

Katie's work is so unflinchingly raw, you won't know where to look. You'll recognise yourself in her writing. She bares all with her *bars*. It's all true. And sick.

Conrad Murray, *Pied Piper & Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster*

*Plumstead Pram Pushers* is a marvel of a poetry collection, in which Beswick seamlessly melds the disparagement of female (especially working-class female) desire, the reality of that desire, and the birth of her own baby (and others' babies as well).

Her extraordinary use of language and mastery of poetic form, using pop vernacular combined with threads alchemized from the seething cauldron of London — its classism, misogyny, melancholy, freneticism, and relentless aspiration — makes this a stunning read. In the end, this is a love poem to desire, pain, and imperfection, without which there are no new babies, no crying, burbling pink life overflowing our carefully guarded river banks.

Julia Lee Barclay-Morton, *The Mortality Shot*

Katie Beswick's *Plumstead Pram Pushers* is a highly visual, visceral collection of poems, evoking images that are both beautiful and painful, distressing and delightful. We take glimpses into the lives of women spanning generations of working-class British life.

Beswick looks at the different ways in which the male gaze and societal judgment inform how women feel about themselves, their friends and neighbours, and even the state of motherhood. Within this unflinching critique lives true humour and playfulness.

Sarah Sigal, *No Caller & Daniel Deronda*



# Plumstead Pram Pushers

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*For Coral*

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## *Foreword*

Adolescence is intense and enduring. The sensations of a newly uncanny body, along with the formative social experiences we undergo as we come of age, linger in our psyches. Trying to deal with our own desires, or lack of them, alongside budding desirability to others, feels dizzying. We are touched and touch in new ways — sometimes these touches are wanted, sometimes they are not (sometimes, it's not even clear to us what we want). Our new emotional terrain and altered body shift us to a different plane, and this shifts existing relationships. Things happen that lay the foundations for patterns played out later, with lovers and children. Our fears and joys, hopes and vulnerabilities, solidify.

I came of age in England, in a South East London area called Plumstead, at the turn of the twenty-first century. The girls' school I attended was known locally as 'Plumstead pram pushers', in reference to the supposed sexual availability of its pupils, and the fact that a steady percentage of us had babies while still at school, or shortly after. The late 90s, after all, saw a moral panic around the figure of the teenage mother, particularly those who were perceived as working-class, as most of us were at my school. Because we were warned by teachers and television about the shame attached to young motherhood and sex in general, and maybe too because many of us had negative early sexual experiences, romantic relationships became fraught — and remained so. I and many of my friends spent years in therapy or bad relationships (or both), coming to terms with what the hell happened to us as young women, and how we could live happily in our bodies given what they'd known.

I wrote the poems in this volume between 2014 and 2024. What started as a private way to work through complicated feelings about sex, relationships, motherhood and class became, over the

years, a focused, more coherent project exploring the contours of adolescence and desire, and the patterns of intimacy we form and eventually break or settle into. I'm interested in how we see and feel ourselves, and how we are seen and felt by others — how the struggles of this form us, and how all of it is mediated by popular culture and cultures of social class. You'll see I'm also concerned with the insult slag, generally used in a British context to suggest the spoiled sexual reputation of the woman it is aimed at. Like all complex things, the slag holds fascinating contradictions — attraction and repulsion; excess and lack; shame and pleasure.

She is in all of us, I think.

Katie Beswick  
June 2024



## *Sonnet for a Real Slag*

One day, she's gonna be obese, that slag.  
Salt and vinegar McCoy's for breakfast —  
pulls at your bedsheets like she's hoisting masts;  
tugging pleasures, snatching at this ragbag  
assortment of whatever she can blag.  
Telling you half-truths no matter what you ask.  
Exposing cream cake thighs, she walks past  
your office window. You joke, call her a hag . . .

It's her youth what you want of her, really,  
in that desperate, total way that you do.  
And it's her fault, feelings you're frightened of . . .  
Strength of a mother, her anger nearly  
bursts through the lust.

Maybe you're ready to  
fill up her, whole, with the shape of your love.

## *Classy Birds*

Our screen name was ClassyBirds  
and we roosted in chatrooms.  
Crude wit flying out our fingertips:  
sleek and shocking —  
rude, like a plume of blue-tipped feathers.

Blowjobs/wankstain/illsitonyourface.

High on the power of the giggle.

*Teehee! Quod we.*

We soared on the winds of our swelling sexiness.  
The thick screen was a thick armour.  
We perched on an office chair my dad had nicked from work;  
told old men about our dirty knickers.  
They kissed our virtual arses,  
while our real bums — warm and pressed together —  
shared the heat of an intense intimacy.  
Fledgling flights for later,  
our real wings shorn,  
in nests we made with men false as cuckoo's eggs.

Thin screens now, in our pockets,  
like terrible flat runes we carry always.  
Unanswered text messages vibrate;  
our flesh, hungover soft, ripples rejection.

Worms hang from our beaks,  
limp and wet —  
heavy with the weight of wanting.

## *Eating Lunch on Lamma Island*

Around us, turquoise mountains rise like fish heads, surfacing open-mouthed.

My friend dips her chopsticks into roasted peanuts and tells me she thinks our South London adolescence was a shared trauma.

*We've done well to recover*, she says.

We are peeling prawns, plucking pink meat from pink skins; drinking pink wine.

I pluck a dumpling from its platter; I poke it in my open mouth.

The sea pulls away from the shore; our boat pounds against the dock's brink.

*I'm a big believer in therapy*, my friend says —

She turns to our waitress, speaks in rapid scraps of Cantonese.

We're waiting for the steamed clams they forgot to bring.

My husband takes his beer and walks down to the dock.

Fishermen cast rods into the wide-open mouth of the turquoise sea.

My baby digs in the sand.

*Maybe it's best*, my friend says, *that we weren't the pretty girls at school.*

Light from the water dances, refracting through my wine glass.

She orders a durian mochi; we recoil from the stench.

The baby taps my leg.

In her open hand, a triangle turquoise slice, plucked from sand, like a great slice of eye —

Some smashed tile, carrying the light weight of long history, dappled with dark dots.

I take it from her; I close it in my fist.

I pour more pink wine;

watch my baby toddle back across the little square of beach — mouth open in existential delight.

My friend and I discuss intellectual property law, and those pretty girls from school, whose children are grown.

The sun moves across the turquoise water.

Our waitress brings the clams.

## *Slaggy Manor*

Not a country estate  
No  
Not that  
Here  
Teenage girls fuck teenage boys  
Or grown men  
In our red uniforms  
We are Plumstead Pram Pushers  
Pushing half-caste babies  
Single mums, smoking fags  
Like slags.

## *Jackie Loses Her Virginity*

The car park of the estate was lined with an oily, ash-coloured slush, melting slowly; it leaked into her trainers as they walked to a flat with a lacquered black door.

He was called Daniel, and he was twenty-one, with red splotches splashed across his neck. His back was lumpy with cystic acne. She stroked his lumps. Undid his shirt buttons. How to frame this as romantic, so the memory of it would not visit her later as shame, or disgust?

She switched out the lights.

His breath was sour — but then, so was hers. It was already one am, and they'd been drinking pineapple Bacardi Breezers. He had been the boyfriend of her best friend's sister, once. That was how things were. This was how things were: people told people things. It was thrilling, at the centre of all that rage.

He pushed against her, dry on dry. Then a scalding pain, and a sound like a zip, unzipping. They lay on the leather sofa. The sash window half-open — so the smell of their sour breath and the old snow, the goose flesh on her arms: all one sensation.

What she'll remember later is not the act itself so much as standing outside a betting shop the next morning, withstanding the repulsion as he kissed her — the most swirling, spiky kiss. *Lettuce in a salad spinner*, she told her friend, laughing. *A tornado of forks*.

## Morning Song

You ordered a Turkish breakfast  
Things blow over, you said  
I nodded Didn't tell you how when I open my mouth entire wide  
swallow you down all the spikes of my needing breaking your fall like  
branches Lashing against your arms  
Back Torso Little cuts  
where those faded tattoos are  
Red slices Lipstick kisses slashed on flesh  
where muscle moves over bone  
Veins Your too, too human flesh  
Right where I could touch it But I don't  
I nodded Made my blue eyes big Full moons  
Like women in cartoons  
Looked out at the flat sky Didn't say my feelings twist up  
from a deep place Solid  
Grown slowly Knotted together  
Steady Still maturing  
The trunk of a tree you can hold onto and not like the leaves  
Whimsical  
Tumbling  
Dead soon and unbothered When the green of your eye  
Flint of it moves against the grey of mine  
Pupils expanding Shared understanding  
I read into that  
Read into the egg yolk that pools on your plate  
The air's shape between our bodies Table-width  
The breadth of a gaze.

## *Pike*

On the sofa at Dave's flat in Bexley Village.  
Aging slowly, we down shots of whisky.  
Sky outside is navy and deliciously hazy I —  
I turn to him with my whole self open.  
Penetrating and filled with a liquid sadness,  
nestle my face against his face.  
Facing each other, our lips touch with this tender authenticity.  
City cynical and hardened against caring;  
ring pulls from the cans we drank scattered like confetti.  
Teeth against teeth —  
teeth and the smooth wetness of tongues,  
tonguing tenderness, like temporary passion.

On the way out the door, our friend, Alex,  
explains my mistake under his breath,  
breathing, *You acted so slaggy yesterday.*  
Daylight and the hangover, he hands me an espresso.  
So slaggy's maybe true, I think.  
Think maybe that's why Dave switched so abruptly,  
leaving me naked, yanking a jumper over his bare chest.  
Chesty cough, he took a sip of flat beer from a green bottle.  
Tells me he's off        don't even say goodbye.

Stoop sitting  
Weed smoking  
Nights like bayonets  
Wisps of indiscriminate fucking  
*Do you know who I am?*  
Mum gone Isle of Sheppey  
Convalescent  
Wore a belly top and thin leggings  
Stripes of rain  
Windows smashed in the night's deep scoop  
Fat wobbles as you scream  
Tin waves on tiled winds  
Screaming bored  
Screaming fear  
Screaming like knife crime  
*Don't come round this way again*  
On the stairs, a pan of penne pasta and baked beans  
stews in gelatinous globs  
From the tarot deck, you pull the nine of swords.



## *Dream Lover*

In the dream, you were packing to leave with your worst ex-boyfriend/The plan was: starting over in a trailer he'd converted from a squat red van, which in reality (by which I mean outside the dream, but you sort of know it in the dream as well) belongs to your husband/Oh there are lots of points in the dream when boyfriends and husbands and friends you slept with fade into and out of one another — when their bewildering sameness confuses you so extremely that the paternity of your baby becomes unclear/Or maybe there is no baby, yet/You are not sure if the dream takes place today, or at some past moment, or in a ceaseless liminal limbo, its possibilities fluid as the viscous dream texture/Your love shifted from dream man to dream man, as though the disparate emotional bonds of your life had let loose from time, unleashing havoc on the people who hurt you and even the one who did not/And why is the van parked in the long summer grasses by Slade Ravine?/Your ex-boyfriend is crying his hacking grief/You really do love your husband, you're telling him — it's important to tell him this, pathetic in his dressing gown and slippers/And there is another not-quite boyfriend to whom you've also told lies in the dream/In the dream he is very small/He is waiting at his dead mother's house to share the fact of your love with relatives, who say they've been worried/They're happy he's found you, after all that trouble with the last one/Still, he seems unimportant in the grander view of things/Though of course he'll have to be dealt with and his clamouring family will come to hate your guts/But back to what's vital: you have a baby now, you're telling him — the ex in the caravan — a baby with black hair and fatty legs and grey-blue eyes with golden streaks that glow when she's happy or the sun moves across them, like your own/like the sky.

## *After School Round Jackie's Nan's*

1. Round here, breathe deep. Collapse in the fat brown armchair. Happy Shopper custard creams and thick, hot mugs of tea, poured from the old white ivy-patterned pot. Watched by matching cups and saucers they never use.
2. She needs say nothing on arrival — just offers her cheek for a whiskery peck. Waves of that scent: clean washing, cheap perfume, potpourri. Grange Hill and the breeze moving net curtains.
3. A chocolate bar if she fancies one. Or a ham sandwich on white bread. In the summer, strange salads with little cubes of cheese, pickled onions and sardines. Nan tells her, *Circle something nice in the Avon catalogue*; asks about her boyfriends (Jackie don't mention blowjobs behind the big bins).
4. Her schoolbooks, covered in bathroom wallpaper, scatter out from her bag. She's shrugged it off in the hallway, next to the shelf of Danielle Steels. The coat stand, where there's always that duck-handled umbrella.

The impossibility of impermanence  
settles over these early evenings,  
like a fog of peace.

## *Sket*

### *After Dizze Rascal*

I'll forgive you, but you weren't on my side, damn!  
Not ever — remember that day, on the train?  
When the little girl with her face, so pretty,  
hair in pigtails, turned right back  
to stare at you, hands waving gentle, fast.  
And her mother stepped forward as if to attack:  
*What you done to my little girl!*  
I said, *Not my man*, I said, *Not him, he ain't*  
*done nothing wrong*. You were full of shame.  
Hated me for loving you. Hated me, but  
I couldn't understand why. Wracked my brain.  
Wondered if this was really all just Daddy  
Issues; your disdain, your mother closing the door to her house.  
The way you said *slag* like it was my name. I got  
no pleasure — cried tears like it was breaking my heart.  
And here you are, *Sorry, I'm sorry I ruined*  
*us*. Pleading at the other end of the phone all, *But,*  
*but you know I never meant it*. Babe, you went  
too far — I click the phone shut. I'm not going back.



# *Crazy*

## *After Eminem*

It was one of them wet, normal days, rain splashing  
hard against pavement; crisp packets, pigeons fighting  
for scraps of old crap. A toddler calling out, *Bye-bye*.  
We stood on the beach, looking out at muddy river water.  
Something came up to breathe and I thought of all our kisses,  
and how they don't mean nothing now.  
And how when things were new,  
I took you home, said, *Dad*,  
*I met the one this time*, as if we was characters in a play.  
Now I lay my head on your shoulder. We're castles  
in the dry sand.  
And you'll admit (won't you?) you were well out of order,  
so I can forgive you/forget about her.  
But first, let me close my eyes, for just  
a minute, and remember when we were brand new.



## Yattie

*After Jehst/Chester P/Kyza*

You told your mates, *She's no Einstein.*  
You said, *She loves my cock.*  
You were stood under the galvanised steel piping  
of some scaffolding, doused in evening light;  
stood next to your parked car  
with the slick coolness of a crime.  
And it's true, I liked riding  
you in the back of that car;  
screaming while you did me from behind.  
Tight minge, tight thighs.  
But my mind  
is not in my thighs.  
My IQ's higher.  
That's why I  
wait for your brother behind  
that dive bar — tell him: *Get them in,*  
*gin and tonic, nice and slim.*



## *The Blues*

I am not happy, I realise, as I pour milk into coffee the way I do: with one slop.

Coffee spatters over cup's rim and across clean tablecloth, leaving a trail of flecks the colour of old blood.

I'm dabbing the flecks with a wet napkin and looking at the clock on the wall over my friend's shoulder when I think: this is unhappiness, what I'm feeling.

And all around there are other people at tables.

Conversation a steady drumroll beneath the clatter of glasses and crockery —

liquids being poured into vessels, wind blowing at the door.

It opens and closes again.

Tap                    tap                    tap.

The spoon makes circles in the coffee as I stir.

Not even sadness, this feeling I have,

it's enduring, like the long note held at the end of the last song.

And the air is too hot, and my neck feels sticky under my hair.

And on the street outside a little girl with dark skin and a winter coat lets go of her balloon, of course she does, her chubby hand gasping after the string of it. Eyes total Os following the balloon, which is drifting off into the endless sky,

the sea,

the belly of a marine creature.

All that blue.

## *EastEnders. A Classic. 2001*

*After Kate Durbin, who said, 'I wanted to reveal the script. You see, we are all carrying it.'*

An Indian restaurant (orange walls, tingly music, Slater family meal in freefall). Mid-shot on Big Mo. Sound of a door slam. We hear Kat call: *Zoe! Come here!* Smash cut to outside. Wide shot. Darkness indicates late evening. The streets are empty. There's a sense of something ominous looming; there's the impression of cold. That tingly, ambient Indian music, like rising panic, carries from the last scene and fades into rushing air. Zoe's wearing a dark, lacy skin-tight dress with narrow straps, short; it's dotted with white and lilac flowers, there's a tiny pink satin bow at the front. Her long, mousy hair swings in the wind and with the force of forward motion. Kat is several paces behind her, cleavage exposed. She's in a red dress with black splotches and a black patent leather coat that flaps as she runs. Her black bob moves like a wig. Zoe shouts without turning round, *No! I'm fed up of you picking on me all the time!* Kat: *I'm not picking on ya!* It's one long tracking shot as Kat follows Zoe. They're storming ahead, curving in front of the flyover, round through the closed market. Flashes of blue and white striped tarpaulin. Abandoned stalls. Zoe, shouting, not looking back: *Embarrassing me in front of everyone!* Kat, imploring: *Just listen to me will ya?!* Zoe: *I'm going. There ain't nothing you can do about it!* Kat's arms move faster as she increases her pace, *Do you want a bet?* she screams. We can see part of a seafood truck in the background, the blue font across the white front. *Shellfish Bar*, it reads above the locked hatch; below the hatch, *Fresh Shellfish*. The wall behind is papered in posters. Kat trots faster still, trying to close the distance between their bodies: *We'll go and ask Dad together, shall we? See who he listens to!* Zoe: *Why don't you just leave me alone!* They pass the launderette. Kat: *Because you're not going to Spain.* Zoe's screaming over her before she's even finished, mouth wide as a yawn: *Yes, I am!* Kat grabs Zoe by the arm and spins her around so they're facing. We're close on Zoe's face. She has a thin silver necklace and, in her ears, a pair of silver or diamond studs. The back of Kat's head is in shot. Zoe: *Get away from me!* Close-up shot of Kat: *No!* They're outside the pub; an abundance of flowers blooms from the window boxes,

dripping down in red and green waves over maroon walls. Close-up shot of Zoe, jaw clenched: *You don't rule my life!* Close-up shot of Kat, who's speaking levelly, as if to a child: *You're not going to Spain. And that's that.* Kat is in red lipstick; her long diamante earrings swing and shimmer. Close-up shot of Zoe: *Why not?* Close-up shot of Kat: *Because I said so alright?* Close-up shot of Zoe, she's not shouting, but still, she's furious: *And I have to do everything you say, do I?* Close-up shot of Kat: *No . . .* she gives the slightest tremor, some internal struggle as she hesitates at the threshold and then decides to carry on — but before she can continue, Zoe loses it. Close-up of Zoe.

Zoe, yelling, her voice hoarse with the graze of rage: *You can't tell me what to do! YOU AINT MY MOTHER!*

The camera pulls back to a wide shot of the women, with the street in view. The road runs back behind them, like the past. Zoe turns, charges away towards the square, leaving Kat behind. We notice Kat's bare legs.

Kat: *YES I AM!*

On the last word, cut to extreme close-up on Kat. Light from a streetlamp is falling across her face; you can see how her cheekbones have been illuminated with highlighter. Her expression sets and then falls. Extreme close-up on Zoe; she's utterly still. Extreme close-up on Kat. A stripe of fringe hangs down past her eye, resting on the side of her nose. The theme music plays: DUFF-DUFF/DOO-DOO-DOO . . .



*A Sonnet for Jackie's Mother*

On the estate, they called her a mad bitch,  
(*that fucking mad bitch*)  
because of her temper, and all that hair.  
She grew herbs in her garden, like a witch,  
and her stick-thin children looked fed on air.  
She took amphetamines for the cleaning,  
smoked weed every afternoon;  
at fifteen, pregnant, she gave up dreaming,  
smoked weed and cleaned and worshipped the full moon —

Told her children there was no one above them.  
*Oi*, they better take that look off their face.  
They stand in the yard blowing bubble gum,  
she picks herbs, says the neighbour's a disgrace,  
waves her scateurs at the open sky...  
You know you're fucked if she catches your eye.

## *A Snapshot, 1983*

Of course, on the nightstand, your rollers.  
You'd placed them there in *almost* regimented rows.  
Sat on the bed's edge, unfurling your custard-coloured hair.  
Deft, arthritic fingers — the oval pearlescent nails;  
maybe you didn't notice they were smudged.  
It would have been very like you —  
easing rollers from that thin hair.  
Pride in a slapdash neatness.  
Your aspirational glamour was the mid-century brown of the satin  
eiderdown,  
lipstick in slightly the wrong shade, slipped onto your false teeth;  
polyester shift dress, your jacket a copy of a copy of Chanel.  
We loved your floral smell that clung to our clothes, perfumed our  
skin.  
I see you turn back to us laughing on your way to bed,  
securing your rollers with a bobby-pin.

## *Jackie Eats Out*

She thought baked potatoes were the most depressing food.  
They were.  
No. She didn't care what you said about how fluffy white, ethereal,  
peaks breaking into snow crystals,  
overcooked, dripping, salt-smear'd good they tasted.  
You savoured the great leathery skins of them.  
Soft, flavourless innards: drenched in butter or cheese or both.  
She'd yet to understand it.  
Their weight — that fist-sized bulk.  
The black-death sense of living history that was the shape of a  
baked potato on your plate.  
And you didn't have to tell her that the potato would look  
anachronistic in a Medieval drama.  
Whatever.  
She liked the present.  
Its stillness.  
The subtle umami of Japanese flavours,  
like sushi, dipped in plum-coloured sauce.  
And the umber-orange glow —  
that most modern of things.  
The span of an illuminated night sky.  
Streaks of puce.  
How only pollution creates that.  
The deep chemical perfume of petrol  
on fire.

## *Crevasse*

At the cliff edge of motherhood, a waterfall sputters over rock's daggered face — Long moments in between surges of yellow pain — The nine of swords, again, bearing down their horizontal load — And the piercing strike of the next one, and the one after that — Down into the curdled abyss your familiar self tumbles — Her mouth shut against the hard air — Life's great surprise — Out of you steps a person, naked and screaming.

## *Eating In*

Today, I read a poem about eating peaches after sex. The poet luxuriated in sticky sweetness; warm, fragrant juices, on her mouth and the sheets. I've never eaten peaches after sex, but once I sat naked at the foot of my boyfriend's bed, still fizzy from orgasm, and ate cold leftover curry with a spoon, straight from the takeaway tin. The container sent its metallic hum across my teeth. I upended the last of the yellow sauce into my throat as my boyfriend looked on, his face a grimace of horror and arousal. I licked my oily, spiced fingers and stepped into dirty knickers, laughing and sated.

*Slag / noun:*

She wants it all that slag  
That dirty, dirty slag  
Sloughed off and thick as treacle  
She wants it more than you do  
She'll get it too, probably  
They do get it  
These slags  
Smelted  
Legs open  
Mouths wide open  
You wait and see what she does with that wide open mouth  
Sparks erupt from iron ore  
Her black pleather mini skirts  
Everything cavernous and bubbling and stinky  
Everything soaking wet  
So wet you could never dry it out  
Never drink it up  
That slag  
Stretch marks pulled back like a threat  
Sex played, like a game of roulette  
In her leopard-print high heels  
With her stretchmarks and all that pain  
I think she's smiling  
That bothers you, doesn't it?  
And all her wanting.

*I Imagine Looking at an Oil Painting, Which Doesn't Exist*

A woman hangs, horizontally and face up, from an iron bar/She is suspended by meat hooks, piercing through her thighs — abdomen — chest/Her head thrown back/Anvil heavy and unsupported.

Her blonde bob is rendered with short, fast brushstrokes/The movement of hair on canvas/Streaking through the yellow colours so you can see how the artist has got there — the beiges and browns, the ochre/The background is a vast abstracted warehouse.

The painting has a fluid quality/Still, her body feels weighted/Like a rotten thing/Putrid/Bloated/About to explode.

Her face is contorted with yearning/Her skin is alabaster/Pink splotches on the fat parts/Blood bubbles thickly where the hooks pierce her skin.

*I hope you find each other.*

## *Subchorionic Hematoma*

There, inside my steep walled womb,  
an egg of blood.

The nurse moved the wand with precise turns.

I had lost dark clots, and concrete-coloured strings of meat —  
held them in a wad of tissue and tried to identify human parts:  
an arm the length of a fingernail;  
some dot of foot.

My boyfriend clasped my hand — he was already crying.

The nurse rotated the wand inside me and said:

*There's your baby.*

She was no baby — she was a pulsing pearl,  
wedged into a far nook of me.

And as the egg bled its bleed,  
she pulsed her pearly pulse  
and became my daughter.



## *Serving Officers*

At the hill's tip, two boys sat by a portacabin.  
Dark terror cylinders, like a psychopath's pupil,  
dense with the intensity of a latent propulsive force,  
swung easily as corpses over their shoulders,  
threatening, yet totally indifferent to you —

You,  
standing in those market-bought Mary Janes;  
your bitter washing-powder scent on the ragged wind.  
Sharp wind on bare legs, puckered like raw chicken skin.  
Maybe the night before we'd danced in pubs —  
this same boy  
who slams the rifle's wooden heel  
on the fleshy heel of his hand.  
You'd felt his fingers, or his friend's fingers,  
at your waist's skin.  
Now, he shoves the rifle behind him;  
inspects your picture on the plastic card with a dull glance,  
nods to his mate in the portacabin, and the iron gate

swings

open.

Chicken legs exposed, you serve soup to his commanding officer.  
Serve this war the way you serve the next one  
and the one after that: pulling your skirt down over your knees,  
polishing silverware in the lamplight,  
bending low with the ceremonial offerings of your people,  
port and Madeira, blood-thick.  
What is spilled by the officers, you wipe with a damp cloth.

*Hot / adjective:*

If you can't be good-looking — you might as well perform it  
Show them all  
You know what it means to possess hotness  
Possess it like a tiger possesses hunks of gazelle  
Devouring  
With teeth like platinum credit cards  
An online yoga class  
Tone your arse, with gym membership  
A Peleton —  
Jewelry in gold vermeil  
Stilettos or platform trainers  
Get your thin, spiteful white-girl lips plumped up  
They'll be kissable then  
And suggest a prowess at blow jobs you do not possess  
Who cares?  
It's the performance that's important  
Performing its importance  
Blow dry your hair extensions with that \$400 dryer  
Those ombre waves cascade like a veil across the truth  
Pull it back  
Like you'll pull back his foreskin with your tongue.

## *A Thought on Valentine's Day*

Remember that episode of EastEnders where Tanya buried Max alive in Epping Forest and then, almost immediately, drove back and dug him up — monologuing a litany of his misdeeds as he choked on lumps of dirt and sobbed into soiled shirtsleeves?

I've been thinking about that today.

I don't know why.

## *After Swimming*

We stand by the river eating chips; wet hair whips our faces.  
Knickerless.

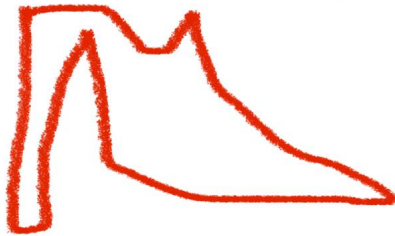
In the wind, under the plastic flume —  
twisting tubes of yellow/green where just now we whizzed  
outside ourselves.

Salt burns paper cuts on our water-wrinkled fingers.  
Vinegar and chlorine on our tongues and the air.  
Cars speed by, flashing headlights in the glow of street-lamps;  
orange on orange.

We suck vinegar off our fingers.  
Suck the ends of our chlorinated hair that just now underwater  
floated around us like soaking clouds while the hands of all these  
boys ran over our wet bodies.  
Up our legs.  
Their lips our lips/For once I am not only watching.

You'd never

call a



dog a

stupid

## *Dove Wing*

The sky in South London was white-grey,  
dove wing colours,  
leaking through my lover's blue curtains.

And later, there was a plum taste  
on the tongue of this other boy — who loved me,  
and tried to say it, but

everything changed before he could.  
Possibility's smashedness.  
You felt the whole world veer off course —

even though you were far away,  
naked in your lover's single bed,  
where New York was only an idea from movies.

His voice as you moved deliciously,  
tangled together, like serpents,  
like two halves from the same broken thing.

*A plane has hit the Pentagon.*  
Glass, all shatters.  
A million futures, all splintering.

Captions, written in blood.  
We watch the towers fall.  
The television flickers.

All day, we watch —  
eat tea and biscuits.  
Smoke cigarettes.

My lover cooks me vegetarian sausages  
and frozen potato waffles with beans.  
The spoon tastes like metal.

Breath from my mouth.  
Dust billowing.

Those wide streets where I'll walk and walk —

I'll lean inside footprints,  
to the Earth's black granite belly,  
its gushing crystal water . . .

Oh.

You spend years  
imagining lobbies —  
looking out over chasms where they once stood.

Peering through wire fences.  
Wire that some dove-wing grey  
as the South London sky.

You close your eyes.  
The click, click: court shoes on marble.  
You dream about escalators;

elevators —  
in your dreams everything rises up.  
Or the wreckage . . .

Steel frames and dust all around.  
Either way, you still panic.  
And the boys I kissed.

Shot in the head.  
Dead or ruined in the hot desert,  
avenging this . . .

Thing.

This.

You lay in your lover's arms,  
trembling at the enormity.  
Shock visible on your skin,

like tiny ripples  
on the skin of a river.  
How water stretches where it meets the estuary

resisting,  
before it becomes the sea.  
And still that dove-wing sky

leaks in through the windows.  
Time before the terrible future  
becomes now.

The hot skin of your lover  
peels away from your own hot skin.  
Two separate things.

*A plane has flown into The Pentagon.*  
The blue curtains move as you rush past them.  
The television flickers.



## *Longing*

In the tall blue fridge, there is a hunk of unwrapped cheese. A bloom has erupted on the surface, like a caution; like the calm before the mould sets in. I touch the white stuff. It is soft, like the fur on a petal, like the chickish down on his birthmark, which I stroked before I . . .

I was free then. I was searing rods branding thick days.

Now, a precise ice-cold blast of fridge air —

Tragic kitchen scene.  
Mouth stuffed full of mouldy cheese.  
Outside it's winter.

## *Up the Common*

My mother said no —

*Not with those children*

(or any children).

Those children, with their thick South London gobs.

And how we used to weave mazes through undergrowth;  
bushes needling our skin.

Deep clean scent of earth on our knees,  
elbows —

a den of newspapers.

Headlines none of us ever read.

Their red tops,

the yellowing pages.

Spidery letters —

fading girls with the best exam results,  
prettiest faces.

Yellow flowers too,

tiny petals splayed neon stars.

Hot spheres of blue at the very centre.

And all around those children, who were us.

Edgeless, dangerous with possibility.

Our South London gobs were thick,  
like the sky.

## *Hungry Eyes*

You're a feast for the eyes, he says.  
His pupils smack thick green lips,  
hunting sweetness, drooling.  
Buds of teeth sprout in smooth black gums;  
gnawing at my fleshly cheeks —  
that forked tongue dipping in a ketchup of blood.  
Low growls of utter pleasure, not mine . . .  
Ah! Whose delight is whose!? —  
lost in the maul and pain of it  
I'm consumed.

## *He Sees Me*

In the karaoke bar — I'd finished an out of time, out of tune, rendition of the Beautiful South's 'Don't Marry Her' — he pulled my friend to one side — *Who is that?* He said — he was asking about me — he said, *She's incredible* — I heard it — I sashayed away — downed another gin and tonic — I saw how in his eyes my tight arse/blue eyes/shameless extroversion — a desire stew — an incredible revelation — I was the sun breaking into shafts of light — I was the taste of tequila after salt, and then the lime.

*Fuck me.*

*A Haiku About Promiscuity*

Bled on his blue bed.  
The tall one with eyes like tar.  
New one likes it rough.

## *Jackie Rides the Night Bus*

At the back, on crisscross woolen seats, a delicate redhead in a satin kimono reaches into her silver rucksack and pulls out a McDonald's bag, wet with grease.

Jackie slips off her shoes; curls up on the seat like a prawn.

The woman eats the fries, holding each one in her mouth as though it were a straw, dipping her head precisely, like a shorebird, so that the chip is coated in ketchup from the little pot in her lap. Then she sucks it up, chewing gently, so gently, before she swallows.

Jackie feels a wave of nausea, like a warm breeze, the cinnamon flavour of Aftershock coating her mouth, stale music ringing in her ears.

There's a Black punk up front. He's very clean, for a punk. Leather collar covered in spikes, snakeskin Doc Martens, a sharp citrus smell and a green afro. Face full of piercings.

I want to lick him, Jackie thinks, noticing the jammy layer of grime on her own bare feet.

And the white guy with stains on his ripped t-shirt, BO and coarse matted hair across his chest, mumbles about corruption, tries to sell his poems to a drunk businessman, tells Jackie she looks as if she needs a good poke . . .

Of course, Jackie misses her stop. Wakes up at the bus garage with the driver shaking her arm; stumbles out onto the street as the sun breaks open another grey dawn.

*Put Your Hands Around My Neck and Tell Me You  
Love Me*

Like a knife pressed to a throat,  
I hesitate at a terrible threshold.  
My flesh, strange in your hands,  
throbs true as a flame's hot centre.

I hesitate at a terrible threshold.  
Your razor-blade smile, twisting.  
I throb, true as a flame's hot centre.  
I'm not sure, at first, if you see me.

Your twisted, razor-blade smile  
refracted in my wine glass.  
I'm not sure if you see me, at first.  
Your gaze is slant as you laugh.

You are refracted in my wine glass.  
Our friend is telling a bad joke.  
Your gaze is slant as you laugh.  
I feel your hand slide along my leg.

The friend tells his bad joke.  
I laugh in shallow waves.  
Your hand slides along my leg  
with a steady, indifferent rhythm.

I laugh in shallow waves.  
Your wedding ring gleams.  
And that steady, indifferent rhythm  
pushes flat against my longing.

Your wedding ring gleams.  
My flesh, strange in your hands  
pushing flat against my longing;  
like a knife, pressed to a throat.

## *Bad Sex*

The bus red flashes across sleek puddle water/We luxuriate in our voices/A synchrony of glottal stops over the crunch of car tyres/Sirens wailing/And the slow soprano of other people/We stop at this Lebanese place for chicken shawarmas/The watery lemon yoghurt leaks down my fingers/A white yellow rain/You pass me a napkin/Order a cardamom lassi so sweet you pour it down the drain after two sips/We watch it slip through fat bars/Your mum's found this weird mole on her neck, you say/But it's probably nothing/Still, you've been thinking lately about mortality, and how maybe you do want children, after all/I tell you my dad won't leave the house these days/Not since that thing with the ducks/Suck the yoghurt out the claw of my ring/Topaz, which I think passes for diamond/If you don't know the difference/(And most people don't)/When our phones ring we switch them to silent/Finish our shawarmas leaning against a decommissioned phone box/Share a cold can of coke/The graffiti on the wall opposite reads BAD SEX.



## *Out Loud*

The rounds of my body  
Stomach,  
Eyes, mouth, pores, cervix  
Open utterly  
Screaming.

*All My Fears Now Are for My Daughter: A Sestina*

Death, that was the big one —  
the eternal hiatus, waiting.  
I stared down its cleft to oblivion,  
terror at my throat like terrible vomit,  
and the acid bubbling in the devil's pit  
spat back.

The thing is, you are only half-aware as he rolls back.  
You are not thinking about death or the way one  
thing leads to another. The smell from his armpit  
stains the air and the dreaded waiting  
for him to say something rises. That terrible vomit.  
*It's not me he wants, you think, it's oblivion.*

Then, *Sorry Mum*, as the thwack before oblivion  
shatters all my futures. Time winding right back  
to how just before you were I used to vomit  
your fullness from my belly, darling one.  
Long years; purple loneliness and all that waiting.  
Then they plucked you from me, like a jewel from a pit.

Now he digs in the mud, shovels a deep pit  
where he'll sling you to rest your final oblivion,  
as I stand by the window, as usual, waiting.  
No thoughts in your head now. No winding things back  
to the point you could have said not this one,  
I don't trust his gait; his stench makes me want to vomit.

In court, he stands over a bucket of vomit —  
as though he might retch a not guilty from his stomach's pit.  
On the stand, an American girlfriend says he was The One.  
She shrugs an apology, stares off, bewildered, into oblivion.  
She's wondering how she never noticed, yet at the back  
of her mind, there was drumroll foreboding, frenzied waiting

for God knows what — all her life perpetual waiting.  
Grieving mothers heaving, spattered grief-vomit.  
This is what it means to love without going back

to an era when death seemed the blackest pit  
from which, no escape, the final oblivion  
turns out to be this one.

I stand in my living room playing back your videos. I'm waiting  
for the big one. Love's pressure rises like vomit.  
In my heart I dig a pit. Sleep there darling, fall into oblivion.

## *Ties*

Here goes the sickening tug as I untangle myself from what I'm bound to/Desperation's drip-drip; your voice, syrup-clogged with blame/I rub my dry fingertips together and focus on the sandpaper sensation/This guttural writhing/A childhood flash/All subject to your whims/Countervailing manipulation with manipulation/My own acid way/Burn through the resistance/Brand this scorched earth.

## *Slip Up Number Five*

It was a mistake.

He'll say this about you, later,  
to his wife.

Maybe even to his buddies.

Himself.

A mistake.

It sits on the screen like a relief of truth.

You know it, even as he moves his tongue up inside you;  
even as he insists that you keep the lights turned up.

He wants to see his mistake in the flesh —  
even

the smell of old Chinese food,  
wafting from the bin in the corner,  
the heat moving against the walls.

Inside and out.

The world burning all around.

It was a mistake,

he says.

The way your bodies changed shape to fit.

You said, I get it;

as if allowing his skin to move against your skin was the betrayal,  
and not the way the universe cracked the possibility of this moment

open,

like the egg of a sea.

## *Jackie Visits a Launderette in New York*

1.

When she was sixteen, her hair hung past her shoulders, a dreamy chestnut mane with copper streaks that glowed in the sun and invited unwanted caresses from her father's friend Paul.

2.

*You'll have to cut this*, he said, *When you're forty and old. Hair like this don't suit old women.* And he took a long drag on a Benson & Hedges and offered the open packet with one hand while he held her hair with the other, balancing his cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

3.

They smoked like that, side by side. He held her hair, weighing it in his palm, as though it were made of gold. As though maybe he could sell it for beer money.

4.

Tonight, her hair is heavy still, and it's summer, and her heavy chestnut hair is damp with sweat. And she's forty already and doesn't yet feel old. The vast machine drums turn her clothes over and over. Tall windows steamy and vibrating.

5.

Earlier, jaded from the day, she sorted her clothes into piles according to fabric and colour. And as she held a pair of silk knickers up, inspecting the gusset, a group of Chinese tourists wearing long beige trench coats came into the laundromat speaking loudly in Mandarin or maybe Cantonese and snapping pictures of the washing machines with giant old-fashioned cameras, as though this place was magically implausible — the machines with their massive drums, the sweet hot air from the dryers.

6.

Now, it's just Jackie and a young Puerto Rican woman who is reading King Lear as she waits for her washing to dry, her baby passed out in a broken pram. The static from the dryer is creamy and tense — the way a storm cloud is tense — immense with the possibility of release.

7.

The whole city moist with potential and here she is, folding clothes so fresh from the dryer they burn her hands, thinking about Dad's friend Paul. He's dead, now; left a suicide note speculating that fallout from nuclear war might be escaped in some parts of Spain.

8.

Her silk knickers have shrunk, and her favourite white t-shirt has turned grey. She lifts her long chestnut hair, twists it round her fist and lets it fall back wetly, stepping into the humid night with a hefty bag of clean clothes. Fuck you Paul, you muthafucker.

## *Entropy*

*My son eighteen now*, my manicurist tells me. She's holding the brush from the jar of red nail polish, millimeters from my nail. *My daughter nineteen*, she says, *My daughter work in business*. She paints a stripe of the polish across my nail. In my pocket, there's a plastic elephant my toddler handed me on the way out the door; the same scarlet colour as my nails. Its smooth weight is there against my leg, like the warmth from her foot on my thigh as she sleeps.

Twenty years ago, I sat in this same chair; this same manicurist gluing tiny diamonds to my big, freshly painted, toe. The red she used then was called Tasmanian Devil. She was swollen with baby, sweating with the physical labour of tending my feet. She kept stopping to sip cold water. She flashed grainy pictures of her ultrasound; showing me the whorl of her foetus on the square of mobile screen. The mobile had little diamonds glued to it too.

In the mirror opposite my middle-aged, postpartum breasts sag; my whole fat ageing self. My hands look the same, at least from the bird's eye vantage; only the wedding ring, and the threat of creping. The sag of my manicurist's face too, those tiny coarse hairs just growing back above her lip. And the clotted red polish on the rim of the bottle.



*A Rhyming Haiku About Class*

High class champagne glass  
Middle class amass houses  
Working class don't grass

## *Lifeblood*

Blood/Chunks of what I thought were you, as you really curled into  
the very wall of me/Held fast — you wanted to be here, I hope you  
remember that, hope it catches/Spider's web on synapse/Diverts  
you from the worst thoughts; gets you through the days when  
nothing can get you through the days/And how I wanted you too, if  
it matters/Hands across the lump of you; so afraid as they strapped  
me to machines that your horse-hooved heartbeat would fall  
silent/When they cut me open, pulled you from me, legume from  
muck/The oh no/Your possibility/Your black curls; your sea  
coloured eyes/Each of your ten fingers.

## *Lived Experience*

Smooth as cracks on a South London ceiling;  
I roll over on a new body.

Again, again — what you thought you were —  
rolling on, like a spliff in Gib's room,  
in 2001, or whenever it was.

Fleshier than these women, all bones.

Body is a flesh house.

Home feels clammy, like the other side of truth.

I bend it for my purposes;  
return there when I need to.

The elemental rumble of community —  
authentic spice.

They keep speaking down; my mumbles  
rise up the tall thin streets in writhing echoes.

## *Dispossession*

Light fell through the curtains in ribbons of gold;  
you gave your weight to the cage of my bones.  
The air billowed gently; pleasant and cold.

Sheets on the floor spread in rippling folds,  
my breath rose wetly in quickening moans;  
light fell through the curtains in ribbons of gold.

Summer heat surged, our secrets all told,  
you whispered you loved me; our love was your home,  
as the air billowed gently, pleasant and cold.

Impossible, then, we might ever grow old,  
we lay as idle as sun warmed stones,  
and light fell through the curtains in ribbons of gold.

You by my side and I became bold;  
and the world felt safe, and sexy, and known.  
The air billowed gently, pleasant and cold.

Oh, but

you left

and I won't be consoled

I waited, years, for your call on my phone.  
I remember the light and the ribbons of gold;  
how the air billowed gently, pleasant and cold.

## *New Year's Couplet*

*Year of the Dragon, 1988*

In the courtyard where Crisp Street Market met the estate, low-rise government buildings, pimpled façades glowing white- grey; dirt in pavement cracks sprouted wiry new grass, spiky like chin whiskers. Market's call, *a pound a pound a bananas a pound*, rumbled under a strange piping rhythm and frenzied drums. My gummy hand clasped the buggy where my sister slept. This puppet dragon writhed with the legs of so many people, its mouth, manoeuvred by bamboo sticks, yawned paper flames. Human feet in ornamental slippers scuttered over concrete. Red and yellow pompoms dripped; red lanterns shuddered in the cold's steam. The great serpentine twist of a mouth, eyes were malevolent slits, crescent teeth gleamed cream moons. Not much later, you see, someone tiled that same dragon on the floor of the municipal swimming pool, where we learned to doggy paddle in neon armbands — mosaic blue-green tiles replaced with this ravenous carmine animal whose purpose was the consumption of slim little blonde girls. My banshee defence as this first fear set its electric alive through my body, veins a conductive circuit. I jolted in any direction, away from the terrifying water rippling shapes in contented dragon's breaths, as the dragon's static eye followed me up to the safe vantage of the viewing gallery.

Behind glass, I sucked on Frazzles and sweet Ribena; senses heightened to the cloying syrup, tongue playing at the grazed skin on my thin purple lips — from this ruminative distance my blue eye met dragon's black eye and we nodded in mutual knowing.

*Year of the Tiger, 2022*

Our eyes met. We nodded in mutual knowing. My mouth so dry; her black hair so shocking — dark stripes across nubs of yellow down, the colour of chicks. In the commotion I whispered, *Sorry*, and stroked her furry new cheek; she bared claws, growling.

Stuffed with tiger, I shuffled across Ladywell Fields; cumbersome blimp waiting for the hormone cocktail to kickstart what it must. I smelled of synthetic prostaglandin and natal blood; my hips ached. My long scarf dragged on the ground. Every now and then, surges compelled me to squat, rotating my pelvis, breathing: breathing. In the trees, wires from broken Christmas lights swung like vines. The grass was heavy with old rain. Dirty molten snow dripped from low hospital rooves; mud clung like terror to my white trainers. A little boy streamed down the gummy slide, squealing, *you can't catch me*. Days passed. My boyfriend rubbed the hot pain in my back. In my cell, I writhed on government lino, the whole air a sustained moan. I opened my throat and banshee wailed, vomited in another cardboard bowl; these stinking offerings discarded across the room as I rang and rang the red bell, retching. Still, the tiger slept inside me, her breaths, slow purring — utter contentment. You see, it's not always possible to override nature. I sat very still as the anesthetist plunged a long needle into my spine. Above my aching pelvis the surgeon cut a wide smile and set to work, yanking tiger cub; pearls of sweat glittered on his brow, like he was pulling roots from deep in the earth.

## *Pretty in Pink*

In a locked cubicle, I watched, and two lines turned pink.  
Time stretched its elastic and whole worlds burned pink

The sky curved out as I curved out too, a fertile expansion.  
Tight against the ledge, all my burgeoning edges yearned pink

Life's long loneliness halved, cells expanded, body doubled.  
In sour sweet amniotic juices, a not-yet person gurned pink

Hormones diluting meanness, I laughed my guileless laugh.  
Dipping paintbrush in its pot, nursery walls adorned pink

On the news, a girl, abandoned to the November frost, died.  
Her caterwaul drowned out; yet another family spurned pink

Sucking hot hospital air; retching, air hot as breathing hot fire;  
I beg relief, then needles/slices/tugging, a baby emerged pink

The newness, at my age — say it — a new name: *Mother*.  
Teaching: red, blue, green — see, my daughter learns pink.

## *About the QR Codes*

The poems *Crazy*, *Sket*, and *Yattie* were written in response to rap tracks, using misogynistic insults from the tracks to explore romantic relationships.

Access the tracks by turning on your smartphone camera, or by opening a QR code reader app, then holding the viewfinder over the code until a link appears on your screen.

*Crazy* — “Bonnie and Clyde” by Eminem

*Sket* — “Jezebel” by Dizzee Rascal

*Yattie* — “The Trilogy” by Jehst



## *Previously Published*

The poem 'Serving Officers' first appeared in *Mukoli: The Magazine for Peace*; 'The Blues' and 'Longing' were first published in *Harpy Hybrid Review*; 'Slip Up Number Five' first appeared in *Ennoia Review*; 'A Snapshot 1983' was first published in *Squawk Back*, 'All My Fears Now Are For My Daughter: A Sestina' was first published in *Ballast*.

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Jamie designs and makes everything from theatre props and sets to accessories and drawings.

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## *About this Book*

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