Transcript: The Life and Death of Poetry

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Thank you all for coming. The Life and Death of Poetry. I hope I won't kill the whole thing by my un-technological know-how because I've tried to bring some slides and audio clips.

So forgive me if there are some gaps in the lecture while I kind of fuss around them.

This is not a lecture about The Wasteland. It is an assembly of voices invoked by and including The Wasteland in order to let me read that poem more refreshingly. Eliot called it rhythmical grumbling, and I have always resented the spell cast by his gloom, a cloud which goes on darkening because of the poem's status as the most important poem of the 20th century. The most translated poem [INAUDIBLE] in the culture.

What exactly is going on when the most important poem speaks to us like this?

What is that sound high in the air, murmur of maternal lamentation? Who are these hooded hordes swarming over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth, ringed by the flat horizon only?

I don't like Eliot's technique of summoning a crowd in the same tone of voice as Dante, but without Dante's pity or Chaucer's warmth or Homer's mighty perspective of forgiveness.

Eliot is a satirist, and a satirist is a brilliant critic rather than a compassionate fellow traveller.

For that reason, the religious transformation at the end of The Wasteland always seems to me to be a private one. The thunder and reanimating rain sweep into me as lyric events, internal thought events, not epic ones.

However, I have recently had to admit that the process of reading a poem begins with geography.

For 25 years, I have been trying to read Eliot through eyes accustomed to Devon, which could not make sense of his urban patterns.

Years ago, I moved to Bristol and something beyond my thinking, something just behind the retina and before the visual cortex began to accept not Eliot's metaphysics, but his sequencing. The way the verses move round each other incognito, like strangers, like people on a pavement looking sideways and down.

To read The Wasteland in a city is like lining up two mirrors. The city can see itself in the poem, and the poem can see itself in the city. And in this doubled world I am sometimes confused to notice a figure from the streets flitting ahead of me through the text.

A woman crossing the road with heavy bags. Is she from my world or Eliot's?

I saw her briefly as I turned the page and behind her a line of diminishing reflections ending in endlessness. That is what happens when you place one mirror in front of another.

That is how the world adds itself to poetry, so that every poem given the right reflective surface is half made of paper and half made of life. This discovery is so enthralling to me that I am tempted to ask some questions, have my categories become too simplistic?

Might a written down poem be treated more like an oral poem permitted to alter from one occasion to the next. Could a book become less like a permanent record and more like an improvising prompt?

Should the reader take more responsibility for the images provoked by a poem?

And even if literature is literary and language gets flattened and photocopied onto dead trees, and Eliot claims that every poem is an epitaph, and the engine of The Wasteland is the zombie movement of that corpse being rippled by water in section four, nevertheless, the reader is part of the picture. And the reader is alive, ephemeral, three dimensional, dramatic, ordinary, unknowable and is entitled to ask: What ails The Wasteland?

What makes the poem depressing rather than life giving? And if poetry, under pressure from its quiet, medium has grown more and more lyric in its scope, since personal truth is the kind most accessible to the solitary writer, then at times of collective disturbance, could the reader, should the reader be responsible for bringing in a chorus?

Eliot provides one answer to these questions. In his poem A Note on War Poetry, he says:

The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal, which we call ‘poetry’,
May be affirmed in verse.

It’s a very knotty little text, so I'm going to read it again.

The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal, which we call ‘poetry’,
May be affirmed in verse.

Is that right or only half right?

Is it not the case that the feat of becoming universal is begun by the writer, but needs to be completed over and over again by the reader. Right now, how shall I complete my copy of the wasteland?

About two months ago, in April, I decided to read Eliot and Bristol simultaneously over the course of 30 days. This experiment would be a kind of rite of spring, and if I performed it correctly, I could expect warm weather to move over the city, bringing first thunder and then real revivifying rain and new leaves.

That is, after all, what Eliot set out to achieve. In the year before publishing his poem, he had been to the London production of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, in which a woman dances herself to death to ensure the fertility of the Earth.

Eliot was impressed by Stravinsky's music, which he later described like this. Whether Stravinsky's music be permanent or ephemeral, I do not know, but it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steps into the scream of the motor horn. The rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of

iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway and the barbaric cries of modern life, and to transform those despairing noises into music.

The music of The Wasteland moving through blocks of voices, cuts, quotes, rhythmic cells and swift transitions towards drumming and drumming and final collapse is a rite of spring to which we are all invited.

And that is where I shall take you in this lecture, which is not really a lecture, but a carnival.

An April walkabout in the company of T.S. Eliot, as well as Edson Burton, Bristol playwright, poet and historian; Dante, Tour Guide to the afterworld; Lucy English, poet and historian of performance poetry; Ben Haggerty, carrier of the ancient tradition of storytelling; Ian Hamilton Finlay, The lamenter of a lost totality; The Hat, street poet; Homer, poet of Troy; Jane, the drunk woman with the rucksack; Linton Kwesi Johnson, great revolutionary poet; Edwin Morgan, dead Scottish poet; Danny Pandolfi, living performance poet and curator of the Lyra Festival; Jenny Pearson, storyteller; Aram Saroyan, electric poet; True Thomas, the prophet from Northumberland; Duncan Williamson, Scottish traveller, singer, storyteller, stone waller; along with graffiti artists Zoyn, Mosa, Avoid, Sexsy, Mish, Mont, Klofe, Beks, Face1st, Sket, Goose, Sarge, Oneism, Nesk, Stoe, Samo and Nanks, as well as night, dusk, Rose West and others.

[CLIP FROM YOUTUBE PLAYED]

I used to think those seven sentences offered all the freedoms and distortions of the cerebral world, the readers world, in which the mind slides over the memory like a sledge down a slope.

‘Marie, Marie, hold on tight’ …compression and stretchiness of time, movement backwards from spring to a single hour to a night of reading, then forwards again to the whole of winter. The verse line widens as the focus narrows. Death and life swap places. The speaker is first invisible, then plural, then female, then singular, before heading south with a suggestion of feathers. There are no rules to help you navigate the gaps between opposites.

You have to keep tobogganing over emptiness. Marie, Marie, hold on tight.

I used to find my way into The Wasteland through the opening in that personal pronoun. I read much of the night and fly south in winter.

I used to think a reader was a book servant, and as a reader sliding my eyes down slopes of paper to the edge and emptiness between pages, I followed the laws of literature downwards from one reference to another to land at last in London, in pentameter, with here and there a rhyme. As if, after all, the tradition of Dante and Shakespeare and Webster and Spenser was still working. Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, a crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many. I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled and each man fixed his eyes before his feet, flowed up the hill and down King William Street.

But about two months ago, in April, the cruellest month I, the reader, put down The Wasteland and walked outside and a man in white with a white splodge on his nose stepped off the pavement and handed me the Bhagavad Gita saying Shanti, Shanti, Shanti. A woman in a crimson hijab was running barefoot with a covered dish and someone was sitting under a tree singing ‘drink, drink, the country’s on the brink. You know life doesn't last long, sir. All must pass, so you better raise your glass and paint a bit of Bristol in your song, sir.’

He looked surprised to find this huge voice coming out of him, as if a stranger had been living in his chest with the lights out, and every time he heard himself, he offered a sweeping mediaeval gesture.

And suddenly, as if invoked by this song, a drunk woman appeared labouring uphill towards me, bent double looking down. Not just drunk, but grieving, falling, wailing, breathless, exhaling short, infrequent sighs, she said she had a broken spine and couldn't get home. Constant jangle of sorrow, leaning against railings, moaning like a two-year-old carrying too much.

I took her tripping scarves. She kept asking Why, why, why? Then, once her under character spoke firmly in a deep voice, ‘I need a drink’. Then back to horror literally doubled up with hurt, puffing up the hill. I said by way of interview, would you trust me to take your rucksack? She said, No. Who are you? I said, Alice. She said, What do you do? Gardening, I said. And poetry. She stopped. She altered, illuminated. She said she loved poetry. She had a book in her rucksack. She rummaged. She couldn't find it.

That didn't matter. It was not, it is not the thing in the book that matters. But the fact of poetry is existence, the tradition of poetry.

She was from Wales. We Welsh, we love poetry. She rummaged, she straightened. She walked upright, almost lifted up the hill, not by the thought of gardening, but by the thought of poetry against all odds, the survival of poetry. I saw it actually bring her back to life. A sort of goddess of collapse. A waterfall became a human.

It was April I was reading much of the night, and as I turned the page, I saw that woman labouring towards me with her rucksack rummaging for a book.

Perhaps the very book I was reading, whose pages faced each other like diminishing mirrors behind each surface, the facsimile of some previous surface. First, we had a couple of feelers down at Tom's place. There was Old Tom, boiled to the eyes blind. Don't you remember that time after a dance, top hats and all. We and silk-hat Harry, and old Tom took us behind, brought out a bottle of fizz with old Jane, Tom's wife. And we got Jo to sing, I'm proud of all the Irish blood that's in me, There's not a man can say a word agin me.

In his first drafts, Eliot began The Wasteland like that, introducing himself as one of a crowd of drinkers, the lines are a homage to Joyce, but also a recollection of music hall and Ballard and a night spent drinking in Boston.

It feels as if a carnival is starting up and the reader prepares to be intoxicated. I need a drink. But Eliot, the critic, Eliot, the reader, made a decision. He took a pencil and lightly crossed out the whole page like a law enforcer, warning drinkers off the streets.

And instead of Old Tom, our first true glimpse of him is that reader staying up half the night before heading south.

Eliot never destroyed the first page, but sent it with the rest of the manuscript to his friend John Quinn, knowing that Quinn was a collector and would value it.

John Quinn, a lawyer and patron of the arts, had offered financial assistance to both Pound and Eliot. So it was a simple act of gratitude to send him the first draft of The Wasteland.

Eliot had a sense of the poem's value, but I think he also had a sense that the poem’s attentiveness to the past had its own past, and that Pound’s editing, as well as his wife's remarks and his own discarded passages, formed part of its tradition.

He ruefully remarked in the 1950s, Well, the fate of that manuscript or typeScript with his blue pencils on it, is one of the permanent so far as I know minor mysteries of literature.

Sure enough, Old Tom came to light in Quinn's papers in 1968 so that now there are two Wastelands, the sermonising one, which guides a reader from a death to an attempted resurrection, and the Carnival one published in facsimile in 1971, with old Tom leading the procession and silk-hat Harry beside him.

Just gone up the alley, a fly cop came along, looking for trouble, committing a nuisance, he said.

You come onto the station. I'm sorry, I said. It's no use being sorry, he said.

Let me get my hat, I said. The carnival starts up.

People begin to cross boundaries. The reader becomes the writer, the writer becomes the reciter, the living and the dead walk alongside each other. The seven opening sentences become seven hecklers. The crossed-out characters take command and silk-hat Harry's hat, which used to appear to me in tattered black cloth with mould shimmer when you tilted it, this hat has become something quite extraordinary, which I witnessed moving towards me in April on a steep street between houses. About two foot high, a pile of colour and fake flowers, silvery scraps, windmills, feathers, shiny, indefinable things and underneath it, a poet. Lifting his hat a little, he offered me a menu on which a list of poems with prices was written. That day's special cost £50. It must have been an amazing poem.

There were others at various values, sweet poems, sour poem, hors d'oeuvres.

I paid £3 for a mid-length poem and a chance to interview the poet. I'm ashamed that I have forgotten the poem, although I remember the intensity of its delivery.

I remember much rhyming and punning and people stepping round us.

And afterwards, this conversation. This, he said, this is basically what the bards would do travelling round, trying to sell poems.

Not all of them, I said, a little on my guard and uncomfortable and needing the defence of my opinions.

What about Thomas the Ryhmer, True Thomas, who was cursed to tell the truth for the rest of his days and therefore couldn't sell anything?

True Thomas is a false ballard written by Walter Scott, he said. True Thomas was a neurotic with anxieties about the truth, whereas me, he said, I'm a fool.

I come from a long line of tricksters. I was a fundraiser once, he said, stopping people on the streets, and I started doing a poem as part of the pitches, I used to work up the case studies into verse. Now that's what I call functional poetry. You've got intro, problem, solution, what we're doing about it and then ask for money back.

I was recently walking down a canal, he said, and there was a couple. I said, Can I do a poem for you? And whipped out my menu? They were taken aback, just me and them on a canal on a Sunday.

Yes, there are times when I'm performing and I can see my client being ripped out and restructured, and space and time do that narrowing thing and then clunk. I love it.

I'm comfortable with this kind of discomfort, he said, because I used to play bass guitar. My roots are in rock and metal, but when I took out the music, I suppose I sort of softened.

The thing is that I'm very confused and I'm happy with that. I once wrote a poem in hexadecimal, he said, which is computer code. You've only got 15 characters, that was batshit crazy, but I'm always trying to undermine myself.

I ebb in and out of rhythm. I compose on the phone and memorise what I write, and then sometimes I write something and forget it, OK?

So that was just a leaf in the river. And away it goes. I'm always trying to evolve, he said.

Always looking for the ubiquitous word that could come from anywhere. I never know what I have until I perform it.

Sometimes I have to pause to let a car go past. But at my back, from time to time, I hear the sound of horns and motors in the spring.

And when I'm out in my hat, if I meet children, there's joy straightaway.

But then I come across old, bitter men with no sexuality, they're just a mist of hatred.

I don't care. But now my hat… his hat, as I've mentioned, is about two-foot high, a pile of colour, fake flowers, silvery scraps, windmills, feathers, shiny, indefinable things. When he's without it he has glasses and leans forward like a puppet left on a peg.

Oh yes, I had his female. She is the expression of my higher self, my tradition, made of things gifted, bits of stuff picked up at festivals.

She is my confidante, my wife, I speak to her, I charge her up. The intention builds and builds till it's no longer myself. Oh yes, there are some things best not spoken of.

It was April that cruellest of months when poets ought to be sitting inside close reading The Wasteland. But the closer I read, the more the poem becomes mere rubric asking for a congregation.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh that Shakespearean rag. It's so elegant, so intelligent.

What shall I do now? What shall I do? I shall rush out as I am and walk the street with my hair down so.

It's not just that the city has altered the poem, but by the time I've rushed out to walk the street with my hair down so, the poem has altered the city. Someone has been through in the night and stencilled four lines of poetry on a wall and someone else has scrubbed them out. Now from the nearness, or does it say now from the mere ness, the mere glass, the mere land under the mist?

Something, something, something.

Is this Beowulf, or is it a new poem written by the mist itself, turning that ancient poem into columns of rubbed out shadows?

It is just as Eliot warned me. The past is being altered by the present, as much as the present is directed by the past.

There are shadows behind shadows. Voices behind voices.

Dead poets carried like a virus in the flesh. Dead storytellers whose stories keep speaking in the living.

And here is someone standing in her garden in excitable air, remembering one of the Scottish travellers who taught her storytelling.

Let me tell you about Duncan Williamson, she says.

So attentive to the audience of shrubs and me and the cat walking across that she has to hold on to things to stop the stories from stealing her away.

Let me tell you about Duncan Williamson, she says, if you gave him the floor, you couldn't stop him for three days. He was exhausting. He was born in a tent, his mother was born in a cave, he was a traveller.

He trained as a stone waller. He was a horse trader. He spoke Scottish Cant. He stole stories from his grandmother's pocket while she was sleeping.

The truth is, says another, Duncan never spoke much about himself.

How are you, Duncan? You'd say? And he'd say, oh well enough. You know, there was once a king who had three daughters. He would talk in a roundabout way. Part of his tradition was to make up the tradition. He was a wonderful singer.

He would get down on one knee and look you in the eye. And that is how his repertoire passed into writing.

A woman from Chicago fell in love with him, and that was that.

[AN AUDIO CLIP IS PLAYED]

In the image, a man with eyes closed, tilted forwards, flushed, hatless, tremulous, singing folk songs, hearing his voice filled out by the arch, lingering on erotic hints and half notes. He can't see it but along the line of the brickwork, it says topple in luminous white paint, which lights up whenever a car goes through.

I'm not sure whether the instruction is to him or the bridge, but they both keep standing just about.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not Eliot's Unreal City. It is Bristol, city of slam and spoken word, the slave trade and the statue of Colston rolled into the river.

And now, from the nearness under the mist, a motorway like a thin blue pencilling line by Ezra Pound has cut two communities in half, and the crossed out voices won't stay silent.

April 2nd, 1980. 42 years ago, in the cruellest month, riots broke out in the Black and White Cafe in St Paul's. And to mark the date, Linton Kwesi Johnson is performing in Bristol on April 2nd, 2022.

I caught sight of him in the morning leaning, smoking against a wall and was reminded of that passage in the Odyssey about a poet walking through a city with morphe around him.

The grace of shaped speech crowning his head as if the poems had floated visibly from his mouth and formed a smoke ring.

Although even as I think this, I can hear Linton Kwesi Johnson saying sharply that some have the privilege of studying Greek and Latin, and it's all very well to make these associations. But for the average reader, that kind of poetry doesn't work.

What I'm interested in, he said. What *I'm* interested in is finding the music in the language, skipping rhymes, old time sayings.

I'm interested in poetry that sings. Yes, there is something musical in Eliot, he says. I absolutely love the love song of Alfred J. Prufrock, but then in my late teens, I became intoxicated by the elegant extravagance of Christopher Okigbo.

Were you interested in oral traditions? I asked. And he answered, Not really.

He said the difference between the scribble and the oral is always extremely problematic.

He said that it's in the language itself that you find the oral tradition.

He said there are phrases in the Bible and phrases his grandmother used, which are all the poetry you need. A fool's thought is his own comfort. Chicken merry but hawk deh near. Young bird don't know about the hurricane. Hard ears pickney eat rock stone.

No, he said he was not interested in landscape poetry either, even though he grew up in the hills of Clarendon and all the different plant forms and the sound of a storm they register in the conscience.

But Derek Wolcott has already spoken for that, he said. Whereas I came to poetry through politics, I was there at the Brixton riots, he said.

I am part of the rebel generation.

[AUDIO CLIP PLAYED OF LINTON KWESI JOHNSON'S FIVE NIGHTS OF BLEEDING]

Just. Right. What?

[INAUDIBLE] in Penguin Classics.

The line shapes land on the surface of your eye and you have to ravel them in and lay them out in the quiet place of the mind.

And if you are anything like me, then whenever you think of the poem, the piece of paper remains inwardly visible, holding everything very thin and still and rectangular.

It is an effort to keep a written poem moving.

You have to keep walking outside to remember the mysterious unpapery-ness of the world.

But when you hear that poem, the actual air is altered.

St. Paul's is altered, the crossed out world becomes visible, shivering voice ripples move out from the speaker and something wing-like in the ear changes its humming and is drifted sideways, like when you walk into a pillar of sunlight in a wood where midges are suspended in an airborne auditorium, being lifted up and down by the same sound as agitates the leaves, and then a gust comes through and the hissing overhead shifts the whole midge swarm suddenly to one side.

That is the nature of the spoken word, the audible, amplified winged word close in kind to the life of insects who feel and float and hum with the same instrument.

And then again, when a poem starts blowing through a room, your whole canopy is shaken as if four people had taken hold of your skin at each corner and wafted it up and down.

And if the poet is a thinker and a watcher, if the poet has a warm sense of justice as Linton Kwesi Johnson does, then you'll be followed out of the building by a swarm of sounds, a bloom whose structure rebalances the air.

And that is the haze that lies over the city and makes a drunk woman walk easily uphill because the book in her rucksack partakes of the same pattern.

Life given voices from the audience. I was there at the first Bristol slam, says one.

I thought I can do that and my life changed. I woke up and became a poet.

I came to it age 14, says another. Don't get me wrong, I was writing poems in exercise books, but then I heard rap, underground rap and scat singing. The whole tradition going back through Linton, Kwesi Johnson, the beats, the Dubs, the music of Reggae and Langston Hughes.

And the third says Linton was a huge influence. To me, the skill of poetry is being able to listen to hear other voices.

I have Caribbean parents, he said. But our home was always open to everybody.

A Ukrainian soldier lived with us for four years. There'd be young Asian women escaping from their families.

My dad's eccentric, hard-drinking friends. Not to mention eight brothers and sisters.

Hip hop, RP, English, Patois, Creole.

I have so many selves, he said. To me, the skill is to be able to listen and hear my other voices. And someone who is not there, someone who has travelled the world to research the training required for shaped speech, which is not the same as written down speech, nor is it the same as ordinary speech.

This one contains inside his head a whole paragraph which widens the city as he walks.

He says I've watched ashiks competing to compose spontaneous verse in perfect metre and rhythm on subjects given by the audience, with two inch needles placed between their lips to reduce the available vocabulary.

He says, I've listened to a Gujarati praise singer consciously bringing energy to his voice, chakra by chakra, as the emotion intensified.

I've watched a 16-year-old Pandavani singer make 3000 villagers follow her improvised songs through the epic twists and turns of the Mahabharata. I've watched a Chinese woman strike a drum in such a way that your mind cannot wander.

I've listened to the Manding griots' kora conjure up the shimmering armour of a distant army.

I've heard a Rajasthani Pabuji storyteller's wife sing long lines of narrative, warding off barrenness and encouraging fertility as she held an oil lamp to illumine the secret details of a scroll painting in the desert under stars, a primal dramatic effect that could reach back to the paintings in the caves at Lascaux.

Zoyn, Mosa, Avoid, Sexsy, Mish, Mont, Klofe, Beks, Face1st, Sket, Goose, Sarge, Oneism, Nesk, Stoe.

Graffiti is the voice of the passing by.

The tradition goes back to the caves via 1960s' New York, when people started leaving their tags in impossible places.

Subways, high hoardings, train cars, lift shafts.

The tag was a kind of personal advert, a boast as if to say ‘I was ‘ere and I was winged at the time’.

Winged words land here at night, spray cans lined up on the kerb and a sound system fills up the space so that the writers can hide inside loudness, inside fumes. One person sits there as if on guard with eyes down. The other is shaping huge orange letters. At various times, various ephemeral instructions are issued to the sleeping city, ‘Avoid’ in squished capitals, gone by the following night.

Then ‘believe’, then ‘soup’ and ‘virus’ set forth in gothic and then gone. And once for a whole week ‘night’ was written on the outside arch in black lettering with silver edges, as if the moon was coming up behind it, as if ancient night herself had passed that way with a spray can and then gone.

And a year later, I passed ‘dusk’ in a playground, clouded grey letters with daylight blue behind them.

No doubt it will have passed by now.

It is all part of the performance of the language in this city that these words print themselves into you and then get painted over.

‘Avoid’ haunts me for a couple of days, then ‘soup’ then people in luminous jackets arrive with grey paint and clean the whole thing off. Within an hour of them going ‘nudge’ in loopy green letters like a weed. It looks amazing on its own against all that grey. But by the following day, a cartoon bird has landed next to it, signed Sally.

Some people call it graffiti, some call it word art, and the different names summon different traditions.

In the 1960s, just as the fashion for graffiti was growing popular in the US, Ian Hamilton Finley invented the concept of the one-word poem with title of any length.

These two elements forming as it were a corner, which would then contain the meaning.

He asked for contributions for his magazine ‘Poor Old Tired Horse’ and Edwin Morgan offered this title: A Far Cool Beautiful Thing, Vanishing, with the single word ‘blue’ as its content.

Hugh MacDiarmid was infuriated by what he saw as a betrayal of the seriousness of modernism. He refused to have his work published in any book that contained Hamilton Finley, even though David Jones, the most serious and the most epic of the modernists, was a quiet pioneer of word art, and his long poem in parentheses succeeds in combining the stillness of inscription with the movement of myth and ordinariness.

But that's another story for a later lecture.

Then there is Aram Saroyan, American minimalist writer born in 1943, who's in the Guinness Book of Records for writing the shortest poem in existence, a four legged m.

He also wrote one word poems without titles. For example, his poem Light, spelt l i g h g h t.

I would love to see that word graffitied on a dark wall. He called it an electric poem.

He said apparently the crux of the poem is to try and make the ineffable, which is light, which we only know about because it illuminates something else, into a thing.

An extra ‘gh’ does it. It is sculptural on that level.

In effect, he said, the single word is a new reading process, instant and continuous like electricity.

So it would seem, finally, in the 100 years since The Wasteland was published, or at least in the 30 days since I started rereading it, that the written down language has been able to grow first flesh, then wings, then light itself, as if coming back to life again, returning to its earliest, thingliest existence. Inscriptions carved by sunlight into ice, haiku swift rain signs coming and going over stones, legible letter shapes of geese and printouts of animals so that it is hard to say which is the signifier and which is the signified.

As I watch the silvery ink of a snail crawling over a wall on which someone has felt tipped, Rose West knows best.

That snail knows as well as anyone what Rose West knows, which we none of us know.

And there are spiders slowly crossing out ‘not yet upset’. Written perhaps by the same winged character in red wax crayon in a doorway.

And here and there, I keep noticing among ordinary shadows the stencilled shadow of a human with the tag: I was ‘ere, but I disappear.

I caught it on the railway bridge as I walked over and a stag was passing underneath me in April, barking a personal advert among the ash trees.

I was ‘ere in this improbable place. And yes, as I remember it now, it was raining with a hint of thunder.

[APPLAUSE]