



*January 2024*  
ISSUE NINE

*Ed. Fran Lock*

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VANESSA ACKERMAN ➤ SAM FURLONG  
JP SEABRIGHT ➤ AYSAR GHASSAN

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## INTRODUCTION

When asked if I would edit the ninth issue of *Propel*, I was excited, but also – not gonna lie – a little nervous. I'd been living for a while with an ambivalence toward contemporary poetry, my own and others'. What, in our increasingly precarious and divided world, was any of it actually *for*? This is not a productive place to inhabit, as a writer or a reader. It's not an especially fair place to start as an editor. At the beginning of the process I was painfully aware of this. I badly wanted to reconnect to the practice of poetry as something purposeful, urgent and surprising, but I worried that I wouldn't be able to meet the submissions on their own terms, to read them with the openness and generosity they so richly deserved.

Turns out, I needn't have worried: reading those submissions would prove to be a uniquely galvanising experience. Going through each piece in turn I was struck in the best possible way by the breadth and potential of poetry, its ability to see around corners, to tell it slant, to open trapdoors in perception and experience. I found myself scribbling furiously, nodding along, punching air. Reading these submissions was not a passive or static activity for me; it was intensely kinetic, as if my readerly body needed to physically respond to the excess energy of the poems themselves. I'd forgotten that reading could feel like that.

Of the thousands of poems received from over three-hundred poets, I found myself most drawn to the large number of works that were variously haunted; that trafficked in supernatural agencies, magical transformations, off-kilter images, feral and spectral survivals. We live in a haunted world, amidst the global wreckage of colonialism: its legacies of injustice, its ecological footprint, its psychic and material shrapnel. We are sorely in need of alchemy. The twenty poems I finally selected provide precisely that space of transformational possibility. They signal poetry's ability to unmake old realities and imagine new ones. They hold our world – and our language – up to the light; they give us an otherwise.

As Seamus Heaney wrote in *The Government of the Tongue* (Faber, 1988), there is a paradox at the heart of poetry: ‘In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.’ At the end of the editing process, this is where I’m at too; in that much-needed space of concentrated listening and retuned ethical attention; surprised, provoked, tickled and chilled. Immensely grateful too.

— Fran Lock  
January 2024

# THE FIRST 7 DAYS AS A WITCH

Natalie Moores

Day 1: Turn you into a witch so we can do this fresh new life together

Day 2: Beam green at the mountaintop

Day 3: Work up courage to remove a newt's eye (me) and a frog's toe (you)

Day 4: Cry almost all day about the newt (me) and the frog (both)

Day 4 (much later): Eat a child, whole

Day 5: Put that man's name in a deep chest so no one can hear his shrieking

Day 6: Bristle at the ghouls at the base of our necks. Some witch business feels familiar

Day 7: Hold tight to who we were and who we are. Soar.

## EXILE

Vanessa Ackerman

The building where my children were born  
has no scent  
and one of the walls  
is always crumbling

A long time ago my friend told me  
how he feigned madness to avoid  
conscription:  
I'd eat the whole cake  
even if the others were starving  
even if they begged me to share it

I wish my children could live  
under their own dirty sun  
the mornings here are haughty  
You'd better behave, none of this nonsense  
Share the last slice



## SKYLIGHT SEX

Flora Leask Arizpe

...rain to be sucked from the palm, viscous rain, luxury rain, rain that resounds on the skylight, sly-slinking-grey rain, forming rain, filling in the divots rain, changing the body with each drop of rain, carving from stone rain, turning out the light rain, heading to the pool rain, steam room rain, running around in swimsuits rain, the smelling rain, the dirtying rain, the bringing it floating closer to the surface rain, rain to be written about, the waited for rain, the waiting to abate rain, never coming to an end only ceasing for a moment rain, the mixing rain, mothering rain, the common caring rain, the run for shared shelter rain, the wet leather rain, the kiss it from your glass rim rain, the local rain, the dead tree in the graveyard rain, a single drop on the ink black branch rain, the clear glass marble petal ambulance siren autumn evening pavement eddy tarmac cleansing hair curling rain to be sucked from the palm of the hand of one you love after you run from it with luxurious laughter and after under the open skylight feel the divots of each other's changed bodies like weathered stone carvings with the lights turned off rain...

## A WORMHOLE IS

Debmalya Bandyopadhyay

An imaginary tunnel through space and time, as Papa had explained to me seven springs after my birth. I was disappointed that it wasn't a home for worms. How I wished it was a room cocooned in mud, where the Papa worm comes back home early evening and smokes a cigarette by the window. Next to him, Mama worm knits a scarf with the last of daylight. Between them, just a lost gaze reflecting the bedroom bulb's insincere mellow.

Since then, I've folded myself in crevices. Like an animal inching through the heart's charcoal tunnels, a refugee dreaming of another home. My rooms are now filled with the damp songs of absence, each note an elegy to the past. All I've learnt of the worm is that no matter how bright the world outside, it crawls into a hypnotic dark: the body's lyric hooked to that magnetic tune, offering itself as a lantern.

# A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE FURIES

Katherine Collins

1. When women
  - a. call out for the dread, is it you who answers?
  - b. rage fruitlessly, is it you who bear it?
  
2. What may we infer from the fact that your awfulness begins
  - a. with the sound of awe?
  - b. and ends in repletion?
  
3. Do you customarily torment men because they made you as the personification of their deepest shame
  - a. and is that why you are exquisite?
  
4. Why did you steal torches from a funeral?  
- now we reach the essence of the poet's current preoccupation
  
5. Was it a punishment to the deceased? What had they done? Was it something to warrant
  - a. extinguishing the lights
  - b. [at] their funeral?
  
6. And finally, like torches, does rage burn out or up?

# OMEN

Meredith MacLeod Davidson

The process of learning a bird  
is the promise of learning a place

chirp or caw, whatever seasons morning  
waiting on the hurricane taking a switch

blade's hook East out of character  
the morning she left Virginia

blood and mash on her  
doorstep splayed cardinal

# HOMO HOMINI LUPUS

John Keenan

'Cause you revealed to them your vulpine side,  
revelling, your pride and power propelling  
your legs through the forest of bar stools;  
'cause you were regarded by drooling she-wolves,  
green eyes blazing, carnassial teeth bared,  
the smell of lust smeared on every surface;  
'cause you dared to dance, a stranger in that  
alien place; they took you out and taught  
a fundamental lesson.

They pinned you  
to the wall, tore your hide, pushed your belly  
on the ground; they poked and probed,  
snarled and snatched, scratched, until you were nothing,  
a bleeding bundle of holes, meaningless,  
meaning: homo homini lupus.

# YOU COME THROUGH THE SOIL

Jon Alex Miller

*After 'You come through the needle' by Gagan Gill,  
translated by Kushal Khandhar.*

you come through the soil and I through the trowel  
love sometimes I through the soil and you  
through the trowel what work is this we do  
love together through the centuries  
what digging is this that does not finish  
we throw around our sweat and laugh waiting  
for galaxies to fall through our shovels  
onto the dirty sheets of our messy bed  
the days have gone love all the years too  
no end in sight love this bed has no edges  
sometimes the soil  
sometimes the trowel  
what garden of stars turns turns with our toil

# I DON'T WANT TO BE A WOMAN

Charlotte Murray

*After Fae Horsley*

I want to be a slug.

I want to meet my glistening doppelgänger  
on a hardness of branch, our bodies  
mirror images of each other,  
slippery palindromes.

I want to feel the damp sheet of evening  
drawn loosely around our coupling:  
not two halves locked in a semblance of whole,  
but a full set in ourselves. Each part of us  
understanding each part of the other.

I want us to marble the dark mulch  
with tiny wet eggs. Two carryings, two layings,  
my slime coating both. Afterwards, I want to sprawl  
like a miniature seal on a beach of moss.  
Just a slug. Not a gender.

## DEAL

Rachel Chanter

September and praying away the ringlight glare of summer O unmaking of me, o rictus of fume The midjourney plasticity of the hot city retreats, now the creeping saint of the new season claws at the space under the door But today is a camera mounted on a falling object, so the world turns around it, fulcrum of happiness, cockle-sweet after the jumperless days in which my callousness has surprised me A week of stunning heat, then the weather breaks over the coast like the feeling returning to a limb, the first drops hitting the asphalt of England The offshore windfarm is a distant Avalon, greyed with grape-bloom horizon, and a peace so complete descends that no question troubles me, not even how long will you love me, not even how many days like this do we have left to us.



# SELF-PORTRAIT AS MY GHOST, WHO WILL EVENTUALLY HAUNT YOU

Rachel Bruce

I am a half-formed notion,  
a pin you think you've stepped on but cannot find,  
a wanton breeze tending to your cheek.  
You have forgotten me even as you walk into the room  
you came to find me in.  
I see the way you scratch your nose when you are alone.  
I sit in the back of the cupboard, reading ingredient lists  
and crying into vitamins.  
I backpack between rooms  
threaded to your shadow by a strand of your hair.  
Mine is still red — death does not revert you to factory settings.  
I am a hermit crab refusing to change its shell.  
I am the empty film in your camera,  
the defunct intention to capture a moment.  
I cannot touch my fingers to your hand,  
instead I tug pathetically at your bedcovers,  
paw at the lights to make them flicker.  
I do not know what you believe.  
I wish I knew how you thought of me,  
your smile a spiral shell upon my back.  
Sometimes there is a light. It comes from the fridge  
but is darker, cooler.  
I have to hide away on those days,  
must not let it find me curled inside your jumpers.  
Haunting is like burning eggs and having to eat them.  
But better to be this non-thing  
than to have you vanish from me,  
to have lost you in the way  
I always feared I would.

## HE NEVER GOT BACK TO ME

Finola Cahill

I check my email	I wish I hadn't mispronounced her name,
I check my email	multiple times. I dream of flagstones falling
I check my email	from the sky, wake up chugging, chesty from/
I check my email	in traffic congestion. Hugo is serious,
I check my email	at 2, already. How does time create us?
I check my email	Rilke seems to suggest we savour it, time,
I check my email	ephemeral passage, the waiting. I can't,
I check my email	that night, we spoke about age. Your 40s,
I check my email	the racing speed of years. I made a glib comment,
I check my email	something about botox. You reminded me
I check my email	the issue is dying, you said, the worry is death.

# ST NICHOLAS REFUSES HIS MOTHER'S MILK ON FASTING DAYS

Aysar Ghassan

A boy in a tiny gingham collar, caramel gelled furrows parting his straw-coloured hair, gives me the finger through the bottom half of the front passenger window of his mother's smart German saloon.

Boys, dots on playing fields, too close to the woods, running from older boys with more developed quadriceps, hoping to make it home before getting their heads kicked in. Each, the apple of mother's eye, a gemstone pocketed on the exodus from Eden, kissed on both cheeks by aunts jostling for position.

## NEW BLOCKS

Dorothy Spencer

i think about those shadows a lot,  
long thin and cruel  
like the slender hands  
of a well-known baddie  
what could be worse really,  
practically & poetically than  
taking the light away from someone -  
no more sunflowers in the front,  
those afternoons spent following  
the sun patch around the bed,  
like a clock handle  
now light falls like  
deadly pennies from 16 floors up -  
they don't kill you, you know  
but will make you feel worse,  
sadder and meaner with a constant  
bother in your head  
and just now comes the wind  
racing crisp packets round like  
rabbits at the track,  
an empty wotsits bag clinging to your skirt  
and it never used to blow like this round here  
the rubbish used to stay in the bins  
all this shadows and wind - we're in  
a dark and whipped up neighbourhood now  
and they have the cheek, loudly  
to wear yellow

# THE BEATIFICATION OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

Sam Furlong

Unlike the plague-boys who whipped themselves to salvation outside the churches, Catherine of Siena knew the value of private pain. She cruised to sleep with a sharpened pike for clandestine castigation.

*Here is my body*, she told Him, *may it be an anvil for Thy beatings*. In her final days, only the Eucharist passed her lips; happy to live and die on his flesh alone.

When there is too much desire and not enough God, we must turn something inward— a pike or an appetite.

(I always wait for my dates to use the bathroom before I swallow

The last of my dinner.) Still, Catherine learned early

they would never make her a priest or a prophet

but if she died well enough, she would be granted a word that looks both like beautiful and beating.

# REDEEMER

Hetty Cliss

I'm not sure why a redemptive origin story  
for a woman who skinned spotted dogs  
was deemed necessary but *Disney*  
must have sensed an appetite for it.

When Villanelle brutalises her targets  
we half-smile, satisfied. Almost smile  
with her when Eve hacks away  
with the axe at the end of season two.

Rule 101: Action must be character-driven.  
Let screens be flat palms that deliver apples  
equal parts sweet and sharp. Let us understand  
motivations, untangle lives lived before

the car chase, the explosion, the quivering  
embrace, the knife slipped in and under  
the rib cage. Complexity enough to muddy  
whose impulses are right, whose wrong.

You slowly expose me to your backstory  
in long episodes, uncut. Had you ever  
chosen to pull out a gun, let its opening  
kiss my temple, I'd have likely joined

the chorus, the imagined audience  
as they whisper: *let the bitch have it.*

# SHAM

Gwen Sayers

Malingerer/ tag applied by Dad/ my father in heaven said/ *malinguel*  
malign/ *nein*/ maladjusted/ malfeasance/ of *faisant*/ an act/ bad act/

*gib uns heute unser täglich brot*/ not a lot/ too much bread/ foie de gras/  
makes a fat cat/ fatted calf/ fatling/ fatality/ Jack Sprat's wife/ fatuous/

born me/ a woman/ emasculated man/ drag king/ emperor's clothes/  
propagator/ egg-shedder/ self-shredder/ needy/ needer of men

to feed/ breed/ lack/ matter of action/ *you can fool some people*  
*all the time*/ those in high places/ you can tell them anywhere/

but can't tell them anything/ little boy blue come blow your horn/  
the sheep's in the meadow/ the cow is forlorn/

*you can fool all the people some of the time*/ those who accept labels/  
badges/ titles/ entitlement/ claims/ claimant's call/ cry/ clammer/

conman/ con-woman/ con-both/ convince/ cunning/ conned/  
*you can't fool all the people all the time*/ not when you're wrong/

crooked/ twisted/ *nie reg nie*/ incorrect/ erroneous/ wolf  
in sheep's clothing/ poisoned chalice in the closet of life.

# CORRIGENDUM

JP Seabright

*After Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo*

For: *everything is fine*, read: *everything is fire*

For: *hatreds*, read: *hat trends*

For: *coup d'état*, see also: *cup of tea*

Ditto: *panellists* = *penalties*

For: *angels*, read: *bagels*

For: *family*, read: *famine*

For: *accelerate*, see also: *ancestor*

For: *contested*, read: *consented*

For: *visitor*, see: *visor*

For: *unite*, read: *smite*

Ditto: *picketing* = *ticketing*

For: *our rooms are not equipped with irons*,

Read: *our rooms are not equipped with icons*

For: *mosquitos*, see also: *inquisitor*

For: *the power of the ballot*, read: *the power of the hello*

For: *images*, see also: *things*

For: *read the signs*, read: *read the sighs*



# THE MEN IN COMPANY VANS WHO GIVE LIFTS TO AWAY MATCHES

Patrick O'Donoghue

Of Sons and Co. and Ltd.

The slide door, the bandy gait – the inheritance.

Hauling nothing but hauntology,

and the leaden babel

of too many kids to pretend to love equally.

Toughened glass panels

reinforcing the bone zone behind driver's seat

factotums safe and serene

in a shatterproof surround.

But now even the road studs turn red

as those marmalising matchday manias.

Figments of a flag-flying halcyon flicker

like target fixation on an infinite bend.

Nails and screws rust

and rattle for their steel deliverance.

Beyond the clubhouse cloister,

the birthday bottle bores

and DIY dignity,

awaits a structure fallen to bits.

What strange birds have since

nested in the old treehouse

that came long before the van

and all it took to be a man?

## QUEER CLIMATE

Julia Ireland

I run hot in a cold country,  
heard a butch poet today,  
ran hotter. Her hairline's  
a protest, she fights my fight  
and even I flinch at her use of line  
breaks. A statement in every  
full stop, the world fears her  
jawline. She could take this town,  
this country, your body.

What's being queer got to do with climate change?

Ask a Roman when their empire  
fell off the earth. Ask her across the street  
who tosses the word gay  
like a can out a car window.

Bold print says World on Fire. I say  
the Ice Age is creeping near  
and the warmth of our neighbours  
dropping a degree each year.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**NATALIE MOORES** is a poet from Manchester living and working in London. She won the Overton Poetry prize in 2018 with her debut pamphlet collection, *Single Girl Lies Hidden*, published shortly after in 2019. Her work has been featured in various publications both in print and online including *Shooter Literary Magazine*, *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*, *Coronaververs Collective*, *Best of Manchester Poets*, *Agenda*, *Poet and Geek*, Medusa's Laugh Press (USA) and many more. She's also both a keen spoken word performer and creative writing workshop facilitator alongside the day job of running her own creative branding studio.

**VANESSA ACKERMAN** is an actor, writer and educator based in Cambridge, UK. Her plays include *Love No Country*, *The Many Lives of Clara M*, *Saturn Return* and *Three Glorious Days*, and her poems have appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Barren Poetry*, *Marble Poetry*, Cephalo Press Anthology *Borders and Belonging*, *Flights of the Dragonfly*, *Dreich Magazine* and *Anthropocene*. She was a 2022/23 Mercury Theatre Playwright. Her collection *Small Rebellions* won the 2023 Dreich Classic Chapbook Competition.

**FLORA LEASK ARIZPE** is a writer based in Scotland. She has had short stories and poems published or forthcoming in several publications such as *Gutter*, *Interpret Magazine*, *Contraalytic Interdisciplinary Philosophy Journal*, and *Outcrop Poetry*.

**DEBMALYA BANDYOPADHYAY** is a BIPOC writer based in Birmingham, UK. His poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Anthropocene Poetry*, *The Hooghly Review*, *CounterClock*, *Spacebar Magazine*, and *Subterranean Blue Poetry*, among other literary journals. He has lived by the rivers Ganga, Kaveri, Teesta, Rhea and Thames.

**KATHERINE COLLINS's** poems have appeared in *The Rialto*, *bath magg*, *Shearsman Magazine*, and *Finished Creatures*, among others. In 2022, her collaboration with composer Christopher Cook won the Rosamond Prize and in 2023 she was highly commended in the Plough Prize.

**MEREDITH MACLEOD DAVIDSON** is a poet and writer from Virginia, currently based in Scotland, where she recently earned an MLitt in Creative Writing from The University of Glasgow. Meredith has work published or forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *Poetry South*, *Lone Mountain Literary Society* and elsewhere, and serves as senior editor for *Arboreal Literary Magazine*.

**JOHN KEENAN** is a poet, journalist, musician, and life model. He lives in Brighton.

**JON ALEX MILLER** (he, him) lives in London with his husband and dog. He has poems published in *Acumen*, *Acropolis*, *Atrium* and *Magma*. He works with big businesses on climate change and social justice.

**CHARLOTTE MURRAY** won the Silver Prize for Poetry in the Creative Future Writers' Award 2023. She has also been placed in the E.H.P. Barnard Poetry Prize, Bangor Literary Journal's Forty Words Competition and the East Riding Festival of Words Poetry Competition. She has been published in various magazines and anthologies, including *celestite poetry* and *Mancunian Ways*. She is a member of Hive Poetry Collective. Twitter/X: [@charlouwriter](https://twitter.com/charlouwriter).

**RACHEL CHANTER** is a poet from Lancashire. Her poems have appeared in *Neon*, *The North*, and *Terse*, and she has reviewed poetry for *Ambit*, *Oxford Poetry* and *The Compass*.

**RACHEL BRUCE** (she/her) is a poet based in South London. She studied English Literature at the University of Warwick and has been writing since a young age. Her work has appeared in or is upcoming in *The Telegraph*, *Mslaxia*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Atrium*, *Lucent Dreaming* and *Fragmented Voices*, among others.

**FINOLA CAHILL** is a writer from Ballina, Co. Mayo. In 2023 she won the Waterford Poetry Prize and was shortlisted for the Bridport, Fish, and Cheltenham Poetry prizes, and the Listowel Writers Week Collection Award. Her poetry has been published in the *London Magazine*, *An Capall Dorcha*, *Fat Éire*, and others. She is working towards publishing her first collection.

**AYSAR GHASSAN** lives in Coventry and was a 'core poet' at BBC Contains Strong Language, 2021. His poems feature in journals including *Poetry*

*Wales, Under The Radar, Ambit, Magma, The Interpreter's House, Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal, The Lampeter Review* and *Strix*. In addition, they have been broadcast on BBC 6 Music and 5 Live. Aysar teaches Automotive & Transport Design and in 2021 he wrote and narrated a talk on Automotive Design for the BBC programme 'The Essay'. In 2022 he was a Room 204 mentee with Writing West Midlands.

**DOROTHY SPENCER** is a poet and writer from London. She is the former editor at *Lumpen Journal*; who published the first pamphlet in her series *See What Life is Like*. Her work examines with humour, wonder, confusion and disgust the strange configurations of present day human society life; with and their everyday hopes, harms and absurdities strangeness that results. She is part of the 56a infoshop collective, works in community alternatives to (and against) prisons, and as a community gardener.

**SAM FURLONG** lives in Dublin. In 2023, they completed an MA in Poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre, where they were awarded the Ireland Chair of Poetry Student Prize. Their poems appear or are forthcoming in *Banshee, Catflap, Sonder, Poetry Ireland Review* and elsewhere. They were selected for *Poetry Ireland's Introductions* by Tara Bergin.

**HETTY CLISS** is a poet from the Fens in East Anglia and a graduate of UEA's Creative Writing MA. Her poems can be found in *Bi+ Lines*, edited by Helen Bowell and published by fourteen poems, on *New Writing* and elsewhere. She was longlisted for the Fish Poetry Prize 2023.

**GWEN SAYERS'** poems have appeared in magazines including *Tears in the Fence, DMQ Review, Magma, Under the Radar, Unbroken Journal, Ink Sweat & Tears, and Acumen*. She won the Magma Poetry Competition in 21/22 (Judge's prize), and was shortlisted in Buzzwords Poetry Competition and the Flambard Poetry Prize among other competitions.

**JP SEABRIGHT** is a queer disabled writer living in London. They have four solo pamphlets published and two collaborations, encompassing poetry, prose and experimental work. They explore themes of gender, sexuality, trauma and the climate crisis in their work. This poem is inspired by a series of misreadings that Anthony Vahni posted on their (now deleted) Twitter account.

**PATRICK O'DONOGHUE** is a journalist and writer living in Dublin. He works for *The Sunday Times* in Ireland. His poetry has previously featured in *The Honest Ulsterman* and *Wordlegs*.

**JULIA IRELAND** is a queer gardener who is preoccupied with death. She is a death doula in training in order to put this preoccupation to good use. She loves cats, acknowledges that this a lesbian cliché and is working toward her first poetry collection.



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