

# SHEARSMAN

## 137 & 138

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### **Submissions**

*Shearsman* operates a submissions-window system, whereby submissions may only be made during the months of March and September, when selections are made for the October and April issues, respectively. Submissions may be sent by mail or email, but email attachments are only accepted in PDF form. We aim to respond within 3 months of the window's closure, although we do sometimes take a little longer.

### **Acknowledgements**

*This issue has been set in Arno Pro, with titling in Argumentum. The flyleaf is set in Trend Sans.*

# Contents

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Eliza O'Toole / 5	John Greening / 42
Trevor Joyce / 9	Maria Jastrzębska / 46
Serena Alagappan / 11	Peter Larkin / 48
Rupert M Loydell / 13	Aaron Lopatin / 52
Amlanjyoti Goswami / 19	David Dumouriez / 54
Valeria Melchioretto / 21	Mark Goodwin / 56
Finn Haunch / 24	Neal Hoskins / 59
Fiona Larkin / 26	Amber Rollinson / 61
Peter Dukes / 28	John Phillips / 63
D'or Seifer / 30	Nic Stringer / 65
Mark Byers / 33	Judi Sutherland / 68
Elizabeth Chadwick Pywell / 36	Natalie Shaw / 72
Dominic Fisher / 38	Wendy Allen / 74
Marie-Louise Eyres / 40	Robert Sheppard / 76

Kjell Espmark / 79  
(translated from Swedish by Robin Fulton Macpherson)

Attila József / 85  
(translated from Hungarian by Ágnes Lehóczky & Adam Piette)

Lutz Seiler / 91  
(translated from German by Stefan Tobler)

Roelof Ten Napel / 95  
(translated from Dutch by Judith Wilkinson)

Notes on Contributors / 97

*In memoriam*

Gavin Selerie

1949–2023

*and*

Avik Chanda

1972–2023

# Eliza O'Toole

---

## Usual is wind from the east

(without struggle or fight, reaction to light, endogenous rhythms)

It was a machine gun of a morning, a cock pheasant in a clamour of flight and a woodpecker jack hammering. The sky was green. It was astringent and the blackthorn was wild and white. It was the way the oak was growing, narrowing the sky and fracture pruned. It was stag headed and rose over. The kites were cork screwing, a pair, slowly circling way up there. Fin was mesmerised. Then it started to sleet, and there was a vast inrolling of petals, and ice was in the air. It was a capitulum of a closing after the beginning of an opening, it was loss of light intensity and temperature drop. It was *aconitum lycoctonum*, cowled and hooded, ground hugging and glowing, bane butter yellow spilling, arisen from a mythological dog's vomiting.

## the colours of pollen

(put pollen upon for the sake of fertilisation)

It was a vixen piss of a morning. Sour scat of that. A brace of pink legged partridge startle. Fin, scenting, nose to the ground finds shreds of pelt,

scatterings of barbes and down,  
moult of winter coat windblown and  
then tiny white sharp shucked  
knuckles, links of vertebrae laid down  
slight covered in copper curls of last  
year's slow stuck wet dehiscing  
leaves. And in the blet scent of that  
Fin, rootling under the cherry plum,  
flushes a blackbird and they both  
jump, dusting a blush of brick red  
pollen brightly onto bone.

## **It was the way the light was falling**

*(unfastening, west of the horse shoe weir)*

It faltered, a rainy river morning,  
gravid with sleet. And in the shul shul  
of the wind, black backed gulls were  
sliding. And in the fret and mute and  
the slap of that, a twisted thing.  
Hand, eye and Fin, bolt upright. In the  
seep and creep, the lifting and the  
withdrawing, a scuppering.  
Overwhelmed, strip barked, part  
skinned, eyes gone, sinews skeined.  
Plundered. Caught, coagulating,  
fractured branches, hedge whacked  
twigs, plastic sacking, renegade baling  
twine (blue), snare tight Alder root  
snatch ravelling rib bones and then  
unmooring. A pruning. Creely the  
riverbank, the colour of cold, it was  
the crows, the crows, the sky as thin  
as tin and in the sedge, Fin quivering.

# Trevor Joyce

---

## Harm's Way

*For Bríd Walshe*

*i.m. Mary Lee (1872–1936)*

1

*even when I tried she said  
the earth was stony and the food was foul*

*even when I spoke she said  
my sense wasn't to be found in books*

*even when I sang she said  
they didn't understand my airs*

*and when I drank she said  
an ocean couldn't satisfy*

*then when I saw the spirit world  
the doors slammed in their face*

*they called me troublesome destructive  
dangerous turned me on myself*

red blossoms gleam  
beneath her nails

2

*come child you should be with me  
come away from the warmth*

*and the lime-washed darkness  
with talk inside of it sweet*

*as the mauve flesh of a damson  
there's a hunger in me*

*for the road and my child beside me  
I am my own affliction*

*come bear with me my last  
uneasiness my inability to*

*rest her blue shimmering eyes  
flowers in an orchard of infirmity*

# Serena Alagappan

---

## Bitter Like a Nightingale

Your fear feels like a well filled with saltwater  
like snow flumping into rain on the pavement  
like muddy walks uphill,  
like a quilt of sea heaving in thunder,  
a mouth with no teeth in a dream,  
a myth with no elder to share it,  
a mime with a pirate smile,  
like a bouquet of embalmed lilies,  
like a winter sweat from layers,  
like a God of nothing dogma,  
a miraculous birth many weeks early,  
a wishbone during a boring dinner  
with people you love, but will never tell,  
like treating nihilism with the salve of hard  
problems, like a wild flapping  
of fingers on keys, like plans that can only  
be rudely unmade, a falling for what  
is out of our control, like joy and grief,  
coconuts plucked clean of hair, meals served  
on waxy leaves, time fattened in napping  
afternoons, like one long braid with 6 strings  
of jasmine, like 9 squirrels ravaging sweet  
plums, like 7 kid cousins begetting children,  
and me, 9 years later, reassuring that we will  
be okay, that we are grown-ups who can make  
grown-up decisions, like having dessert before  
dinner, and keeping all our promises.

# Rupert M Loydell

---

## The Critical Gaze

### 1. Comprehension

‘The future has been over for a while.’

—Eugenio Montale

I've been finding it ever so difficult.  
Fragmentary signals, isolated gestures,  
cries and whispers all resist attempts  
to unravel meaning. Back I go, pushing  
and dragging phrases into patterns  
which are then tested to destruction.

Making use of the found and discarded  
is an important part of autobiography;  
solitude not solidarity is the normal,  
syntax is no longer in the driving seat,  
no-one is named and names do not seem  
to be attached to anyone in particular.

I find it difficult to escape repetition.  
Theologians stress order and principle,  
while philosophers maintain either that  
life obeys some rules or that it does not.  
But you're wondering what became of  
comprehension, aren't you? Ghosts

soon begin speaking, explaining things.  
Understand motivation and purpose  
are only diversions, truth and desire  
fall between reality and imagination.  
Those who invent a recognisable past  
legitimise only certain ways of seeing.

## 2. The Critical Gaze

‘You cannot be free if you are contained within a fiction.’  
—Julian Beck, *The Life of the Theatre*

Theory is a place of circumstantial reality which doesn't actually exist. At its core are questions about how we read others and how we are read by them. We can all misremember through multiple voices and manifold perspectives, burrowing into sweet, dark places of fecundity, novels and paintings and architecture, even poems, making them our own and writing parasitic criticism before laying little translucent eggs, pollinating novels to make more novels, turning the breath of the living into irrational knowledge.

The critical gaze is tearing us apart; we learn to be by simply being, unfolding our personae, mapping and re-mapping the self onto others, onto art or literature. Being taught in this way feels forbidden, the remove makes it only sweeter but it is another idea that helps the reader understand what could be going on. Ignore the aside in an earlier chapter, the norms of chronology and narrative; after all, parataxis, chance, fragmentation are how many of us experience the world and like our reading to reflect that. I haven't read it all yet but as well as being obsessed I don't pursue expected lines of thought.

Image and information overload lack depth or meaning, are working differently, find

readers in the wreckage of biography, dread and excitement. Both dystopia and utopia signify nothing which has not happened yet; everything changes when the world can only be read by considering webs of associations, connections, connotations, perpetual motion occasionally broken up by over-zealous poets, jagged editing and fractured time. Reviewers suggest that reading is not working: people are interested in moments, places and their responses to and memories of them. There is an absence throughout the book, missing rather than fractured time. Improvisation is a narrative shaped like itself by narrative shaped itself by chance in the middle of the moment. Everyone has just left this mediated and constructed fiction, wandered off to track down lost locations, looking for obscure references, a perpetual state of mind.

There are many costume changes, sets can be dismantled overnight; these experiences are easier to talk about afterwards. In some ways, you are manipulating reality, as you continue to attempt to grasp something no one can understand: fictional real life fiction breaking the rules using different rules. It is unclear if we will ever get truth bolted together, is all about perspective, about the angle that you're looking from as we fall into language. If the actual mechanism is hard to discern don't bother reading from beginning to end. Discernment still facilitates the process of interpretation, expression and communication, allows readers to pretend they understand.

# Amlanjyoti Goswami

---

## Pia Tafdrup's Book

At the exhibition, the slender poet  
Waits by the desk, draped in elegant chiffon.

Her book is lying on a table of grainy wood.  
I grab it, like a treasure, a rainbow of surprise.

It is about a piano, a simple tune  
Dressed in notation, as if music.

I am so delighted I rush to tell  
My academic friend about it, the one who knows it all.

I check the book on Google and Wikipedia  
And it is the same one.

I check the price.  
Way too expensive for me.

An out-of-print edition, from twenty-five years ago  
But the cover is the same.

I've never seen the book before  
And yet the exhibition is real, real as the poet standing next

To the book, with pictures being clicked.  
I look for the poems online, wondering which one is true

The book – or – this feeling – slipping into water,  
Swimming home, those dark lapland lights twinkling.

# Valeria Melchioretto

---

## The Shortest Day

*sicut in caelo et in terra...*

On winter's solstice Pegasus fell from the sky to die in our garden.  
It must have slipped or knocked its head on Cassiopeia's vanity,  
but while the Queen of Aethiopia had seized the North Star firmly  
so she would not drop from her height, the poor horse stumbled.

Despite wings it fell to earth with countless snowflakes in its train.  
Its once pure coat turned mourn black as it rushed through space,  
then broke its neck on the spot where mother's roses are out of bloom.  
There I find it in the morning; far from fame and glory, far from home.

Its body lies in the dirt, fragile and final. On its black back, slick and soft,  
pearls of perspiration resemble a constellation. Can a myth ever die  
or is death just a myth? A crowd gathers but there is no explanation  
or consolation. Still, much is said while the snow slowly turns to slush.

What would mother make of such a stark omen if she were still alive?  
I raise my head to see if Andromeda is still securely chained to her rock  
and realise, that I am the rock to which my world is scarcely bound.

## Orphaned by Default

Despite its years, my heart resents being orphaned.  
It resembles a split pomegranate not meant for my chest.  
Yet perhaps this is as inevitable as original sin and the fall  
made me inherit father's plight and mother's sorrows  
with so much sour cordial to stain the sky east and west.

The robins peck the red berries as if it could shorten winter  
and parrots prize juicy seeds from the ventricle chambers  
as if its taste could take them back to their exotic paradise,  
magpies fancy them to be garnets or rubies of exquisite worth,  
but the sweet orb is no longer related to joyous fruitfulness.

Plundered, till all that remains is a husk where red ink bled  
into laments. It's the shell of a vital organ with papery walls  
on which prayers are written with an unsteady hand, tremulous  
as if frost had set in, verse hurts, words are dictated by birds  
with the pattern known from songs that spring in the windpipe.

This strange fruit got into my ribcage the way Persephone  
entered hell: fate put it there as a reminder that life is round  
and all is dialectic, all is a digestion which we must obey.  
Once taken food, even from strangers, destinies fuse and  
they become familiar as we belong to them beyond the grave.

# Finn Haunch

---

## Engine Confessional

Their knees couched in gelatine pads, three workmen clustered to a box junction. They could be the famed luminaries from the council, which we wait to see all our lives – maintainers of the power grid.

They could've been said to be praying at this unsociable hour, stooped awkwardly under a pylon with looped-wire rosaries in-hand, voltmeter as *spiritus mechanicus* – but downwind of the devotionals, there are so many broken souls shuffling out of the nightshift by the petrol station, all disappearing into a bus depot where the dodgy, silent kids smoke dope at the door.

And this one woman in a handstitched shawl, a nurse's uniform, she blows a fiver she can't afford on a bunch of sellotaped, cellophane flowers.

Winds' getting up again – the last of the leaves are loosening up like a badly built wardrobe. The lads are chewing on biros, something is ticked off and pondered over. Tab-ends burn up, become little lives.

Weeks earlier, there was an incident up there. Things were organised online. There was a decent turnout with posters and placards, protest and a counter-protest, though no-one official. They made a sort of wayside shrine from a signal box beside the roundabout, the thin rusted doors hinged open to a weak, washed-out sun –

flowers, fosters, toon scarfs,  
and under them the  
mouldy diodes clumped together  
and slung up over a grid of soldered-on hooks,  
barely blinking, the damp split rubber  
and wet gaps stuffed with torn-up  
metro tickets, which go nowhere in particular.

Our Meera's come back this morning, clutching flowers  
at 5 a.m., only to find the workmen here  
in their vestments of high-viz.

Their heads are pressed into the paving stones, necks craned  
into a dripping, fungal darkness  
to find a fault none of us would know to look for.

There was nothing to be done  
but take up the last, waterlogged, laminated picture of her dead boy  
from the hard shoulder.

# Fiona Larkin

---

## The Unthank

Once, I received gifts  
I could not reciprocate.

I kept them anyway.  
Sometimes a no is hard to take.

Words twitch on the tongue, not  
the honey you remember

but the sweetish rot  
of something on the turn

bitten back at sore expense.

## Fugue

I play you to my inner ear  
where the canal's on fire:  
a musical malfunction?  
Restless beneath my feet,  
earth threatens to release  
my staggered self.

Like tinnitus you're echoing,  
insisting that I listen,  
clicking mandibles  
clattering a tune,  
something in the timbre  
unknown, remembered.

Blame it on my openness:  
this unplugged aperture,  
a readiness to hear again  
the counterpoint you sing,  
your entirely intoxicating  
and possibly viral air.

## **Lethal**

immersed at last  
in the river's spate

a pebbled rush  
a dash that deafens

earth's residue  
a stain to bleach –

he's a yellowed leaf  
all helplessness

where ripening's lost  
fruit forgotten

as if the flow  
rots memory

turns frog to tadpole  
back to spawn

who cares – not he  
now bud now seed

rinsed clean of all  
that made him sing

# Peter Dukes

---

## Three Lagrangians

I

Paradiso rough—copy dot dispensed impeded  
factive the swallows repelled, late shortfalls  
    in March—the snows ringing the out-post  
rippling chlorosis out of the whirlwind shall  
the plummets of heaven its jars and funnels  
    rain through in heels and pleats loosed like  
stays and splines the line upon it thick darkness,  
    sunk roads, uncomely healed— Ungiven,  
when they couched in dens or shuttered from verges  
slowing in an evening's ochre I felt my  
    mind damned freighted arch rhododendrons'  
    the jostle hope fast apex meri—  
    stems flaming into the air or reaped  
of night, left in earth and warmed from dust—rip forth

Mazzaroth in his seasons

II

By the willows of the brook a deep shore copped  
silken rage wind-hardened terracotta veils  
    dis-possession—the crumbs turning  
    in air, the tidal mound covered from  
folds, worked loose in right shaking jolt surrenders—  
Nolde looking both ways neither happier  
    nor sodden clef its thunder drawing  
up Jordan to his mouth afront ache votive  
sorbus anthem foul

tempo aryl knock joint  
crape amongst the dewy trees, and—

flint gravel exhilarant cordial thought  
rapt apparel the dead when last  
dumb lily obedient Sedge forced left  
below advent bittering—bell match ardent

tongue, parry its cord drawn down

### III

A belt or cloud sent toppling through the merry  
larks more iron than carbon water  
phaeton turning in its sunlit dust hearts'  
attuned in a thorny wood squalling beauty  
stroke fore damnation—fire-myth died Ate false  
but she made mouths, from horizon  
slippered—spring fields candour sufferance gripped  
wind-lashed little blunt mouse-ear repulse—and with  
a back and with a front lax basal  
rubble terra cleft

riddled clap teasel burned

jade vantage—for his hands that claw and rigid  
fail

as piece of the nether mill-stone  
sharp under, sewn in windfall—greet  
fanning ark ever strikes charm anoint the un-

seen shelf curt zigzag clover

# D'or Seifer

---

## Autotomy

Once I believed in you  
a homeland  
living simply  
with no hurt.

But how can you love with no memory  
the world reborn at the end of the journey  
leaving only recipes  
tattered flavours from *The Pale*  
stories about woodcutters and bears  
not neighbours nor childhood friends.  
Life the only belonging you carried.

Discarding the tongue you were born with  
like a lizard discards its tail  
adopting an ancient one  
regrown.

Painting poetry  
in a placeless language —  
that is art's line, growing grapefruits,  
squeeze-turning until art takes new form.

Half a helix  
a spiral blowing in the wind.  
I do not carry you in photos but  
in texts inscribed upon my memory,  
as if *written in pencil in the sealed railway car*.  
Fear of abandoned bags,  
a partial story passed on.

I have sung the old songs  
and now unlearn their tropes.

I am a writer of new texts  
an air-plant  
carried on the wind.

I live in a jar with no soil.

# Mark Byers

## Polychoral (notation 1)

step beneath a canopy of birdsong  
its nuthatch/  
coloratura or simply the common  
sluicing of the river against

exposed beech roots alder wands  
man-made banks/  
denser rhizomes unco-  
ordinated sounds

I say *simply* – turning along  
my habitual path/  
where the calls limn  
horsechestnuts and retreating

blackberries/  
agile impromptus over  
microtones//frayed edges  
cantor / cantrix /  
sing to the choir

# Elizabeth Chadwick Pywell

---

&

on one of the days we went to see her because she was dying my grandmother pointed under the desk & screamed there were devils & then she looked up at the bathroom's darkness & shook with maybe withdrawal but it seemed like death & all the time she lay there wrapped in too-white sheets that stank of terror and bleach & then she took my hand & I felt her heart beating through her fingers like a train coming off tracks over long grasses & she had almost no teeth but she said quite clearly so I still hear it *please please kill me* & my sister said something with her breath that sounded like prayer & we were all very quiet & the still of the room was terrible & then she went to sleep but her eyes kept moving behind her lids & she didn't die for several years & when she did of course I wasn't there

# Dominic Fisher

---

## Earth mass

Then we go down broken, in a thick sleep, into the elements that make us and also make that black bread underneath us which takes the living to itself, feeds on our bone and sinew stem and feather, flesh and shells, the nitrogen, the calcium. We'll add in our small measure of blood or ash, and become uncountable among grains of soil as they're sifting falling sea and as winters lock then unlock damp stumps, teeth of mice and crumbs of trees in the grub and slow-worm underworlds. How did we think we could ever hold it with our promises the ground and bread we've broken all this time and wasted, and is it time we were re-absorbed, perhaps to be returned, as leaves maybe, some nameless month early in the season? Moons, worms, the tilting of the world would work the earth very well without us while we're going disjointed round again.

# Marie-Louise Eyres

---

## A Well-Tuned Eye

If it could, this eye  
would release a slow whine,  
in B flat, as an accordion might.

Each plaintive cry  
begs a cool compress  
padded with lavender.

Long term, I'm offered  
a scorching laser-beam  
and a sweaty, rubber mask.

Flashes arrive on the left,  
out of nowhere  
like portals opening

into an animated universe  
where everything  
shimmers in silver.

Oh, sing me some god-damned  
Brahms why don't you,  
while I rest my head

on soft flannel sheets  
in the dark.

# John Greening

---

## Oracles

*Tells you only what you know,  
Know, but dare not realise.  
—Lawrence Durrell, 'Delphi'*

For you  
Mrs Simmons  
is still  
declaiming  
one of the tragedies

\*

I approach  
the oracle

\*

My first question  
What is the point  
My second  
Why does nobody know  
and others  
fit for a leadership debate  
or an English lesson  
the kind I dream

\*

Oh and  
why last night  
were we  
so vividly

debt collectors  
in a tenement  
demanding cash  
and who was that  
annoyed not to be recognised  
*I just served you your meal*

\*

*Oracles*  
cries Mr Hill

\*

Having finished Divination  
by Signs and Inspired Divination  
in Flaceliere's little book

I was starting on the Oracle  
at Delphi but broke off to look

for ways to make room on my shelves

trying to find the smallest crack  
in the slim volumes for a fat Collected

\*

Taking one I hadn't noticed,  
and never read  
a hardback  
black dusty unappealing  
dated *mcmlxvi*  
to give to charity  
opening  
the book at once I saw the title  
Delphi

\*

# Maria Jastrzębska

---

## When I was your age

the dead watched  
with eyes open all hours

and the flat stare of security  
cameras in corners

Did they spy on us  
making love?

If we whispered  
could they hear?

We heard them even  
as they fell silent

a rustle like wind that picks up  
dry husks of wasps

at the end of summer  
only to drop them again

When we saw a programme  
about young seals

their mottled bodies  
washed up headless

on sand and rock, the dead cried  
*Look! They're just like us!*

turning our attention back to themselves  
as usual

# Peter Larkin

---

## Blockwoods Weren't Unknotting This (extract)

as if to unlock blockade  
or release it to its interferences,  
on the way of, across the path of

at a staple arable of trees  
the stamped root of assistance  
is occupational

resistance at its sprung palliatives vertical risk goes cagey over its fir  
extensives

amend a tree to its structural tabs, cramp it co-attended tokens of  
latitude, remitting chastened amplitudes

evenly blockage will 'skim' across any other alleviate package, prowling  
kernel at a shawling scrape of access/recess

is the prevention: anticipates in block formation its ontological spurt  
(weight) the sweep tarries until its own graining will have reached an  
across to flow with each encapsulated stub

a reversion concession recodes (coats) the circling horizontals, is hood  
and cloak to a contrary compression, not one fleck looser

an ob-struct vents the green cascade immediate rim rehearses a seating  
it immersed, thickly occurs across stripped

a leaner channel taps  
its own vestiges, festoons  
the pressure lock, stoppages  
unblanked

how a runnel cribs its shoring its through-to implants abreast punches (graces) butts of crustfilm, trimflow, groundflood

as the slippage is clipped with this, fetched at the sudden shutdown onset of sharp symbolic wastage, its spread (vantage) terrain without which the secreted horizontals starve

constriction at the plunge itself bulges unknown envelope unflows rake up and seal plenties by vertical relation diagonal breadth of the post-open, preliminary meta-release

ample tumble trails the knot, on the exact a basketed spire whose pull encumbers each living wire offskirted for a knot's inner fringe

moored bulge not hulk grants body its ropes at a covering of unpaused germ a range ahead of a lunge disdains the fresh flesh, re-cairns the crash of it the crush of its bulk becoming, becalming

banked / swarmed / harmed at the resting ferment now a little intimate with post-torment the interlocking rudder is vertical shudder each surface shrinks (shivers) the contingents of another

climax plane at its embrace  
again, vertical at depthless  
relief bordering: fords  
horizon knot for knot

acclimatised reserve, the binding only bold for lightest tendril edge rivets (enspirited) don't themselves alight re: the co-blight of

what not yet let go set from margin towards sore ventral offer on behalf of a not yet shared non-release knots will spot the entrance, not increase tether (allow span for) some membrane of reception

tie the sills, it instirs within ante-lapse, proto-pulse at the back of any pre-looped standing knots are binary remit, hailing delay for its one other course diversion unadorned, poorly (faithfully) sheered at the touch

a tree's congestion hurtles  
its shrubbing, requites unstealthy  
verticals truly nondescript once  
unbroken in common choir

tender ruin qualifies for prediction, slenderness reassessed the rim no  
neuter is as chancing as steeps of this spared horizontal at knotted  
creep scarce not rampant, collates the stickiness of behalves on  
betweens

veins taller for lashes, spears of attachment, knots of fruition      befell  
the provenience of implicit, total transfer *at* its clotting

loose, unslashed traps in  
relay-trips real otherness  
which included them  
around our own blockages,  
green baggage

not trivial preventive, blocking  
is deformable but embedded:  
an unknot stuck at/is  
its particular traverse  
across the grain

a tangle diagram so blocked out as to label its leaf for airy minimal touch  
attachment by holding the miracle to its least

freedom continuous arc  
tasking-over the crossing,  
garment-fold group of a knot  
its overheads relieve (relive)  
block for block

the error of meaning it tree-prominent duration of block averaging  
already salvaging repletion at its blunter less possible, actual to a least

float block from blockade along a pacing-large arena      the quota is  
natural wood distilled by each truss of the grain

the replication block only  
solid at a leaf's horizon,  
lone freefall to a treeful  
of the unknot

# Aaron Lopatin

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## Will one plow there with oxen?

And what, I wonder, did the rabbi  
say about mistake.

The way it galls and shackles  
and architectures on your soul:

The abandoned abacus strains.

Rain water fills a bucket to the brim.

Horses worry that we never live again.

We mistake the taste of hemlock for the truth.

## The Room / The Field / The Sanctuary (Daiyenu)

The offerings avoidance of; the smell  
of burnt potato; play a trumpet

for a mouse; take my feet off  
at the door; enough of it to build

a whole; slash the screen door;  
crack the attic; enough of it to dig

genizahs; burrow in the fields;  
to harpy; heap in ranges; patch

and dapple in the light (amen); enough  
of it to split the pits out from the  
  
fruits; to bring us home; to dry the land;  
would it be sufficient?

## Coronas

Walls, water, stores  
of bones:

a beaver builds a dam:  
a bower birds a bower:

by the hour  
bodies drop

while people pray,  
unending, in their

maudlin: this  
a, sort of, rising

of the lights?

# David Dumouriez

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## Morning at Galata

It's not the waking. More the how, or why.  
The younger me would think, at those  
abyssmal hours, that all the beautiful  
would be asleep and just the average  
or the desperate ones were up. I'd take  
the bus and look at the imperfect, the  
dishevelled, as we passed them,  
stop-by-stop. I'd see the onion eyes  
of those who entered; watch them  
lurching down the aisle towards a seat.  
The beautiful must be asleep, I'd think.  
They must. They should!

But another beauty never slept.  
Perhaps I didn't care to see it. Was  
committed to resist. Ultimately, maybe,  
something switched. I saw the city first.  
The place. The space we borrow from the cats.  
I learned, perhaps, what people meant  
who said they volunteered to track  
the sun's ascent. To the right, I viewed  
the city half in gold, and further out  
the greying panoramic channels issuing  
an open invitation: "Look, I've made it easy  
for you – come and be another Canaletto!"  
And there, off to the left, around  
the domes, I nodded as I saw those  
spears that try to touch the spirits,  
but fall within the human range.  
This place and its transitions: the  
parts that break into another age,

then break again. But stay. A city  
living, always, on the edge of  
natural demolition (as so, repeatedly,  
we're told!). Just trust the cats.  
The cats will tell us when.

I see it better now. This place.  
A place with few superiors to visit?  
*Check.*  
A place requiring fortitude to stay?  
*I've paid my toll.*  
A place in which to live and wish  
to think is often to despair? (*Too true,*  
*according to the ones who know.*)  
But 'good' can swallow 'bad'.  
And states and angles change.

# Mark Goodwin

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## Through A Crystal of Daylight In A Field Overlooking A Llŷn Peninsula, A September 2022

*The idea of a crystal alone  
floating in the void without a  
background to reflect, is a fiction.*

—Douglas S. Duckworth, *Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy of Mind and Nature* (drawing from Sūtra Explaining the Intent)

*We imagine with our bodies and in place,  
never without the ingredience  
and the co-operation of both.*

—Edward S. Casey, from his preface to the second edition of *Imagining*

as gem

-sheer sun  
light cements

drystone walls as

glints through gaps  
blacken blocks as

wind squeaks grasses' edges as

gorse glows its golds a  
against sky's one wide blue

thought as

black flakes of choughs  
divine un  
seen curls of air so  
a young  
chestnut stallion now

releases

his silvery fl  
ag of piss &  
scent of apples ( his

alcohols of  
autumn windfall ) this

alive icon  
empty

ing noth  
ing

# Neal Hoskins

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## Note from the Villa Arcetri, 1638

A sky of voices above a land bright from rain. Heat humming in the tree light with murderous glare. Firenze's drumming pageant rumbles on with the passing storm. The cicadas swell his mind. Their sound is a wall of black mist along a line of cypress trees, etching in the shadows, inking him to the landscape. He sees hooded men with knives, he sees a window, and arriving with the dark, there is a voice – *Il Signor Milton è arrivato.*\* There, Galileo finally. Hovering. His face painful, absorbed. Like someone feeling for the darkness. In his pocket, a letter's seal melts like a wound; it bleeds with dark words spinning an underworld. Note the tremendous scrawl of Italian ink. Tear to the line: *Every time I wake up, I go blind again.*

\* *Mr Milton has arrived*

## Prelude to Rain, 1940

where the dark of a window  
on a train becomes a line of soldiers  
on horses and a river in the rain  
there in the forest by the fire  
they will sing down a carriage  
where pianos play and they believe  
they will be home and safe again  
a broken monastery appears  
in the windows of the train  
oxygen of letters written back  
in the rain moves through the sky  
on a soldier's face of pain  
something about the poetry of us  
was left standing in the rain

# Amber Rollinson

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## Birdwatchers

When my first sighting becomes  
our first sighting, I think –  
of island through mist, towering cliffs  
the turquoise wrinkle of frantic Atlantic  
think – the cliffs are grey-blue, like bruises  
swelling through grassy sideland skin  
You think you are afraid of deep water, and boats  
but cross to look as puffins fly –  
as seabirds gather, and people gather  
to see their busy swoop and dive –  
You think this footpath is the one to the cove  
find steps which crumble into unsolved  
conversations among land and edgeland and sea  
Here is battery wall, here is grass like sponge  
here is birdwatcher searching for something  
dropped as we cross ledge together, reach sharper edge  
Afraid of heights, you stare down, look –  
at strange little men in smart tuxedos  
heaps of sand eels caught in tiny teeth  
as they feed we feed on seasickness tablets  
think of explaining bird and its habits  
with only the words for you and me

# John Phillips

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## This Isn't a Painting

As a painter tries to find the simplest form in order to discard all painterly effects, making the one thing capable of being seen the idea he had to express, the poet must work to make sure the poem isn't noticed, that it's as invisible as possible.

## Braque: His Final Palette

*for Alex Danchev*

raw umber

burnt umber

raw sienna

burnt sienna

yellow ochre

orange-yellow

Naples yellow

ultramarine

lamp black

vine black

bone black

# Nic Stringer

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## Poems from *even the stones the builder rejected [Foundations]*

### [Fiction]

Like the truth I am unfamiliar and distant, and not to be found half way between two propositions, or hiding behind bark with the sugar gliders, patiently waiting for beetles and flies. This does not make me irrational or extreme – being in the middle won't get you closer to reality, or to home. The middle is a slight thing, you must sit with your hand raised. It will lock you in.

Like the truth I am not at peace. I am a shapeshifter, mythic monster  
a bird you'd normally regard as unclean even in flight  
contact and take off  
contact take off like the truth  
like a magician carrier  
narrative machine

### [Fabric]

Pure grained and almost translucent, it's a kind of parlour trick. A man lying dead, veins raised and still pulsating on the forehead, a veil carved from the same crystalline limestone, scatters light. There is no obvious cause of misery, no lengthening of fingers from hands too fragile to hold the weight of a sagging body, or fluid filling the chest

but a veil, where a veil should not be possible. A very particular aspect of this death.

# Judi Sutherland

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## Fire Season

*'It doesn't take much in the way of mind and body to be a lookout. It's mostly soul.'* —Norman Mclean, *'A River Runs Through It'*.

We can smell the burning gorse eight miles away  
it billows into dirty cloud, yellowing the air  
as tobacco stains a ceiling. Now, every continent  
has Fire Season. I think of those writers

who like to work as 'lookouts' in National Parks  
firewatching the forest for twelve bucks an hour  
in order to have time to think, and write  
the wilderness from the tops of wooden towers.

I've realised too late that I am a nature poet;  
it's impossible to speak of landscape now  
without the feeling you are crafting elegies.  
If the Inuit have fifty words for snow,

I need a lexicon of flames. How many species are there?  
How hot do they burn? What are their names?

## May Morning at Ditchling Beacon

Coming up the hill through early grey  
into the hush of the morning.  
Standing, shivering, waiting, checking  
which way is East, wondering  
if this orange haze is just the lights of Lewes  
below the horizon. The sky scrubbed  
of clouds, the sheep, woolly huddles on the Downs.

When the sun rose, it was just a glow  
then an edge then a rolling arc  
then the afterburner of a rocket launch  
while mist shifted in the hollows  
like a turning tide. Summer was a cobweb  
caught between the hedgerows  
and their shadows, and out across the Weald  
the birds bustled into song, and we sang too  
*Sumer is i-cumin in— Lhude sing, cuccu!*  
pouring a libation of mead on the altar  
of the trig point. And it was hot, that summer.

Who was it said, that if the sun only rose  
once a year, we'd all be there to see it?  
I'm telling you this, so although you weren't there  
watch with me now, watch the sky  
burnish up to blue. And when we've gone  
that dawn will still exist, the sunrise  
and the singers, because that's what poems do.

# Natalie Shaw

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## Breaking into the Icehouse

The icehouse was locked I  
didn't have a key, I  
had only my hands, also I  
knew there would be thick layers I  
██████████ before I  
could perform *the rescue operation*. I  
got through the outermost parts ok; I  
had some light bleeding but not too bad, I  
then reached an inner section ██████████, I  
nonetheless kept on undeterred, I  
did it, I  
hurt my hands in fact I  
needed better tools, I  
was performing *a rescue operation*. I  
kept on, into the icehouse, I  
bashed through the ghosts, I  
hit their empty faces; I  
smacked them, I smacked them, I  
was performing ██████████. I  
got through because I  
had no other options but I

# Wendy Allen

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## South of the Boating Lake, Unnoticed

After Barbara Hepworth's 'Single Form' 1961–62

I watch her side view, a thin, arched ridge, marking the way she will move. Except forward is a fence and the other side a lake. The making and the marking is made difficult by the ledge she stands on, remaining straight backed, she looks at him, at the lake, the danger of the fence, the tight net of the green metal confines, notices the plaque with her name on covered in concrete.

## All the Ways

I'm not allowed to use fingers, or tongue, only rub against you using the edge of breath. You leave abstract gasps on the roped off surface of *All the Ways I Want to Fuck You*. The artwork is carved from marble. Its several layers hide the way you'll never know if it's you I'm writing about. I wonder if you taste the way I imagine – your tip laps sea, is library still. You are salt quiet while I kiss the rim of you, repeating slow over. There are arched sounds now in the nub of it all.

# Robert Sheppard

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## ***from Poems of National Independence: liberties with Wordsworth's sonnets***

### **Fair Star of evening, Splendour of the west**

Big Bong at eleven, resonant in the North, voice  
of my country, strong across swart horizon, above  
White Cliff's Union Jack screen, carries like Big Bo  
stooping over Britannia's spangled party bosom,  
on the government's news feed; Bo's little bong  
on the Number Ten gong (the Cum's boohooing!)  
conspicuous to all nations – but not on the BBC.  
This bong is my country's new anthem! Winking,  
laughing, Bo waves his bombastic banners over  
his fresh duties, puzzled, declares, *There, this  
dark spot is Global Britain's sphere.* Sport thrives  
under Go's new National Thrust. Bought spent men  
linger with contempt, do not love her, my fingered  
Kentish maiden flattened against freezing winter metal.

# Kjell Espmark

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*translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson*

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## Mallarmé Calls Destruction His Beatrice

The room is empty and dark.  
Tables and chairs, carpets and bookcases –  
everything has been erased.  
Just a mirror is allowed, in the background.  
The tenant is satisfied to see  
how the mirror disowns him,  
reflecting only a cluster of stars.

Here existence has almost reached twelve.  
Time has apparently foundered.  
At 25 he's already in his later life  
and can draw up its grammar  
on a page of squared paper torn  
from his red school-jotter.

The Book, his Divina Commedia,  
the ultimate account of silence,  
has, of course, erased itself  
before it had time to begin.

It's a question of elimination.  
What's left of the cup of coffee is an odour,  
of the half-eaten croissant  
the memory of a spot of grease  
on the table already wiped out.  
If anything could be thought of as left behind  
it would be a triangular ashtray  
full of the ash  
that proves the world once existed.  
What remains is the descent

of the dizzying spiral staircase  
in what is only the smell of a cellar.  
The thinning walls open into night.  
Further and further down in the vertigo  
that replaces the stairway. The low pressure  
is immense. It's time to blow out the stars.  
And then to erase oneself.  
In the final darkness there are only words  
reflecting themselves in a glitter.

## Fugue

Tossing to and fro on my camp-bed,  
coiled in the mosquito-net, running with sweat:  
how many refugees can squeeze into  
a single human? Without the whisky  
I couldn't make it through to morning.

Right now: a mother and her little daughters  
are creeping through a millet-field. She fears  
the little one might start crying  
and be strangled by the others.

News has spread that I'm a doctor  
and the flow of refugees has veered my way –  
children with bellies like water-bags  
and women filleted inside-out.  
How many of the desperate can I contain?

Right now: someone rests on dripping oars  
while the patrol boat slides past in the dark.  
And suddenly all is a searchlight blaze.

When I try to stitch together  
the slashed belly of the one people

the other, sneaking shadows, threatens  
to chop my hands off.  
How much do we have to forgive?

Right now: they're wading through water  
to avoid the sniffer dogs  
and the cries of Kill! Kill! Their past  
has just run them down.  
I become a noisy refugee camp,  
my brain a clutter of grey shacks  
knocked together by hope and terror.  
But the mutual hate is there too  
like a latrine stench pervading my days.

How can the half of the world that's burning  
be made new in the half that's spared?  
The smoke takes our reservations.  
The smoke is full of faces  
which are only eyes and flight.

# Attila József

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*translated by Ágnes Lehóczky and Adam Piette*

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## Dusk

This dusk, so sharp, so clear, it's made for me. Far off,  
see how the structure, warp and weft of bare black boughs  
with grace upholds the gravity of empty air.

As each and every subject's torn from every object;  
they sink into themselves, perhaps they cease to be,  
who knows? My gut feeling might have the right answer,  
except that, like the dog that's bawled at by its master,  
brooding over its feelings in the cold back yard,  
it's howling at strangers, yet still won't breathe a word,  
that's what gut-dog's like now. Can I do without him?

The only certainty: the mistakes that we make.

Lucky I lean on iambs: it's how kids learn to walk.

Only reason I can't pretend to be that child  
is that I'd be too moody, bolshie, treacherous,  
like everyone who's human (least that's what I think),  
sly, mulish. And so? How could I possibly know?

Guy winks at me and says, hello, pretty boy,  
another, lazy arse, you dodging work again?  
your eyes as big as your belly, well, is that wrong?  
A third tosses a coin, says, hope you'll muddle through,  
I feel for you, I've been through hell as well, my friend,  
another guy he nicks my junk, just coz he can.  
A shove here, pull there, groping, poking, punching, croaking,  
But none of them can see the hump there on my back,  
the one I carry, like mad mother her foetus  
which she'll give birth to, she thinks, sempiternal void.

*Autumn, 1934*