

Creative Writing Portfolio

Mirrors

King in the avenue of mirrors,
ruler of alien dimensions.
Here and there self and space,
half looking in and out.
Angles of impossibility
interrupted by the high tint
of fly and metal colliding.

Locked in this grey space,
floored in bladed green,
the pacing doppelgängers,
eternal blue eyes staring back at me
like the wait at the end of the world.
Here you cannot see a way out.
Not until your brain snags
on a sudden stillness
that doesn't move with you.

This is what it is in my head:
other people talking different languages,
drifting through without sticking.
Where the wind only blows above you,
away from you,
between the pavement's broken-glass and
the feverish blink of a thousand eyes.
And someone calling your name that isn't yours.

La Seine

On a walk you met La Seine.
I am a river, she said.

People are always so desperate to be something,
You thought. You want to be taller.

I am a stone, you offered half-heartedly,
Je suis marbre, je suis de la craie.

But chalk washes away, she said. Marble cracks.
Most people would prefer to be diamond.

People are like rivers, you said, constantly running
No-where. And diamonds just gather dust.

Rivers go to the sea, she said.
Only to find themselves in streams again, you said,

Fiddling with split ends, like tributaries branching.
Biting them below the split, you considered being a river.

Deciding it's not for you, you make to leave.
Please don't go, La Seine murmurs quietly.

What would you have me do? you ask, shrugging.
Qu'est-ce que tu veux?

Leave me something to remember you by, stone girl,
N'importe quoi. She shrugs too, if a river can.

You think for moments before
Pulling sea shells from your raincoat pocket.

You toss them in, light tiny treasures. Totems.
Take them back to the sea for me, you whisper.

But she doesn't answer.
The shells have already gone.

Rabbit

Like knowing worldly waves beat on worldly shores,
I have a sense of something far away.
Like driving in the dark,
The car lights play on the hedgerows
As deep-sea creatures undulate and glow
In a fabric of dark underworld.
And I see the body of a rabbit in the road.

We rush over it
Like audio recordings of its breath,
Metal death machines playing back
The sounds of fragile life.

I wonder if its little heart jumped:
A cardiogram of serrated trees,
And if it truly froze there,
Right there,
Its life dashed out and disappeared
With the lightning.

I imagine the hit, the cracking,
The landing.
I think of forest fires,
I think of muddied estuaries and
The fading beat of swans' wings.
Its eyes were open, I'm sure.
I think of caves full of lakes and
White fish,
Buried diamonds,
My bedroom mirror.

And did it fall,
The way my darkening hair falls,
The way snow falls or night falls,
The way water falls?
I hope so.

I wonder if it too had the mind of an open sky,
Noticed how beautiful headlights are on the hedgerows,
Or,
Like knowing worldly waves beat on worldly shores,
It had a sense of something far away.

Shape shift

I don't see humans in the wild anymore.
I sleep in my hollow alone.
On one side I am cold bedrock,
Deep lava-shifts of heat in veins,
And the aqua-dark drains,
Leaving only mist snared between the trees.

When the sun hits my bed
I bathe in it.
I am sun-warm beach-shingle.
I don't think of him saying so.
All day I sing at the top of my lungs,
Then I run the way a river runs.

He loved me.
All hands and eyes and deep lava-shifts.
I drank him in like woodsmoke without coughing.
Every month the fury doesn't pass
And the trees bare the marks,
Stretching like nerves to the sky
The way I stretched for him,
His hands on my spine like coming out of the sea.

Under the moon
The forest becomes a vacuum
And I run like blood around a body,
Through concave shadows,
Sound membranes,
Collecting burning words.

Then I return to a world where parallel lines never meet.
In rare moments of sanity small things return.
I watch magpies.
I imagine skin, feathers and scales
But never fur.
I want my old softness back, that touch.

X

in the aftermath of the argument
I have the sudden fierce urge
to open all the windows
let in the cold
so that when I wake up alone old
there's frost on my sheets
ice in my books

they'd like that wouldn't they

the anger returns with the morning
seeing my breath in cold grey light
pulling on dead clothes
I'm pale in the bathroom mirror
I enjoy the sting of Listerine
that chemical alkaline dose

morning purification they'd snigger

I spit blue down the bathroom sink

last night's tears have crystallised
into perfect powder snow
I imagine them skiing down my pillow
whooping

laughing

carving savage Xs in its case

Raindrop

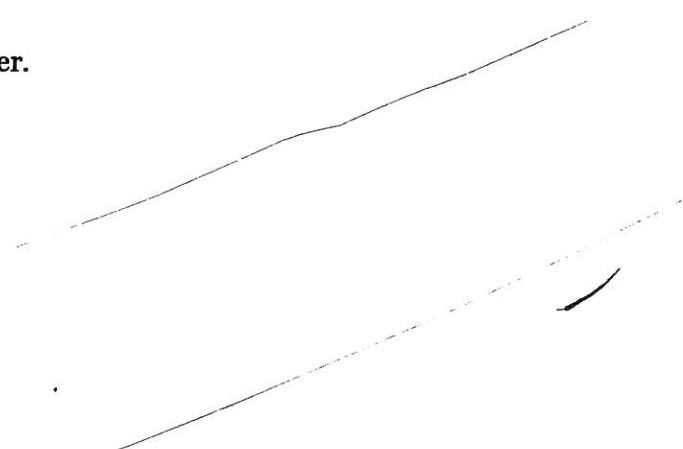
This morning you felt like a raindrop,
Lost somewhere between clouds
And Earth,
Left only with the sensation:

Downwards,
Downwards.

Dread, like falling rain,
Splashed across your shoulders,
Through your hair.
You listened to music to escape it,
Lost yourself in that deep sea place,
Those uninhabited soundscapes.
It stopped you thinking about the landing
For a moment,

But a moment only.

You tried writing in your transparent ink
But nothing came.
The empty page lay in its own useless water.
You felt different,
But when you go outside,
Their eyes,
Like raindrops,
Are all the same colour.



Drift-words

Rubber scrollings, rolled and graphited,
Litter my desk like black sand.
They cling to the wood and my fingers,
Stickier than they were on the page.

Meanings harvested, fused, condensed,
Their dust clogged beneath my fingernails,
Their body parts on my tongue,
They cling like head-lice eggs to my hair.

The pieces blackened
By grey pencil-blood,
The letters murdered
By the rubber's frictional hand.

And their shallow graves left behind,
Handwriting trenches,
A battlefield of looping scrawl,
Soldiers scattered without their lines.

They float aimlessly
Until they wash up in my margins:
Drift-words. Like a plague of locusts
They strip my language.

Gorged and fattened
The rubber has sucked out all my words.
Its larvae, in their dark cocoons,
Wait to hatch again.

Blue Head

Once I went to a party as Megamind. I daubed and scraped on blue paint until my arms were once-painted wood, my hands stained as though I'd washed a clear spring sky. The gigantic balloon head bestowed upon me, crown-like – a bulbous cavity, a thought echo chamber.

At the party my balloon head had its own mind: a brain of sound and paper synapses, neurons of air rushing, colliding, rushing. The head had a higher view of things – it wondered how to learn when there is so much to be taught, how to think beyond its borders of paper and glue, how to become itself.

Below my deadening sobriety made me lonely. I took off the head. Synapses snapped and thoughts escaped, diffused and were lost among drunken noise.

And then you, dressed as Bane. Cloak and head abandoned. Blonde hair stroked bare blue shoulders.

*Wrap me up blindly,
Hold me like a nutcracker
And paint your face blue.*

Creative Writing Commentary

In the last year I have concentrated on writing poetry, having written a small collection as part of the AS. I was torn between poetry and prose, but after writing 'Bedside Traveller' last year I felt that I'd unlocked something new and interesting, whereas prose felt very familiar. I felt that poetry opened a door for me that meant I could write both about myself and create voices and personas without backstory or narrative. Furthermore, with poetry I felt as though there was more scope to explore form and language, something I experimented a lot with while writing my coursework.

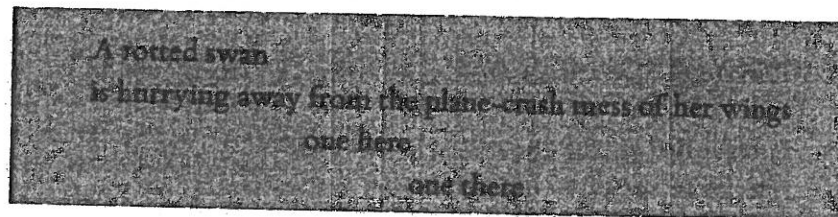
A lot of my poems are, whether it's obvious or not, based on something that happened in my life or something that I saw or felt. For example, I had just had an argument before writing 'X', 'Blue Head' is about a party I went to and the sight of a road-kill rabbit on a night-drive inspired 'Rabbit'. I particularly liked the image of the dead rabbit in the road but was at first unsure how to present it: I tried it from the perspective of the rabbit but I imposed human language on the rabbit's mind. This was a problem because I thought to write authentically I'd have to find a way of writing like a rabbit. Instead, by writing it in a human voice, I could explore what it was that I found so striking about the experience: imagining 'the hit, the cracking, the landing', and articulating the rabbit's pain. I did this through images of 'forest fires' and the 'fading beat of swan's wings' to convey the searing pain and its disappearing heartbeat. In 'Rabbit' the first two lines are repeated at the end with only a slight word change (from 'I have a sense...' to 'It had a sense...'). I found this technique in Luke Kennard's collection *the harbour beyond the movie* in the poem 'Nut Factory' where he does the same to evoke the tedium and repetition of factory work. I adapted this to convey ideas of mortality and connection in 'Rabbit', as the structure of the poem begins where it ends, neatly reflecting the life cycle.

Form and structure are things that change a lot during my writing process as, when I first come up with an idea, I write the poem very quickly without properly considering line breaks. The poem that changed most dramatically between drafts was 'Drift-words'. Originally it was a two part poem that focused more on my struggle to write than the act of rubbing out, whereas later it came to be centred on the latter idea. After being told by the poet Malika Booker on an Arvon Writing Course that the 'fresh' idea and the poem's energy was in a single stanza, I scrapped everything but that stanza. The next day, having written the new version, the issues were form and language based. It was pointed out to me that my stanzas, of random lengths at this point, easily grouped themselves into quatrains. With some moving around and cutting the poem became far more stable and the ideas more concise, but the form also added stability and order that it lacked in earlier drafts. I enjoyed this method because it showed me another way of approaching the editorial process and thinking about form.

The other issue was one word: 'shards'. What I wanted was a single word to describe the pieces of rubber that come off as you rub something out, but even 'pieces' didn't work. I tried 'shards', 'bits', 'shavings', 'rubbings' but none of them conveyed succinctly the image I wanted. Eventually I invented 'scrollings' because of the way the pieces are rolled up by friction. In hindsight, even 'scrollings' may not

work because it evokes the image of paper rather than rubber, but I liked the connection with writing that 'scrollings' suggests.

The poem 'X' also changed a lot in the final drafting. It began without any punctuation; something that was criticised by the Creative Writing Workshop because they felt it was needed to give it its proper rhythm. However when I submitted it for the second time the sporadic punctuation didn't work either – it had to be all or nothing. In the third draft I decided that experimenting with line breaks and shape would be a better way to ensure the reader knew where the pauses needed to be – as such, the spaces in 'X' became far more extreme to emphasise these pauses and turns. I took some guidance from Alice Oswald's *Falling Awake*, such as the poem 'Swan' where there is no punctuation at all:



The shape of the poem on the page guides the reader as to where they need to breathe and pause. This is particularly evident in the lines 'one here' 'one there'. The diagonal spacing slows down the reading after the busy second line, settling it like the swan on the water. I then used this in 'X':

I imagine them skiing down my pillow
whooping

laughing

carving savage Xs in its case

Where I would normally just put commas, I instead used line breaks and space to avoid punctuation, so that 'whooping' and 'laughing' visually follow on from each other with the same fluidity as with a comma. It's also a visual depiction of the 'skiing' as the words are arranged across the page a bit like skiers. Having written several poems before 'X', I wanted to try this technique of spatial punctuation to broaden my writing style.

Where the form of some poems changed a lot during the editorial process, as above, I decided to write some in stricter structures that challenged me to keep within their boundaries. 'La Seine', written in couplets, features an argument between the French river and a girl. I found the couplet structure worked very well for this because I could give a couplet to each voice in turn, so that the form mirrored the argument. I'd been thinking for a while about writing a poem in, or partly in, French, but hadn't come up with an appropriate premise. I liked the idea of writing in another language because the soundscape of my poems are very important to me – using French was a way to vary the tones and sounds in my writing. It also distanced the voice of the river from that of my own. This is perhaps the reason that 'La Seine' is one of my favourite pieces because it's not in my voice. Of course, writing in a foreign language had boundaries: my French is limited (I'm not fluent) and the poem

had to be understandable for those who didn't learn the language. Feedback from the Creative Workshop was that the quantity of French was just right.

It was also the first time I had ever written dialogue in a poem. I'd been reading a lot of Luke Kennard at the time, who uses dialogue in a majority of his poems, inspiring me to do the same. In 'The Elements', a series of four short prose poems, Kennard stages interviews with a wave, a breeze, fire and a clod. I think I subconsciously assimilated this concept of talking to inanimate objects and used it in 'La Seine', where of course the river can talk. 'The Elements' also demonstrates perfectly the strangeness of Kennard's written dialogue, for example he asks the breeze 'Is Absurdism a term with which you are comfortable? Do you wish to distance yourself from the more capricious, fanciful elements of that tradition?' and 'Is your work surreptitiously misogynistic?' I find Kennard's dialogue completely absurd, and although it must have a deeper meaning I never get what it is. In 'La Seine' I wanted my dialogue to be unusual and metaphorical but not to leave my readers completely at sea. Therefore, I kept a simple register throughout because I felt that the use of French and the ideas discussed were abstract enough.

'Blue Head', a haiban, was the only poem with stricter rules of form than 'La Seine'. The haiban was described to me as a way of showing the reader a panoramic view with the prose, before zooming in or concentrating on one idea through the haiku. This meant writing both my first prose poem and my first haiku. The haiku didn't prove a challenge but my prose required a lot of stripping down before I was happy with it. I liked the idea of the head as a 'thought echo chamber' and decided (in later drafts) to take a more literal approach, actually giving the head 'its own mind'. I think using the haiban form mirrors the division between the head and its wearer (and the wearer and the rest of the party) because of the contrast in tone between haiku and prose. However the thoughts of the head, like the arguments in 'La Seine', are quite abstract for what paper mashe might think about, for example 'how to become itself'. Again, *the harbour beyond the movie* and the technique of giving voiceless objects opinions and questions was, subconsciously, a key influence for 'Blue Head'. In Kennard's poem 'I Am No Longer Your Pilot' when a pig falls out of the sky it says 'Teach me of satire and upper-body strength.' In the same way that the pig wants to learn, the 'head' wants to carve out an identity for itself.

Whilst writing the last few poems for the portfolio, I noticed that most of my pieces, if not all, are about loneliness or identity. However these ideas translated themselves entirely subconsciously into my poetry - I never had the intention to have an overarching theme. There are plenty of examples: the persona's isolated by their 'deadening sobriety' in 'Blue Head', the surprise of discovering you're not unique when 'someone [calls] your name that isn't yours' from 'Mirrors' and the search for a connection with a rabbit's corpse, wondering if it 'had a sense of something far away'. 'Mirrors', the first poem in the collection, is probably most overtly dealing with being alone: the persona is lost in a 'grey space' surrounded by 'pacing doppelgängers'. This poem started out as an exercise in observation, taking inspiration from when the poet Matthew Caley came to talk at our school. He mentioned the practice of flanneuring - the act of wandering slowly and aimlessly around a city - that started in Paris as a protest against the speed of industrial city life (some even walked

tortoises). I wrote 'Mirrors' sat in the middle of a mirror-maze sculpture, only noting particular details that I later manipulated to illustrate how I felt. For example, watching the wind in trees prompted the lines 'where the wind only blows above you, away from you', which conveys the narrator's isolation, as though even the wind is abandoning them and leaving them behind.

I've found over the last two years that influences aren't a big part of how I write – I read a lot of poetry but don't often purposefully copy another poet's techniques. Contrary to this, however, 'Shapeshift' was undoubtedly inspired by 'Little Red-Cap' from Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The World's Wife*. It rewrites the story of Little Red Riding Hood as a parable of twisted adolescent romance where the wolf leads her 'deep into the woods [...] to a dark and thorny place' and reads poetry 'in his wolfy drawl'. I decided to write 'Shapeshift' from the perspective of a werewolf because I really liked the portrayal of seduction in 'Little Red-Cap' and how the wolf is simultaneously presented as human and animal. I found the association of wolves and poetry interesting in 'Little Red-Cap' because language and animals are not usually paired together. This partnership humanises the wolf and somehow exacerbates his otherworldliness, the fact that he isn't human: he has 'a whole wall [...] crimson, gold, aglow with books' at the back of his cave. We recognise his library as human but are reminded by the 'cave' that he is a wolf. I described my wolf's nighttime activities as 'collecting burning words' in order to suggest this closeness between human and animal, as 'words' are a human concept, but also the relationship between wolves and poetry. I liked the idea that from a simpler interpretation, 'burning words' could simply be a wolf's interpretation of smells or the act of hunting.

I also tried to emulate aspects of Duffy's style, particularly her use of rhyme and sound. In 'Little Red-Cap' there is not a regular rhyme scheme, but Duffy uses lots of internal rhymes to give lines pace and rhythm, for example 'One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said' and 'as soon as he slept, I crept to the back of the lair'. I've always struggled with rhyme, writing much more naturally in free verse, but I wanted to at least try to get some internal rhyme into 'Shapeshift': 'veins' and 'drains', and a half-rhyme between 'lungs' and 'runs'. I also used alliteration to group sounds together, such as 'sun-warm beech-shingle'. 'Shapeshift', with its short lines, couldn't support long strings of rhyme in the same way 'Little Red-Cap' can, but I enjoyed creating sound groups and experimenting with it to give my poem new rhythms. The last two words – 'that touch' – are the amended last words from Duffy's poem 'Mrs Midas' ('his touch') in which everything Mr Midas touches, as according to Greek myth, turns to gold. In the last stanza, the werewolf wants her 'old softness back, that touch' as Midas's wife misses her husband's 'touch'. I liked the fact that both women want to have that physical human connection that is comforting and gentle but are haunted by memories of what it used to feel like ('deep lava-shifts' or Duffy's 'his warm hands on my skin'). For the werewolf in 'Shapeshift', the loss of her 'softness', her 'touch', represents the loss of her lover and the gentler, human aspects of her personality, as she slowly becomes more wolf-like.

Writing this collection over the last year has been the most experimental period of my writing, with me trying out multiple new forms and techniques I'd never

even heard of before. It has also given me time to develop my sense of voice, be it a werewolf's, a river's, or mine, so that all my poems feel unique – I didn't want to create a collection with only one narrator. 'La Seine' was a conscious attempt to remove myself from my own writing and create a new voice but the rest of the collection was a chance to explore my own creativity, placing me irrevocably at the centre of my own writing – something I love and the reason I chose poetry.

Word count: 2449
