

Ghost Passage

## Also by Josephine Balmer

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## Josephine Balmer

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Everything in the landscape is older than we think... for a moment or two we succeed in entering into the minds of the dead.
W.G. Hoskins, The Making of the English Landscape

This is the book of a city which will not be destroyed...
Arthur Mee, The King's England: London (1948 edition)



## Writer [?], London

Writing tablets, Walbrook, London

It seems a slip, a novice error, marked as if crossed through. A name no one can read. Or knew.

But I am the first. It holds my fear and my life, the heart-knot terror of a letter misplaced, misconstrued. I breathe through its blocked lungs my blood, my bone, my sinew.

And all those others yet to come. Centuries later fold back each leaf to trace the fossil frail we'll mane, this usury of borrowed topgue mud-stopped loans, gains ofdyst, the lines we send lik<ash-va/d moths to brush your doorspe as you sleep: We bear witnoss in out own hand that debts $\underbrace{\text { wed shall be paid later... }}$
We have seen our city shrink to sand so we scratch wood to soothe the ache diminished words we leave behind to score these shuddering, ghosted streets back into form and place: London writer.

Then hand them on for you to shape.


## I.

## In Wood

What London hath been of ancient time men may here see, as what it is now every man doth beft.
(John Stow, A Surveyfldodon, 1508)



## Cicero (Minor) Conquers Britain

Southern Britain, September, 54 BCE

Caesar... tells me you were not yet with him when he reached the coast

As usual I was following in the rear.

My brother teased about the chariots I could buy for souvenirs. Or the lack of bookish Britons to trade as slaves. He talked of turned tides, of steeper cliffs to scale than my stalled career.

Riding back to the sea from inland I'd found subdued villages, smoke scrolled up like fading stylus frezes; neat fields crossed by tangrehedges, hardly touched by oyrr. Cblivious. From Rome Marsmote of the heat, of roof repair $<1$ mbing, land prices; of savage (he senate, ambition pressed between pine tablets as he boasted of each winning speech.

In my deep lanes, the blossom turned like soured milk; dog roses gave way to dark thorns, scarlet berries. Waves of parsley parted, foaming as I passed. Alder shivered with each drop of rain.

I abandoned the tragedy I was writing. My talents wouldn't match my temper; I saw its ending, each sharp, staged death.
I was never in the centre, only at the edge.
On the losing side. And to my brother.

## The First European

Legionary tomb, Colchester, 49 CE

They never managed to pronounce my name;
as I'm tall, I was always 'Longinus', 'Lofty' (I'm Sdapeze, son of Matygus, a Thracian from Sofia). Can't complain: I was on double time. The days were dank but the oysters were good. I bought a cloak plus a fine hunting bitch, Agassia, with squat little legs, sharp teeth and soft paws. The wife and kids back home would have loved her.

Fifteen years I served with the cavalry across the east - Syria, Scythia.
At forty it ends here. Remember me:
I was in the advance, one of the first. Your ancestor. My bones still feed this earth?


## Pecking Orders

Writing tablet, Walbrook, London, 51 CE

To Titus Birdface, Poultry man...

A word of caution in your own interest through the City, debtors are crowing that your new bills are ever-flowing;
if you ruffle feathers, bring discredit, no one here will thank you for it you won't advance by these advances
only undermine our fledgling markets.
Such loans are more than we'll allow.
So heed this warning: don't play foul.
 the sigh of fish thrdog the quicksilver river. Yet somehow, I seas, I missed my latch, lifting, thesple-soft step of 'Anonymous' slipping their sour tablet beneath my door. A month ago, in Athens, I was in the agora
debating Plato by moonlight, Pythagoras. Here, in Britain, they waste good wax and wood on weak puns, vindictiveness.

These are the paltry men. Chicken feed. We Greeks do not care for pecking orders. I will lay my nest eggs where I please.

## In the Second Consulship of Nero

Writing tablet, Walbrook, London, 8 January, 57 CE

I, Tibullus, freedman of Venustus, owe 105 denarii to Gratus, freedman of Spurius, for goods sold and delivered...

I knew it was a gamble, rash even.
But the year was fresh, the month of Janus the god of openings, gateways, passages. And I believe, like my fellow freedmen, that the way it starts is the way it ends.

We didn't choose to come. We were baggage stateless, nameless - of our former master (who'd half-read the poet I'm called after). Yet we found shelter here, security, a place to bank our safe new currency, the ceaseless tap, tap, tap of builders' countered by scratch, scratch, scratof $f$ IOUs. Soon Nero will abolish al This town is booming. Ourfornes with it.

