Trust Writer in Residence 2022). *Like a Tree, Walking* (Carcanet, 2021) was a Poetry Book Society choice and shortlisted for the Jhalak Prize.

https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?owner_id=1167

Roshni Gallagher is a poet based in Edinburgh. Her debut pamphlet *Bird Cherry* is published by Verve Poetry Press (February 2023). She is the co-winner of the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award 2022 and a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Awardee 2022. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary publications including *Best Scottish Poems 2020*, *Gutter*, *New Writing Scotland*, *Propel* and *The Scotsman* newspaper. In her work, she explores themes of nature, connection, and memory.

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Tim Tim Cheng is an ESL poet and a teacher from Hong Kong. She is studying for a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh (class of 2022). Her poems are published in *POETRY*, *Rialto*, *ANMLY*, *Cicada*, among others. Her pamphlet *Tapping at Glass* is forthcoming in 2023. She is working on another pamphlet that explores desires and rituals through the lens of tattooing. She loves frogs.

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Titilayo Farukuoye is an Austrian-Nigerian writer and organiser based in Glasgow. Striving to dismantle structural oppression, Titilayo concerns themselves with issues of race, gender, community care and climate justice. Titilayo co-directs SBWN and the Anti-racist Educator. In 2018 they curated *Our (In)visible Strengths*, an exhibition celebrating Scottish African and Afro-Caribbean communities. Their poetry featured at Fringe of Colour, 2020 Mixtape, Wrapped Up in This and Edinburgh Multicultural Festival. Media4Change and Future News Worldwide have recognised Titilayo's journalistic work. Titilayo is a recipient of the 2022 Edwin Morgan Poetry Award.

Niall Moorjani is a mixed Scots-Indian non-binary writer, director and storyteller who creates for both adults and children. Their work is focused on the liminal, the fantastical, historical and whimsical. They have written and performed shows for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2018 and 2019), Scottish International Storytelling Festival (2020 and 2021) Fringe of Colour Film Festival (2020 and 2021), Hay on Wye Literature Festival (2019), Newham Word Festival (2020/21) and The Whitechapel Arts

Showcase (2021). They have been published by Historic Environment Scotland, the Scottish BPOC Writers Network (March 2022 release) and their book of short stories is due for an autumn 2022 release with Fenn and Pickering.

Marjorie Lotfi is an Iranian-American who has lived in the UK for over 20 years. Her writing considers displacement, home and belonging in the context of the natural world. Marjorie's writing has won competitions, been published widely and performed on BBC Radio 4. She is a winner of the inaugural James Berry Prize, and her first collection will be published by Bloodaxe Books in 2023. *Refuge*, poems about her childhood in revolutionary Iran, is published by Tapsalteerie Press.

Nadia Maloney is a neurodiverse social entrepreneur, writer and book addict. Although she has a passion for social justice and human rights, Nadia can usually be found barefoot in local parks while home-schooling her young autistic son and running her social enterprise in the East End of Glasgow. Follow Nadia's writing work here:

https://www.takeoneaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Changing-our-Tune-Zine_Final.pdf

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Alycia Pirmohamed is the author of *Another Way to Split Water, Hinge, Faces that Fled the Wind*, and *Second Memory* (co-authored with Pratyusha). She is co-founder of the Scottish BPOC Writers Network, a co-organiser of the Ledbury Poetry Critics, and she teaches at the University of Cambridge. Alycia studied creative writing at the University of Oregon and the University of Edinburgh. She was previously the Junior Anniversary Fellow at IASH.

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Nasim Rebecca Asl is a Glasgow based poet and journalist. Her work has been published widely and appeared in magazines including *Gutter*, *The Dark Horse* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*. In 2021 she was awarded a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award for Poetry, performed on the BBC's Big Scottish Book Club and was a digital writer-in-residence for The Poetry Business. Nasim was shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award 2022.

Nikki Kilburn is a writer and photographer based in Edinburgh. She is interested in exploring how identity and lived experience creates complex realities.

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Shasta Hanif Ali works in the Third Sector and is an Edinburgh-based writer, poet and anti-racism campaigner. Her writing explores race, identity and heritage, with work published in the Scottish BIPOC Writers Network, The National, STV Scotland and Books from Scotland, among others.

Twitter

@ShastaHAli

Jeda Pearl is a Scottish Jamaican writer, poet and artist. She has performed at StAnza, Push the Boat Out, Event Horizon, and Hidden Door. Jeda was awarded Cove Park's Emerging Writer Residency in 2019 and she has been published/commissioned by Black Lives Matter Mural Trail, New Writing Scotland, Not Going Back to Normal – Disabled Artists Manifesto, Tapsalteerie, Shoreline of Infinity, Rhubaba, Collective, Scottish Storytelling Centre and Peepal Tree Press.

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Raheema Sayed is a writer and creative based in Edinburgh. She enjoys the arts, creativity and exploring and merging different mediums of expression in her practice and beyond.

Brenda Vengesa is a poet, writer and Diversity and Inclusion advocate. She has worked in the accounting and finance sector for over 10 years. She is currently working full-time whilst working on her first novel and poetry collection. Brenda has also worked on stage where she has performed in amateur musical theatre with the MAMA (Musselburgh Amateur Musical Association). She used the lockdown period from the pandemic to reignite her passion for the arts and sharpen her skills.

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Nina Mingya Powles is a writer, poet, zinemaker and librarian from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently living in London. Her debut poetry collection *Magnolia* 木蘭 was shortlisted for the 2020 Forward Prize for Best First Book of Poetry. Her food memoir, *Tiny Moons*, was published by The Emma Press in 2020. In 2019 she won the Nan Shepherd Prize for Nature Writing; her resulting collection of essays *Small Bodies of Water* was published in 2021.

APPENDIX

'April River' by Roshni Gallagher was inspired by the session run by Nina Mingya Powles.

'The arms of grief' by Shasta Hanif Ali was inspired by the sessions run by Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo and Nina Mingya Powles.

'intertidal' by Tim Tim Cheng was inspired by the sessions run by Churnjeet Mahn and Amanda Thomson.

'Letters on the Curtain' by Nikki Kilburn was inspired by the session run by Anthony Ezekiel (Vahni) Capildeo.

'Ancient' by Nikki Kilburn was inspired by the session run by Samaneh Moafi.

'Zero' by Nikki Kilburn was inspired by the session run by Amanda Thomson.

The phrase 'What do you remember about the earth?' reappears in poems throughout this collection. It was borrowed from Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*.

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- | | |
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| Jack Belloli | https://directcontemplation.wordpress.com/ |
| Dionne Brand: | https://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/poet/dionne-brand/ |
| Dorothy Chan | https://www.dorothypoetry.com/ |
| Saradha Soobrayen | http://saradhasoobrayen.com/ |
| Atillah Springer | https://attillah-springer.com/ |
| Rachel Lee Young | https://www.rachelleeyoung.com/ |

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The poems inside the short anthology you are holding emerged from a very special space. Over a period of four months Scottish women and nonbinary writers of colour came together to listen, to explore and experiment, and to write about, in, and with, 'nature'. Reading these pieces means moving through their journeys, memories and dreams; standing by the side of the ocean sifting sand through your toes or crossing the deserted streets of revolutionary Tehran. In these poems, different thresholds and bodies of water constantly push at the boundaries of what we understand as nature, and who belongs in it.

Shari Sabeti



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