

TENEBRAE: LESSONS LEARNT IN DARKNESS

THE POEMS

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TENEBRAE; LESSONS LEARNT IN DARKNESS

THE POEMS

In March 2021, a group of fifteen writers living and working in Brighton came together during lock-down and spent four intense weeks trying to put into words their feelings about the losses, griefs and very particular violences of the past year.

This work was part of TENEBRAE; LESSONS LEARNT IN DARKNESS, a new work for the Theatre Royal in Brighton. The work was a one-day-only, dawn-to-dusk installation, and its sound-world featured recordings of this cohort of writers reading fragments from a suite of fifteen specially-written individual poems, edited and re-woven into a new whole by sound artist Christopher Shutt.

We are also publishing the complete poems by all of the fifteen writers here, so that you have the chance to further reflect on and engage with these brave and powerful voices.

During the four weeks, the group listened again and again to the music that inspired this whole project; Louis Couperin's haunting 1714 setting of the "Tenebrae" service, *Trois Lecons de Tenebres*. Many of the poems reflect very directly the structure and themes of that music. They also reflect the very different and individual resonances which that music created in each writer. As a group, we talked about the contemporary meanings of the "Tenebrae" service, one in which all the lights of a church are deliberately extinguished, and we spent time sharing our personal perspectives on what it means to watch your world turned dark. We also paid attention to the text that Couperin was setting; fifteen verses from the Old Testament "Lamentations" of the prophet Jeremiah which give an eye-witness account of the forced evacuation of a bewildered and traumatised city. We talked about that city, both literally and symbolically, in relation to our own - and then we started writing.

The resulting poems speak of sorrow, courage, horror, strength and surrender; they draw on our lived experiences. They also speak of hope, and of life emerging through and out of darkness. They invite you to look at our city with new eyes, and to hear a lament that is in its air right now.

The writers are; Maria Amidu, Jenny Arach, Sheila Auguste, Yvonne Canham-Spence, Helen Dixon, Josephine Hall, Oluwafemi Hughes Jonas, Sam Kenyon Hamp, Joseph Lee, Simon Maddrell, Lucie Naish, Georgina Parke, Mark Price, Zaid Sethi and Sea Sharp. We range in age from 19 to our seventies, and we all live, work or study in Brighton. Our voices come from a multitude of places, countries and cultures, and jointly we hail from: Brighton/East Sussex; Uganda and Tanzania; Calstock; Pakistan; England; UK-Canada-Nicaragua; the Isle of Man; Jamaica and London; Antibes and Salisbury; Leicestershire; London with Yoruba family heritage; the Black Country; London and Brighton by way of St. Lucian (African Caribbean) parents; Cornwall; Lincolnshire; the African, Kansas, Indian and Brazilian diasporas; Scotland; Lincolnshire and Sussex; Germany and Liberia; Chichester.

At the end of this collection of fifteen poems, you can find out more about each of the writers.

Look at this City

we see a woman running close to the water, she seems confused, she stops then drops
to her knees, please, I need some help, can you help me
we see a boy gesticulating wildly at the bottom of the hill, his voice is muffled by the
wind, he is afraid, look he shouts, look he shouts again
we hear a policewoman speak into her radio, she is at the edge of the playground,
there is dread in her voice as she rubs her forehead, are you close, are you nearly here

darkness swallowing our words, preventing them from ever leaving our bodies

we see a woman slip away from a graveside, she is hiding her grief, gripping her house
keys
we see a woman in a doorway, she rests her head on the glass and murmurs not today,
not inside again today
we see a man through a window, he is looking blankly at the screen, is he in shock, his
hands begin to shake then he covers his mouth, we cannot see or hear him speak but I
think he has just got some news

darkness swallowing our words, preventing them from ever leaving our bodies

some of us did not see the man being murdered on the television
some of us did not see that mother in the queue
some of us do not see the child hiding under the bed holding her breath because in the
other room they are saying, she has to go she cannot stay here

*darkness swallowing our words, preventing them from ever leaving our bodies
in this city our silences have names and they are unspeakable*

MARIA AMIDU

The Harbour Lights

1

I was looking at the lights when
I saw her body lying flat out on the beach
Lit up by the Christmassy sparkles from the harbour
Instinctively I knew she was dead
and my whole body shuddered violently

Standing rooted to the spot , I felt my breath catch in my throat ;
The lights beckoned me, but I couldn't move .
Then I retched, and hot bile splashed onto my boots

I fumbled for my phone ; neither my mind or fingers would function
The screen lit up, bathing the scene like a flare;
I gasped out some words, heard words said, but could not make sense of them
Falling from my grasp the phone hit the pebbles,
The screen shattered ; darkness

2

I turn to that darkness still
And the horror of that image floats before my eyes
Like the white-hot glow of molten metal
branded on my mind
That I cannot now un-see

One of many deaths that outrage my senses
In public spaces and hidden places all over the globe
Blue-light news-images transmitted from the screen to my eyes
Messing with my mind, disturbing my peace

The covid pandemic - the daily body count and vaccination tally-
A blanket that muffles deaths from other causes ; other pandemics
A blind eye turned to flagrant murders and atrocities
The cold deliberate extinction of a single life televised around the world

Abominations that I see when I wake or sleep .
All those outrageous deaths, embodied by this one body on a beach
It mirrors my personal loss, sunk deep in a well of darkness
My burden, the familiar eternal weight under which at first I staggered

3

Crushed at first by the impossible burden
Asphyxiated, not able to breathe
Then, beginning with the rituals of burial
The gathering of family and friends, the support of strangers
Sharing our grief, sharing the burden
Doing only what was necessary
Suddenly I was able to breathe again
I was still Alive
And Living
Minute after minute, hour after hour,
day after day
Life, without propulsion from me
A force with its own momentum
Suddenly, I was able to shoulder the burden and carry on

JENNY ARACH

All Our Tears are on the Outside Now

This is why I weep;

1.

The city was very bright, and I saw the constellations
in the sky over Hove Lawns dim and disappear
like many of our people.
The Shadow of Darkness is here.
How do we find strength?

2.

Caring is not enough.
Her mother died and hers.
We stand outside in the contaminated air,
looking through the windows, watching,
no touching.

3.

We see the chaos of uncertainty
in the eyes of a man who has nowhere
to call home. His wife has passed.
His mask is all that holds his face.

4.

We see a procession of our dead in the eyes of our companions,
so long that we are losing out minds.
Is it OK to cry with stiff upper lips?
To howl?
Are we learning to be brave?

5.

We want to believe there is no discrimination in death.
But we can all see it now.
And even in this Darkness we need to say goodbye.

6.
Our people have died.
Every body knows it.
And yet, the will to stay alive is strong.
Burning bright, reviving, renewing.
Our tears our screams our woes
evolve into streams of new neural pathways,
held bright in the moonlit darkness.

SHEILA AUGUSTE

The Seedling

*I ask you to be present, to hear a woman; to see her pain.
Stand with me a moment, to listen to this woman's story of loss.*

I see a woman; her arms open wide
to a space that only she knows.
Eyes exhausted from searching,
her body, a despairing question mark,
pleads: where is my home?

The city is empty,
collapsed in pyrotechnic distress,
hollowed out by a livid fear.
She is alone, and asks:
who will help carry my bundled-up sorrow?

On blistered feet, abused by broken ground
she sees no sign of refuge.
Looking up, she follows a sound:
a low moan - the sound of her own thickening pain.
"No one sees me! No one hears me!"

Deserted by the godhead
her need for succour is great
so deep is her loss.
Her life's tapestry torn,
she waits in grief to sleep.

She lays her head on warm dark earth;
by her hand, a seedling emerging to the promise of sunlight.

YVONNE CANHAM-SPENCE

The City

Let us inhabit the shadows of the City
their hardest, darkest clarity.

And so it begins.

I see a woman bend slowly to the ground
she sits with her toddler, in the queue for food.
She has lost her shine, lost her work,
about to lose her home. Her face is a mask,
so her child doesn't see it.

I see a teenage girl, her face streaming tears,
march with others down a busy shopping street.
Her throat is hoarse, her words hard to hear,
and she trips, hits the ground.
Why did none of us catch her?

I see a friend on a kerb, her grey hair soaked red,
a makeshift cloth wrapped around hand and head.
Under stunned eyes her mouth gapes:
“...clubbed with their sticks” she barely says.
Do you not yet know that smell of iron?

I see two students stumble out of tear gas
one holds the other, a bloody rag on his eye.
Their shaking hands hold shells.
“This one rubber, now these: live rounds.”
How could you not believe them?

I glimpse two riders speed by on a motorbike,
a third is slumped, held close and clumsy.
They leave a trail behind, like bloody breadcrumbs...
You know where they lead. You cry:
“They're killing our children!”

And not long after, an old woman heaves in vain
to pull someone out of the rubble.
She stops for breath, strokes their dusty hand
and murmurs, “Where is everybody?”

Across the road three men huddle round a bundle
held by a woman who wails without cease,
skin singed on her arm -she doesn't notice-
only screams a baby's name over and over.

Someone brings a stretcher, someone else a shovel,
trucks come and go well into the night,
we all work together under crags of cement
Until the lost moon emerges, and a man
plays squeals on a broken clarinet.

An ancient dirge rises from choked lungs,
but there's no-one left to hear it. Everything is finished.
Everything destroyed. Who sent these bombs?
And someone says "Does it matter any more? All is war."

She was once an architect, you a shopkeeper
Her feet in fine leather, the shoes you once sold her.
They still creak now, still wear at her heels
as you walk with each other.
"What did we do to deserve this?" she mutters.

And I see a man on an English beach,
climb out of a boat and up to the street
he fumbles into a disused phone booth,
dials and dials while his eyes dart out.

And here is a child who's lost their mother
at the security gates of a Removal Centre.
Their eyes are wild as the tears choke,
their small hands flail and tug at your collar.
When will they find safety?

These city streets are full of light and glass and steel,
what ugly secrets do they bury?
Whose faces, tears and smoke and shit and blood
are smeared on the walls of our hidden prisons?

The city is full of light, but I see only shadows,
hands straightjacketed, a miming mouth
trying to scream, surrender, sing through the silence.
Fingers of ink scraping to write, push
against the numbness.

Let us inhabit the shadows, their hardest, darkest clarity.
Feel how the City wears on us, on some more than others,
and hold our differences close as the knowledge of wounds.
Let us sit with this.
Only there,
 only then,
 can the day begin.

HELEN DIXON

British-Nicaraguan queer feminist writer.

A City Stretches

I saw shame pouring.
Hidden in the shadows of rain.
Soaking into the skin of a mother.
She didn't feel a thing.
Shining gently like a smooth brown pebble.

I saw history haunting her.
She walked slowly to the bus stop,
carrying too much to be able to protect herself.

The city moved through her.

There was no question but an assumption
- that she would be up for it.
A boat crossed oceans of genes.
Due, she landed on her knees and screamed

“Help! It's happening!”

An island of doctors marched her through the streets,
carried her emptied womb above their heads.
Everyone saw the pale child drenched in death.

Violent choices.

Silenced voices.

God said she'd lost her mind.

In the city she'd left, other parts of her heart were still beating
In the footsteps of children, quietly hiding
from football fans and uniformed gangs.

We watched the city chew them up.
We let them be stopped, we let them be searched.
They needed answers, but didn't know the questions.
We watched the city spit them out.

I saw a conversation happen.
The weighing of the worlds they'd dared to dream.
They imagined a chorus of countryside calling,
an aching melody of space and breath.
They packed up quickly and didn't look back.

Their bones knew when to move.

They left God far behind,
finding belief in the rhythm of the sky.

New histories were born...

A granddaughter's frown deepens.
Confusion takes root, out in the fields.
She feels the weight of things she can't understand.
She covers her mouth with her hands
- Why speak, if she can't be heard?

I saw her caught in leftover rain.
It started falling through decades of clouds.
No one saw her silent splashing.
But we all felt the flames.

Somehow burning at the bottom of the ocean.

Ancient ruins erupting.

Hope drained out of every limb.

A curve, and folding of herself

into

absence.

I saw a young woman escaping.
Slipped out from one cage after another.
She heard a voice calling her
and followed the scent of healing.

Feeling a push from somewhere within,
she took off her costumes and set them on fire.

She was sore but ripe.

Something rose in the deep, dark curve of her spine.

The city saw a shy surrender
in the muted moans of a courageous exhale.

We saw generations of survival
chasing out shadows of shame...

So history's heart could continue to beat
in our stories of breath and the stamp of our feet.

JOSEPHINE HALL

Josephine's inspiration for *A City Stretches* came from François Couperin's *Leçons de ténèbres*, as well as from many other places, such as:

Maisy Card's novel *These Ghosts Are Family*, participating in Pranayama practice with comebreathe.co, paintings like *My Mother Earth Is Black Like Me* by John Lyons, music like *Concrete Jungle* by Bob Marley & The Wailers and *Hustle* by Sons of Kemet & Kojey Radical, conversations and reflection around ancestral trauma and 'Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome', many different cities, fields and seas... and her own experiences of stretching, breathing, feeling, healing and stamping her feet.

Find more of Josephine's work at josephinehall.org

Wind Wheels Turn

This is a witness's lament from lockdown...
How did this city fall into its shadow?
Once vibrant colours gone, streets empty
Hushed, but for the distant cry of gulls
As if the pendulum of clocks, stopped.

I heard us seek words to explain
Silence. Echoes of aching loss
And I saw shock waves
Hospitals swelled. Breathless
Safety nets in shreds
Care-givers reaching for threads
Tending life, in peril, their breath

I saw a nurse die. Heard her new born scream
Forlorn, a father held his face in his hands.
I beheld a man, Leon, on Broken Street
Flailing his arms, fragments of himself scattering

No-one heard his cry, until.. Suffocated. WHY?
Why *so many* dead? Why the sun beams?

And everywhere air, ashen in despair
Homelessness. Shivering sacks.
Everywhere, bird song in the gaps
And everywhere in tents, in church yards
Loneliness pours out of pores
And everywhere bird song belongs

Amazon vans are unloading
Plastic, polystyrene, bubble-wrap
As Amazonian lungs are choking

And everywhere, grief. A reeling
River stone, whirlpooling oceans
Earth tears, flooding fields

How in these shadows, can we continue to breathe?

Yet, I caught a crystalline uncurling
A tidal wave of gifts; food on doorsteps
Dreamed rainbows on windows
A ragged rage of love rousing. Reweaving
I felt the wind turn and saw, a woman as a black jaguar, run

Witness Joy, growing her wings.
Dragged from bed in dead of midnight.
Right in the middle of a council estate
Men with tools of tyranny, pinned Joy down

I saw her fight, saw the tape wound,
Leather twist, Heard chains snap shut.
Echoing corridors roared. Silence..
Body limp, bereft of breath,
I saw Joy leave.
Felt, heart ache and *rage* fuse in me
In the fleeting distance I saw, a woman as a black jaguar, run
A time had come..

As I stood beside Joy I saw
Artisans, traders, farmers,
Diviners stolen. Middle-passage
swollen with Africa's body.
Lost indigenous knowledge
Bare feet in the soil
New-borns sung into birth
Languages of trees singing
Sacred rites of passage
A village for a child
Rivers in the flow of our bones...

Scenes of branding irons, burnt flesh
Boot prints on necks: 400 years
Of our ancestors weathering storms. I see,
Glimmering from afar, a woman, as a black jaguar, run

What story must be undone to out-run the distances?
What strange diamond exposed?

On sugar plantations, on cotton fields
I heard a holler; a song call and
Response. Heard speeding wheels
An underground rail - road spin
The pendulum swings. And I heard,
A hurricane of wings on the wind. *While a woman, a jaguar, runs*

Today on streets, drum beats, pulse of feet
Youth rising up fists full of fire
A woman before millions, stands
Says 'Lift our gaze to our purpose'
Our Spirit, is far larger than any state force

I saw in the universe
Dark Matters
In the midnight sky,
Stars
Stardust under our skin,
Jaguar Kin
Observed a crumpled leaf's fall
Felt in earth's dark womb, a seed
I wonder how a battered beauty,
Will be reborn, fragrant, violet, vermillion, indigo

Ask the Coral Reef, the Honey Bee, the Elm what they know
A time comes to galvanise. It's Now.

OLUWAFEMI (LORRAINE, SUDARSHANA, GOMEZ) HUGHES JONAS

Honour and remembering: Joy Gardener and Leon Briggs, whose breath was brutally forced from them in the name of 'law enforcement' ; Harriet Tubman and Amanda Gorman, whose creativity, courage and spirit brought freedom and agency - restoring hope for future generation.

Little Lights

I looked to the lights as the pier went black.
As the starlings went out with the tide,
A conductor emerged from the darkness,
To take me back home.

As dusk soldiered on,
The houses erupted like lanterns,
That sailed through the spaces.
We saw feasting and families and dancing.
All held in windows, like portraits in frames.

The flowers that peaked through the creases in concrete
Burned so brightly they cut through the haze of the evening.
We imagined them warming our fingers,
Strolling through parks by the light of the street lamps.

I heard music and chanting
Rise up to the station like wood smoke,
It's guarded by men we don't trust.
I hear power ring out through the fearful.
My own pain unravels, I don't feel it's sting anymore.

It was here that I finally let go
My heart facing south, as I looked out to sea.
Although I could not see the ocean I knew it was waiting
Could feel, the tide coming in.

We're all in this together, A collection of islands
Connected by what is submerged by the current
Things won't be the same when the lights come on.
What's important is we're here
When they do.

SAM KENYON HAMP

My Lamentations

I was looking at the lights being extinguished.
Each bright flame was starved of oxygen.
The city was becoming a place of darkness.
Starved of light. Starved of breath.

I heard other people taking in the air, sharply.
They tried to battle through busy streets.
I could feel their desperation.
I was now struggling to breathe, starting to choke.

I felt connection being starved.

I was looking at the television, and I saw a camp in Sudan.
I saw the helplessness on the faces of families.
I noticed the presence of fellow people had become a threat, tainting lives with pain.
Tell me; how can the people we trust become those we fear?

I saw a young woman demanding an answer.
She stood in the centre of a deserted marketplace, screaming into the camera.
On her hands and knees, she pounded the ground beneath her,
“What sort of person could inflict this, upon another?”

I saw a young mother with her baby.
Protected only by a blanket, she held her young child close.
As if the darkness would snatch it from her.
She cried; “Show me hope! Show my child mercy!”

I felt a broken place.

I was looking out of my window.
I saw an old man reaching for someone to hold.
He struggled to raise his arms and couldn't speak.
Sweet memories could no longer comfort him.

I could hear a married couple through the walls of my flat.
They woke their children to check on their small bodies.
To check they were undisturbed by sickness.

I heard the unspoken thoughts of a young woman standing at a vigil.
She stood quietly in the crowd,
Upright, with her own arms wrapped around her body.
Protecting herself from harm.
Hope had abandoned her.

I saw a young man confined to an empty house.
And in the silence, I said,
“Find your voice.”

I felt compelled to reach out.

JOSEPH LEE

Lament for Doomed Youth

i)

I was in this city, and I saw it didn't love.
Queer-hatred cruised through the streets.
Gutters washed away its secrets, drains
overflowed with guilt. And shame was
the thing that no youth could name.

I saw a boy holding sweet peas & smiles
the tender petals of childhood dropped.
A father preached his preference for
a thief over a queer for a son whose
youth was damned before it began.

Judgement delved down the boy's throat
grabbing that apple with one bite gone.
The boy blamed a belly of snakes
and faced a wall, nailed with a wreath.
He wept inside like a broken fridge.

The boy was alone in a city of amber lights.
No prayers or holy glimmers could hold
a flaming candle to his sad eyes.
Demented choirs sung words they didn't
understand, boyhood wailed into a void.

Playground screams echoed a monstrous
truth, that the boy knew was his. With no
mother at home, he spoke instead to the wall
beside his bed. He scratched a hole in hope
to escape those wet sheets and all their stink.

*O silence, silence my fear.
O fear, submit to the darkness.
O darkness, release my breath.*

ii)

I saw this boy in the city where he learned
to fight for others but hide from himself.
Each glimpse of darkness begging for a cure
the boy couldn't sleep, nor could he rise
from crusted sheets and hidden depths.

He visited the city where he was born
still the laws declared his joy a shame
a state of disgrace, a death row convict
desperate to hang himself, to swing with
sorry scrawled on the soles of his shoes.

In an eastern city, his brother's death
was a drawing down of blinds, a loss so
mourned that it saved his life. I saw the boy
couldn't leave his parents that burden
of another child's body, to burn, to bury.

The boy left for the rainy city where the
police chief stalked dank canals and alleys
a dark blue spectre watching his every skip.
God's copper dreamt of thrashing queers
until their weals begged for mercy and salt.

O silence, silence my fear.
O fear, submit to the darkness.
O darkness, release my breath.

iii)

Then gravestones tumbled black & white, God's
reminder this cesspit was a bed he wet himself.
A grey monolith says that Ignorance = Fear.
The boy's deep terror howls – Silence = Death.
In the shadows, a hope bugles – Action = Life.

One by one, each city became a ghost, snuffing
out a generation of lost uncles, brothers & lovers
the boy wished he had, never had or ever would.
What bells toll for these who die as rabbits
stacked in numbered boxes of those unknown?

The leader spoke to her nation and revoked
a gay boy's inalienable right to breathe
along with all those queer children cheated
of a sound start in life. Yes, cheated by mockeries,
pretend families that tripped over their dead kids.

He roamed a city with big lights, on streets where
the only place left to look, was dark. A deep dark,
that did not end with the dawn. A black dark,
that could not be reached by sun or moon.
He lost his sense of the edge between love & touch.

He set out from that city to a salt-sea coast
wrapped in a darkness, he learned to kill ghosts.
But it was from this gravel-blind beach
that he saw his darkest fate, a place from where
he could not rise, and the sand blew to dust.

O silence, silence my fear.

O fear, submit to the darkness.

O darkness, release my breath.

O breath, breathe in my peace.

SIMON MADDRELL

The Witness

I bear witness to the tragedies of today!

I see myself on the street
watching people hurry by
I see faceless figures shrouded in fear
The elderly trapped in their homes

I hear a clanging noise, incessant clapping
As people thank God it is not their job
To be surrounded by disease

I see a young woman sat in a crowded room,
Her laughter does not reach her eyes
as she realises she's been left all alone
Oh cruel world!
How much more loneliness must we experience!

People march down dirty streets
Anxious solidarity dripping down their backs.
Another woman died last week,
She'd been promised safety by the state

Even children are weeping,
Tiny black hands held up in tiny black fists to the air.
Air they try desperately to breathe
Hate stuck to their lungs,
as they beg us to save them

Sixteen-year-olds are whooping in the square,
All the classrooms are empty
I listen to teachers complain,
Trying to silence us
Blood boiling in my veins

Criminal men cause explosions
A port once flowing with water now drips crimson
Dust falls in sore eyes as homes crumble

I see a mother wailing alone
in the middle of the rubble,
Her soul in agony.
She throws up her arms and demands God speak to her,
I hear no response.

It's been a year now
Faces older than souls join hands,
Uncertain voices sing in unison,
As they remember those they've lost

A broken bell tolls over the earth; a disjointed ceremony
I turn my face in shame!
It was us who watched as terror moved in
And we did nothing but wait

As that bell tolls, I speak to you now and I implore you
Please listen.
I have looked on in horror,
as my world succumbed to darkness
Day by day, I have seen the light leaving our homes
The longest year in history
But still I want to say, do not lose hope!
We have reached the end of the road
yet we are still here,

Our spirit will never go dark!

LUCIE NAISH

Lamentation

I see a young man.
His eye is swollen and bruised.
Chained in the hull of a ship.
Shaking his bilboes.
Calling for his ancestors.
Will his gods follow him to a strange land
or the bottom of the ocean?

I see a tangle of bodies in a pit.
No ceremonial cloths adorn them.
No oil anointing their hands and feet and faces.
Unnamed. Naked. Worn. Spent.
Bone upon bone, thin skinned, broken.
Mothers. Elders. Fathers.
Brothers. Friends. Children.
The earth holds them in this silent Caribbean tomb.
Their cries are voiceless.
Who will say their names?

I see a child collecting food parcel from school.
A can of beans, packet of raisins, cheese slices, Frubes.
Who will feed our children's souls?
Will they know what sustenance is?

I see a man, ashen grey on a sofa.
He is taking his life over a pile of brown envelopes.
He is diagnosed with long words that show no care.
Are the vulnerable ever worthy?

I see the structure of grief.
Skinned by the language
Of colonisation.
Captive in a structure that
denies and cannot contain
the reverberation of anguish.
I look out the window.
There is a seven floor drop.

I see a couple and two children in Sunday attire.
Delighted, walking to church for their lamentation service.
And Outside, There, it is happening-
the stripping away of cities, the Other.

It is happening.
And in the darkness, not one is recalled.
Darkness begets darkness,
forgetting begets forgetting
begets a type of forgiveness
that doesn't heal.

I hear a row of elm trees.
They speak a language that is old.
Unfamiliar.
They are being sacrificed for a road.
They are crying.

I sit in a court waiting room.
Crisps and sausage rolls
squashed on the floor.
A family is losing their three children to forced adoption.
Red eyed, desperate.
Who will judge them all?

A girl is cutting herself in her bedroom.
She shares her photo on the dark web.
Who can count the likes?

Two teenagers in dark hoodies.
Sit on the ground below a tower block
Doing ketamine.
Hoping to find a hole big enough to hide in.
There's no place in the world.

Ah the city trades away its soul, gives away
its peoples' hearts and it is not sorry.
And the golf green is lush.

I see a woman in bed.
Wearing purple fleece pyjamas.
It is two in the afternoon.
She is waiting until the day is over.
Hoping she may feel something in the night.

I see a young boy at his desk in school.
He is receiving his exam grades.
Hoping for a future
that depends on another's measurement.
He has failed every question.

He is below the national average in every way.
He is only twelve.

I see a mother in a lift.
Bare faced,
Worn from caring for her adult son.
He's off his meds
And spitting and punching holes in walls.
She could get stabbed.
But who will cook his dinner?

A man is outside fast food joints.
He's waiting by his scooter.
Just a casual worker.
He crossed a sea to do this.
Where is his future?

I see hundreds and hundreds of people
Sleeping on factory floors.
The din of machinery
A mechanical lullaby.
More needs more-
Is never enough-
To fill this hole where we belong.
Who will say their names?

A line is forming.
Of people in flip flops and worn trainers.
Large laundry bags stuffed with every possession.
Waiting for admission to a country
That doesn't want them.
Calling their ancestors.
Hoping their gods will accompany them
To strange lands.

I see a group of people on a dinghy.
Washed up by white cliffs.
Unnamed. Worn. Spent.
Bone upon bone, thin skinned, broken.
Mothers. Elders. Fathers.
Brothers. Friends. Children.
Their cries are voiceless.
Who will say their names?
And I see all this
Dislocation. Dispossession. Desolation,

This abomination. Stripping of dignity.
Justice deprivation.
And above, the satellites are watching.
Filming, tracking every movement.

Where are the angels?
Where are the angels?
Where are the angels?

GEORGINA PARKE

Lamentations

I am here.

I am your witness.

1

I see a city crumbling and a child running.

I see his despair, his feet pounding.

I see a woman standing motionless

On the once busy street corner,

Silently sobbing for all she has lost.

I see young people, coming together without fear;

Their defiant faces expecting and wanting no apology.

I see an open square,

No longer full of market stalls and chatter;

Desolate, and hushed.

And now I hear sirens

Bouncing between high buildings.

Where cathedral bells and calls to prayer once sounded.

I am with you

I am your witness

2

In this city, I see so many people.

I see their pain, their fear, their anger

Held within a jutting jaw, fidgeting hands, downcast eyes.

I sit on a bench, and see a woman I once loved.

I try to call her name, but she has already turned away.

How am I so tired?

How is this city no longer my home?

So much hope, that we once held.

I brace myself again.

I am your witness,

And mine.

3

Our stories propel us forward
And yet they may divide us too.
Let us share them together.

Look around you!
This is all that we have!
There is only us!

Let us tell our stories.
Tell me yours, and I will cherish and care for them.

And let us dream together!
Let us open doors,
Bring in light, and find meaning together.
Oh, my love, my people! Do you not feel this too?

*We are the creators of our future.
Together, our stories will be told, and heard.
We shall bear witness to this.*

MARK PRICE

Lament

I

Lying in a hospital bed,
Crisp white sheets drenched in medication,
But her smell remains;
The smell of home, of love, of family.

II

Breathe Mummy, breathe.
Can she hear me? asks her daughter.
I don't know, my darling.
Why don't you know?
Does blame ameliorate pain?

III

Daddy tell Mummy to breathe.
Breathe Mummy, breathe.
Breathe for your daughter.
Breathe for me.
Breathe for us all.

IV

Drowning in darkness
In the still quiet I have never known,
I tuck in our child and her favourite teddy.
They don't make a fuss in our private pain
Consumed by death.

Someone, breathe hope into my heart.

V

Teddy says Mummy will be all right,
I'm sure she will, I say, giving up on honesty.
Will we see her tomorrow?
No. Why not!
Questions I cannot answer.

VI

Breathe, my darling, breathe.
I love you. I love you so much.
I love you more than a mother loves a child,
More than the impossibility of love.

VII

My world has changed.
Gone is the promise of permanence
Leaving the artifice of memory as our consolation.
I don't want to believe the change.
To believe would give reality meaning.

VIII

Despair brings me to my knees.
God, where are you? I scream.
People look away
Stunned by their helplessness.
There is no redemption here.

Someone, breathe hope into my heart

IX

The beach is empty.
Devoid of children and laughter
I hear the incessant lap of waves.
The piercing shriek of gulls cry out,
Where are the people!

X

Life still burns within us.
We cannot bleed away our pain.
To do so would burn the past,
Reduce precious memories to ashes.

XI

I can't believe she's gone, but no one can.
It feels like the destruction of the world,
But the world is still here.
A world blighted by loss.

Someone, breathe hope into my heart.

XII

Do you love me? She asks.
You already know.
But I want to hear you say it, she says.
I love you more than everything you've left me.

XIII

Isabel! Isabel! Where are you now?
I'm here! I'll always be here.
Thank God! I thought I'd lost you.
I sleep in the arms of Isabel.

XIV

In the darkness I now see
As tangible as love can be,
That dreams materialise,
That pain learns to live with hope.

*God have mercy on us all
Breathe hope into our hearts.*

ZAID S. SETHI

Lamentation of the Elements

And I will now begin speaking elementally for you...

<p>H hydrogen</p>	<p>1. I was in this city, and I saw it happen. It came from all directions, mostly below. I felt the ground quiver, heard HER groan in hideous tones. I saw the ground crack open, a purple chemical glow pushed me up. SHE was being aggressive, antigravitational. It was like the breath in my chest shrank when I screamed.</p>
<p>He helium</p>	<p>2. MOTHER said it's boiling outside. HER face looked tender under the grating beams. There was no respite under those ash trees, sparse and crisped with powdered leaves. Greta looked at me with twitching eyelids and tear-troubled cheeks. I remembered a time when we grew lemons, cartoon yellow orbs that didn't burn like the devil when we picked them.</p>
<p>Li. lithium</p>	<p>3. I wanted to visit MOTHER, to tell HER about little Greta. I wanted to say "Greta is still weird". Say she is still a skew-whiff doll with black buttons for eyes. Say we heard her laughter again. Say it sounded tinny and far away, like a hollow voice-box, like a punctured chew-toy. I wanted to tell MOTHER about little Greta, but MOTHER isn't well. MOTHER is very unwell.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Be beryllium</p>	<p>4. I saw MOTHER coughing, in the backyard as SHE hung up our washing. I saw how betrayed SHE felt, knowing what we had done. Dizzily and off centre, SHE wobbled around the grey lawn a while.</p> <p>When SHE finally toppled, I decided to come closer. SHE wheezed, mouthing an ancient hex into my ear! “A pox for me. A pox for you!” Greta was crying on the stoop, praying for HER forgiveness.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">B boron</p>	<p>5. In this city, we used amorphous rocks to feed the rockets. We shielded our eyes as they bloomed clouds and chemicals and cancers. I planned to leave the city at dusk. I packed a bag of essential plants, tender sprouts for breakfast and bitter cabbages for exile. I was a little brown medicine woman who pocketed HER withered heads of hope. Outside, Greta was on the stoop sobbing. MOTHER’s face was dissolving into the dirt yard.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">C carbon</p>	<p>6. There was mayhem in the streets. The gates were locked. Every launchpad was bare. No way out, I thought, looking up into the dark-lit day. Everyone was urgently running in no particular direction.</p> <p>Jostled into the industrial sludge, I thought of MOTHER’s spurned face. Someone trampled my fingers, a hurried foot tripped over my teeth. I knew this day would come; I heard nearaway whimpers from MOTHER’s dog-eared Bible.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">N nitrogen</p>	<p>7. And then we all began to float, like battered little ghost things, dispossessed. From above, I could see the ocean. It was viscous black and putrid. It wasn't moving. It wasn't waving at the automaton moon. Everything left behind is machine or decay or regret. On my face, my nostrils burned, punishment for what we did to MOTHER. Crawling over the horizon, came the cruel and hissing sun.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">O oxygen</p>	<p>8. There are different versions of this story. But I was there when MOTHER was in the garden plucking herbs between her brown fingers and her green thumb. When SHE falls this time, I hold Greta's hand. Together, we hold our breaths. We wait for HER tiny gasps to stop. And they do. SHE looks old. HER head is a casket. SHE looks familiar, like SHE was once our grandmother and MOTHER and me.</p>

...So now I have spoken elementally for you.

SEA SHARP

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About The Writers

Maria Amidu: Maria Amidu is an artist and writer who is also currently a PhD Candidate at the Royal College of Art, London; www.mariaand.co; @ms_amidu

Jenny Arach: Jenny Arach was born of African and English parentage. She writes poetry based on her family's experiences in East Africa, Brighton & East Sussex

Sheila Auguste: Sheila Auguste, 58 is a writer and therapist who lives, works and plays in Brighton and beyond.

Yvonne Canham-Spence: Yvonne Canham-Spence is currently pursuing her doctoral research on the Santiago de Cuba Carnival in eastern Cuba. She writes poetry on the themes of love, loss and journeying.

Helen Dixon: Helen Dixon is a British-Nicaraguan, queer feminist writer and translator. Helen is currently doing a PhD at the University of Brighton and teaches at the University of Sussex.

Josephine Hall: Writer Josephine Hall lives and works in Brighton. You can find more of her work at josephinehall.org.

Oluwafemi Hughes Jonas: Oluwafemi Hughes Jonas lives and works in Brighton. She is the whisper in your ear.

Sam Kenyon Hamp: Sam Kenyon Hamp is a newly graduated multi-disciplinary writer and researcher, passionate about Brighton and the city's limitless creativity, Samkenhamp@gmail.com

Joseph Lee: Joseph Lee, 27, writer from The Black Country residing in Brighton. He writes about loss, and compassion, through relationship with colloquial angst and existential gratitude. Instagram @joeyyy_lee Website <https://joeywords.com>

Simon Maddrell: Simon is a Queer Manx poet who now lives in Brighton & Hove.

Lucie Naish: Lucie Naish, a 19 year old queer writer who is studying creative writing at the University of Brighton.

Georgina Parke: Georgina Parke is of Ghanaian English heritage and grew up in Lincolnshire and lives in Sussex. She is a nature writer and Gestalt therapist and holds workshops at Breathing Space, Stanmer Park. www.georginaparke.org

Mark Price: Mark Price is a writer, educator, and researcher, working with narrative border crossings and becomings. He has worked previously as a teacher, youth worker and psychotherapist. www.lifeswork.uk

Zaid Sethi: Zaid is a freelance writer whose latest collection of short stories 'Blue Tomorrows' was published in 2020.

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