

the soil has started to shift

WOLFWORDS ANTHOLOGY 2023

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'Carnations', Mitali Gupta

Preface

When we first discussed the idea of a Wolfson poetry anthology, we knew that we wanted this to be a project for the whole Wolfson community. We sent out an open call for original poems and images, welcoming, in particular, submissions around the theme of 'Growth'. That was this year's theme for *Wolfson Explores*, an initiative that brings all constituents of the College together in charged, interdisciplinary dialogue.

What arrived in our inboxes over the term was both surprising and delightful. We noticed how the theme drew out fascinating tensions between the limited and the limitless, potential and fulfilment, the planned and the serendipitous. And what emerges is a shared belief in the power of learning and language for transformation, movement, and collective healing.

We are therefore delighted to present the first WolfWords anthology, *The soil has started to shift*. In the spirit of that dialogue for growth, our title comes from Jonathan Chan's 'Sestina for changes'.

We have both found many delectable lines that we could pick out, but we shall leave these works to speak for themselves, and you to hear what resonates. That said, we shall leave you with this snatch from the opening poem, Philip Ward's journey of transformation from human to bird:

He was a thing poised between heaven and earth,
very nearly a miracle.

We hope that in the liminal, open space of this collection, you will find similar moments of poise and connection.

Caroline Banerjee and Debbie Pullinger, Editors
Wolfson College, Cambridge 2023



'Icy Mornings and the Onset of Winter', Mitali Gupta

The Bird-Man

(Translated from the language of birds)

They say, 'you're only young once',
with a finality that brooks no denial.
But what if they're wrong?

What if you could go round again,
take another turn on the carousel,
do it differently –
do it as a *bird*?

That was the curious fancy that occurred
and came to prey on his mind.

As soon as he'd hit on the notion,
he ring-fenced it in imagination.
So powerful is taboo that it censors thoughts
before they rise to consciousness.

And yet, where was the offence here?
Becoming a bird wasn't so outrageous.
Like a myth, the idea made sense
of contradictions in experience
and bridged the gaps in self-belief.

Unable to find out there
his 'ideal' human form,
he moulded an avian self
from materials within.

Delighting to bathe in moonlight.
he felt grounded as never before.
Still he prepared for take-off,
and there was pleasure
in the texture of pavement underfoot.
He stretched upwards, wishing to appear supreme.
He was a thing poised between heaven and earth,
very nearly a miracle.

PHILIP WARD

Growth

My biology teacher once told me
That growth is a one-way matter,
There was no turning back.
But my memory told me otherwise,
So I set out to visit my past,
Only to find it had indeed grown – smaller!
Whole sections of my life had no record,
Even my words were playing slower.

Where did my memories skip off to?
Some were supposed to be formative,
But they disappeared first,
Then familiar words followed suit.
And today, when I tried to compose a poem,
For Wolfson, I seem to remember,
Even the word 'growth' itself
Shrank away.

JOHN BASTABLE

Reflections

I used to stand on this street corner
Tight and breathless
Fast thoughts and slow sympathy
An intruder, a thief

And now I stand still
Contented and softened
Happy memories and happier still
A free woman, a dream

OLIVIA KIELY

Sestina for changes

resting in the midst of the heat
of summer, perhaps, the turn
in august, july, june, the minute
a message crosses oceans for a friend
promising to call, or to write,
like the wall of text that could fill a book,

what the time ahead might turn
to, might become, the mystery as a minute
builds to an hour, a day, a week. a friend
says to wait six months before you write
to say, 'i'm ready'. each day, you stack book
upon book, fearing the ubiquity of heat

not just the sweat you've known in the minute
of your awakening, but the one every friend
seems to talk about. unwieldy, they write,
unusual here, though not there. they book
flights to places more tolerable in the heat,
travel splashed on a virtual turn.

the soil has started to shift: this friend
gets married, that one moves home. i write
in my journal of old fatigue. the good book
frames the drapes of cautious heat.
my brother is in California. his turn
to make a new home, the minute

gladness begins to makes sense. 'write
often' is tacit in the group chat. book
a car to get around. taste the heat
of a new city. the highways turn
and turn. his absence is felt in minute
detail. like a faraway friend.

against the clock i begin a new book.
against an impulse i hike in the heat.
while discussing a novel i wait for my turn.
while rushing about i come late by a minute.
i remember the fireflies as i speak to a friend.
i remember the changes as i sit down to write.

JONATHAN CHAN

Instructions on How to Grow a Spider

His first heart was ambitious.
It grew too big for his chest
and left him.

So he grew a second one,
but it was small and weak.
He coughed it up over dinner.
Saw it shipwreck on a casserole.

Tired of hearts, he planted a word,
deep in his ribcage – SPIDER –
which kept its proportions,
but every time he was short of breath,
the word beat against his chest.

NICK OSBOURNE

Time and Place

Forty years ago the rain was just as wet;
Twenty years, grey skies and sea were much the same
and bog and rock slipped and greasy underfoot as they are today.
There is peace here, soft grey peace,
Gulls' cry
And the whispering wind in grass.
But little power now to pierce my heart.
The raw jagged edge, high above the sea no longer takes my breath
And I can only glimpse the part of me that I left here.

Since then I have seen the bronze shield of Achilles,
Been burnished by blazing Apollo
and gazed across shimmering Minoan seas.
The warmth and light of another world have entered
And Tir nan Og has loosened its grip.
Dream of my youth
Where is thy wild delight?
The glittering sun on water and soaring hills that float above –
Remain just that.

Tougher now, and polished by the southern sun,
By life and living, edges dulled –
I dream of lazy, shaded days
and warm dark nights where cicadas sing.
But this lost land of mists and water, of rock
And fairy grove,
Is part of me and tints my harder world;
And I do not forget you -
Sunbeam of my soul.

JANE MACFARLANE

God Bless London

Look at the way the sun shafts swallow our city
And spit it out at dawn
Washing every landmark into view

The wheel which doesn't seem to spin
The clock that chimes its tune
Surrounded by The Houses like a necklace made from sandcastles
Where men talk of matters of importance
Over endless mugs of coffee

Take a look at the trains dip dyed in grime
Drowning music from the buskers
Eyeing their top hats void of pennies
While mimes melt golden paint upon their bodies
But people go to theatres
And reek of perfume

See the pigeons pecking gum on the pavement
And every rooftop blackened with soot
Taxis chasing tourists who litter the streets
Arms are brushed on escalators
Everyone glancing at those people kissing
The smell of old memories

Watch soldiers march in a dozen red lines
Drumming loud enough to attract attention from
The policemen and women
In their black vests
Skirting every occasion
Smiling still
For the incident about to happen
Sure to make it on tomorrow's newspaper

RADHIKA GUPTA

Building the Past: a Journey of Growth

Glyn's journey began, a quest to find,
A path of growth with purpose well-defined,
With heart and soul, he sought to understand,
The secrets of the past, and shape the land.

Through dusty tomes and ancient ruins old,
He studied with a passion, pure and bold,
And with each page and every site explored,
He unlocked treasures, waiting to be adored.

With expertise in abbey and priory,
His knowledge shone like a radiant glory,
A light to guide us through the ages long,
And help us find the truth, amidst the throng.

Oh, Glyn, your journey is a precious gem,
A beacon shining bright, amidst the hem,
Of academia's hallowed halls and lore,
And we are grateful for what you explore.

May your life continue to bloom and grow,
And may your light forever brightly glow,
For in your path, we find the way to see,
That growth and grace can lead us to be free.

STEVEN STROUD

The Judas Tree

With one last roseate flourish and several loud creaks
the Judas Tree gave up the ghost.

Some say your leaves were white
until the traitor Judas hanged himself on you,
reddening your leaves with his blood,
and blackening your pods with the darkness of his tormented soul.

But even with your limbs bent low
under the crushing weight of his guilt,
you transformed evil into beauty and sprang back up more beautiful than
ever,
your boughs no longer stained by sin but gloriously arrayed
like an emperor of Byzantium.

Lately, though, with each passing year,
the strain of stretching out your arms began to tell;
and like a latter-day Moses,
tired and drooping limbs held aloft by steel similitudes of Aaron and Hur,
your sun set for the last time.

Hopes of one more year dashed by a fatal fusion of senectitude and
gravity,
we will miss you, Judas Tree, for ever present in our memories
and a myriad of photographs
in which you stood, strong and silent to the end,
an ornament, a rose-pink jewel in a red-brick garden
bringing joy to all.

Farewell.

DAVID GOODE



The Judas Tree', *John Bastable*

The Wake-up Call

Roused by the alarm's quivering tone,
a reflex, well tuned to such unsettling calls,
scored for the dreamer some respite,
as she sank back into the eiderdown
and to a reel of meandering scenes.

Another sound spread out and told that time
was up when a bell nearby began to chime,
echoing its motto there upon engraved:
Ring true, ring true....
And verily, no other call more urgent rang;
each beat struck home and knelled a blow
to a cushioned conscience, snug and safe,
in its lazy frame.

No chance there of another wake-up call
that keeps the dreamer drifting back into
oblivion. The *now* more urgent than before,
it's harsh and real in its demand - get up!

It is the *now* that shapes one's life,
past present gone, future not yet there.
The *now*, an ever-changing presence,
to be lived in with its flow and rhythm
of which the beat is at its heart:
awake, stay a-wake ...

HANNELORE HÄGELE

Lessons

My teacher used to have this rule
That when you were really struggling
To focus, you had to run around the
Whole set of classroom blocks,
And when you came back,
You'd be 'as good as new'.

With only a t-shirt on,
I ran out into the frosty morning,
hooks (white) catching
On my plimsolls,
Cheeks like newly lit fuses.

I return in an instant.
Head pulsing with the air of now.
Only to find an empty classroom,
Morphed plastics,
Desks floating in a bath
of sun.

CAROLINE BANERJEE

IJE UWA (Journey of Life)

This is a reminder that we are all human
All vessels
All vulnerable

That even the littlest things could have the largest impact
And we can make or mar
And build or break

In the heat of every challenge
There is a struggle to find balance
To match the tempo of yet another dance

Of a beat so vibrant
So rapid it leaves many breathless
So ruthless it seems futile to keep going

But we must summon the courage to proceed
To move with uncertainty
To even move with fear
To just move

So, I ask that we choose to be kind
Challenges are inevitable
Support makes them bearable
At the end of it all, we are same

It lies in the fact that we are all human
All travellers
In this journey of life.

ONYEKA AWUNOR

Beauty takes me by surprise

Beauty amongst the rankest rubble grows,
Lilies spring where the filthiest water flows.
This paradox of beauty takes me by surprise,
To find kind Nature blind to all that I despise.

The wasted land that industry defiles,
The spoil heaps that builders leave in piles
The landscape littered with thrown picnic teas
The river carrying plastic to the seas.

Yet violets sprout from odorous piles of trash
A purple phoenix from discarded ash,
The iris from polluted mud erupts, bright
Bugs crawl on leaves which industry blights

Nature fails to see the ugliness at hand
In man's despoliation of the land
She pushes on as if nothing untoward
Creating life where none was to behold.

Beauty amongst the rankest rubble grows,
Lilies spring where the filthiest water flows.
Beauty was there before mankind drew breath
And will endure long after mankind's death.

JOHN BASTABLE

Under our feet

We couldn't see you except when your fruits emerged
from the surface of the soil

We didn't have a name for you – you were neither
animal nor plant

We thought you were parasites even when you brought
us flavours, poisons, visions
Altering our minds to see the connections between
everything in nature

We noticed how you preferred certain soils, or being
near certain trees

Slowly we understood you were your own thing, 'fungi',
a literal class of your own,
performing unseen miracles in the ground, holding on
to the topsoil, sharing nutrients with the plants
It is you providing the connections between everything
growing, decaying, recycling and living again, yourself
outliving and outgrowing all else

Still your supporters were often 'amateurs' and you had not
infiltrated mainstream science with your mycelium
that makes up one third of the world's biomass

Even now we haven't the words to describe you
'on your own terms'
We say you are an economic system for distributing
natural resources, or
We describe your actions as altruistic, connecting trees
in protective relationships

In truth you are more complicated than our language or
our minds can encompass

We are studying you more intently now to
understand how you grow, make decisions, communicate,
reproduce

And all this without a brain, with one and many DNA
signatures, you are at once a collective and a distributed intelligence,
a biological phenomenon

You can help us mend the planet with your trick of
eating anything, digesting waste, recycling rock ...
We offer it all up to you and you will show us the way

You have hijacked us to enable you to evolve
You can take over the world –
indeed it is already yours.

CLAIRE O'BRIEN



'Fungi', Claire O'Brien

Canvas

I used to be white,
Free and pure.

They painted me red,
Chaining me with rules.

They coloured me blue,
Feeding me with norms.

They sprayed me yellow,
Expecting me to comply.

They splattered me purple,
Silencing my thoughts.

They dipped me in orange,
Forcing me into a mould.

They tried to smudge me green,
But I'd had enough of their colours.

I drowned myself in black,
Black as I was white.

YING YUE CHAN

“Babaji”

I have moved to a new city;
a new country, in fact –
it is difficult and glorious,
all at the same time.
You would have liked to visit, I think;
it is small and cosy.
You could have walked everywhere,
like you always did.
You could have come and lived with me;
woken up in the wee hours,
like you always did.
I have a small kitchen;
you could have made your morning tea,
before leaving for your walk,
like you always did.
The marketplace has flowers
and fresh fruits too;
sometimes when I visit, I smell and choose
those that look most fresh
(but are not sprinkled with water)
like you always did.
Sometimes I forget how far I have come –
I am not always proud of myself.
But I know, had you been here,
you would have walked the streets
of this magnificent city
that I have come to call home,
and been so proud of me,
like you always were.

MITALI GUPTA

“Babaji”, as I called my grandfather, passed away two years ago
amidst India’s difficult fight with the pandemic.



'Innocence', Claudia Brown

Growing together

Little by little with others we grow,
With pace and with mettle we row,
Seeds with love and care we sow,
Little by little like trees we grow,

Through trials and hardship we flourish,
The bonds made together we cherish,
As the threads of lives interweave slow,
Across the tapestry of time-flow,

Our thoughts and actions brought in-line,
With tempered heart and open mind,
Through solidarity and integrity we bind,
To reach together the zenith we all pine

ARUNGOPAL KANIAPPAN PERIAKARUPPA

Ars Poetica

A line, from Horace, reaches
a struggling wordsmith,
untrained in the craft
of casting gems
of thought.
Words easily jam or
find no form for pouring into.
Precious spillage
slipping away from
a craft's dire discipline.

HANNELORE HÄGELE

Tears of Happiness

How the growth of knowledge defeats the growth of cancer.

Sachin studied, working hard, was always keen to shine,
And he played hard and bopped away, but always drew the line.
Between a lifestyle shared with owls, and greetings every dawn,
And meeting every deadline set, a Wolfson star was born.

So Sachin is a graduate, of Wolfson College now,
He's stood before the President, and given a deep bow.
His parents, they were really proud of what their boy had done,
'He's ours! He's ours!' they yelled out loud. 'He is our special son!'

For they had watched their little boy, from cradle to Senate House,
Grow strong and wise, and beat the odds, no longer 'Little Mouse'.
For that was what the bullies said, when he was young, at school,
But now he's grown and shown the world, he is nobody's fool.

Sachin, he showed we all can win, forget the word 'imposter',
And now he strides out in the world, ambitions for to foster.
His mother watches from afar, her heart is full of pride,
She cries her tears of happiness, her husband by her side.

But one day Sachin got some news, the cancer it had come,
He told his parents, they were shocked, it left them both quite numb.
'This cannot be the truth,' they said, 'This isn't in our plan,
To cry again, for our dear son. He's only just a man.'

'This is the end, that is a fact,' his Mother wept alone.
'How can the world be rid of him? My one and only son.'
But just as fear and darkness came, to cause them untold grief,
The work of Wolfson scientists, did bring them all relief.

These women, men and others, worked, for means to find a way,
To save this man, this clever soul, to keep sure death at bay.
And this they did, Sachin was saved, his parents thanked the time,
That Isaac came and made those bells, the Wolfson bells, to chime.

So when you hear the Wolfson bells 'Ring True,' throughout our place,
Please don't forget those tears, now gone, that ran down Sita's face.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN McDERMOTT

Dual Flowers in Eternal Bloom

Thirty years and counting,
Your brilliance remains in my heart,
O Wolfson College and Cambridgeshire...
Two fragrant flowers in eternal bloom,
Verily a vital part of the life-blood,
That's been gushing my being,
Carrying me from strength to strength,
All through these eventful decades,
And this admission I need to make,
That if not for your empowering presence,
I would not have grown in empathy,
And discovered the essence of peace-building.

LYNN OCKERSZ

Blossom's Time

See these over-wintered trees –
Fissured frames, frigid limbs,
Dead fingers – their summer dreams
Lie in the grass, thin skeletons.

Fossil forest, caught in the act
Of marking time. Until
Earth tilts,
And one grey woollen mitten strains and splits, lets slip a lightening streak,
And the secret
Is out,

And out again – the change repeats
A hundred-thousand-fold, and builds
To a full, full-throated peal.
Spring's bunting trills.

The gloves are off; a show of hands;
Clouds of mayflies taking flight;
Manna from heaven; wedding banns;
Silent snowfall overnight.

Morning's broken; bright new world.
Arresting sight beseeches, *Stay!*

Yet as the final bud unfurls,
Three petals drift away.

DEBBIE PULLINGER



'The Softness of Spring', Mitali Gupta

The Birth of a Poem

I'm not sure when you were conceived -
I took no precautions against inspiration;
Soon realised it was true impregnation
And not just my imagination.

This was cause for elation,
But then a kind of sickness,
Followed by a certain weakness
And doubts about your viability.

Poems have no set period of gestation
But I felt you growing and kicking
To remind me of your potential versatility,
A not unpleasant sensation.

A few false starts, which had me alarmed,
Braxton-Hicks contractions of the muse;
Then out you popped when least expected;
You were little, but perfectly formed.

ANNE KIRKMAN

Becoming

I saw you grow, my shining, gifted friend.
Questioning the strong flow of the current
Reflecting what had been taught. Resisting.
Choosing yourself over their ideas,
Assumptions, presumptions, and also yours.
I saw you rise, my blooming, caring friend.
There is not one answer to who you are;
Myriads of ways, paths to uncover.
Embracing life as an uncertainty.
As a relief, an opportunity
To be; to breathe deeply; love heavily.
Faith as a compass; wisdom as a shield.
I see you thrive, my loving, gentle friend.
Kindness in your heart; future filled with hope.

ISABELLE LALIBERTÉ

Contributors

Onyeka Awunor is a first year Pharmacology PhD student. A lot of her time is spent in the lab, but she is also quite invested in a medley of non-related interests like true-crime, music and theology. She takes to poetry as an outlet for emotions as inspired mostly by personal events.

Caroline Banerjee is the College Outreach and Student Recruitment Officer. Her poem 'Lessons' was published in The Black Spring Press Group's *The Best New British and Irish Poets 2019-2021 anthology* (2021), and her work has featured in *Aurelia Magazine*, *Free the Verse Journal*, *Wild Court Literary Journal*, and *The String Magazine* amongst others. Alongside her job, Banerjee is completing a PhD at City, University of London, where she is investigating the political utility of Contemporary Medieval literature.

John Bastable is a retired International Educator who, after graduating from Wolfson in 1975 and forty years travelling the world, is now living once more in Cambridge. He has written poems throughout his life and published several collections as e-books (under the pseudonym Bob J Nashatle), which are illustrated with photographs taken from his travels.

Claudia Brown is a self-taught artist who is studying medicine. She exhibited her work in the 2022 'Kill or Cure' exhibition at Wolfson, and was commissioned to create art for Black History Month in Cambridge.

Jonathan Chan is an alumnus, and a writer and editor of poems and essays. Born in New York to a Malaysian father and South Korean mother, he was raised in Singapore. He completed a BA in English at Wolfson in 2020 before receiving an MA in East Asian Studies at Yale in 2022. He is the author of the poetry collection *going home* (Landmark, 2022) and serves as the Managing Editor of poetry.sg. More of his writing can be found at jonbcy.wordpress.com.

Ying Yue Chan is a second-year Archaeology undergraduate specialising in Egyptology. She writes when inspiration hits and would write about anything in any form depending on said inspiration. She likes to dream, be it during the day or in her sleep.

Mitali Gupta is a postgraduate student (LLM m. 2022). She grew up in Delhi, India, where she practised law before moving to Cambridge. Mitali has been writing poetry for as long as she can remember, drawing inspiration from anything that moves her.

Radhika Gupta balances a career in biomechanical engineering with a love for musical theatre, and turns to poetry as her solace. Drawing inspiration from spoken word poets Sarah Kay and Olivia Gatwood, her poetry delves into darker themes and psychological landscapes.

Hannelore Hägele is an art historian, who also feels drawn to poetry. Through reading and writing, this genre opened up for her a new way of exploring the visual arts, especially via ekphrastic poetry. But she also writes about aspects of life around her. She has long-standing connections with Wolfson College – PhD student, JRF, CRA, SM, and has been a choir member since 1998.

David Goode is the Praelector of Wolfson college and a Fellow. He writes occasional poetry, and this was his first serious attempt at un-metred and un-rhymed poetry, prompted by the demise of our lovely Judas Tree. David lives in Ely, and works in the University in strategy and planning for IT and Digital Transformation, and spends a lot of time out in The Fens on his narrowboat, the appropriately-named Grumpy.

Arungopal Kaniappan Periakaruppa is a postgraduate student pursuing an MBA at the Cambridge Judge Business School. He likes poetry due to its versatility in conveying the author's emotions and perspectives. He is an amateur in writing poetry and has a bias towards poems with rhyme schemes and natural themes.

Olivia Kiely is a first-year English undergraduate. Her secondary school English teacher Miss Nelson first gave her a love for poetry, a teacher who could light up the classroom with her infectious enthusiasm.

Anne Kirkman became a Senior Member fairly recently, but her connection with Wolfson goes back to 1968, when her husband was appointed a Fellow of what was then University College. She began writing poetry regularly in retirement along with learning to be a drummer. Her main poetical influence is probably Roger McGough.

Isabelle Laliberté is an LLM student. While she came to Cambridge University to broaden her knowledge of law, she found much more than that, and is deeply grateful for it.

Jane Macfarlane graduated in 1976 with a Diploma in Nutrition. She has since been a teacher, a lawyer and, introduced to poetry by her mother, a collector of poems in an anthology begun when she was 10. Her love of the natural world has been greatly sharpened by poetry driven by rhythm and thus locked into her mind's ear, and by the stories and myths of the lands she has visited.

Christopher John McDermott is an alumnus who was first an undergraduate pursuing a BEd (m.1975). During that time he was heavily involved in the Wolfson Drama Society and his interest in the theatre has continued; he has recently won awards for both writing and performance. He has now completed two further degrees at Wolfson College: MEd and MSt in Writing for Performance.

Claire O'Brien is a Senior Member and Joint Wine Steward at Wolfson. She has developed a fascination with fungi in recent years and continues to read about their incredible properties and significance for the biosphere. Her poem is about her own learning journey as well as a reflection on how slowly the Kingdom of Fungi has revealed its secrets to scientific enquiry.

Nick Osbourne is Wolfson's Communications Manager. He has a PhD in Spanish from Cambridge (Darwin College), where he wrote his dissertation on 20th century Mexican literature. Much of his writing – and thinking – is (often darkly) coloured by decades of reading Latin American literature.

Lynn Ockersz is a 1993 Press Fellow from Sri Lanka. He counts 41 years as an English Language journalist. An international politics columnist, he considers political poetry his forte.

Debbie Pullinger is a College Tutor and Fellow. She returned late in life to both academia and poetry, and ran the Poetry and Memory Project at the Faculty of Education, on which she continues to work, writing poetry and drama around the edges.

Steven Stroud is a postgraduate student pursuing a MSt in Building History. He has embarked on an artistic journey through poetry, intertwining his passion for heritage and the built environment. He likes to explore the essence of time and the connections between human creations and the stories that they hold. Drawing inspiration from poets such as Etel Adnan (a current favourite), he weaves words that illuminate the rich tapestry of our shared history.

Philip Ward is both a Senior Member and an alumnus. These days he's a non-fiction writer, specialising in literature, music and biography. Prose is his usual medium; poetry is a stretch!



Wolfson College
Cambridge