

Impossible Things About Optimism

Barbican Young Poets 2016



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Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning

Creative Learning at the Barbican and Guildhall School aims to inspire, challenge and amaze – whether you're in the audience or taking part. It enables people to participate and to develop themselves through a vibrant multi-arts programme. Our audiences enjoy international music, theatre and dance, film, visual arts and design and through our partnerships, we present the best established artists, while seeking out and nurturing the talent of the future. Creative Learning is a joint division of the Barbican and neighbouring conservatoire the Guildhall School. The division provides a spectrum of opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, from first experiences of the arts to professional level.

Our pledge to young people

We will

Help you access and afford outstanding arts events

By offering accessibly priced tickets to Barbican events for 14-25 year olds and putting on free events at the Barbican and in your community.

Give you a platform to be creative

By delivering inspirational, hands on arts experiences for every 8-16 year old in east London by 2020 and giving you opportunities to perform and showcase your work.

Enable you to gain skills and get jobs in a 21st century economy

By providing arts and training opportunities for over 10,000 young people and artists by 2020.

Listen to what you want

Programming events by, with and for you. Listening to your ideas and supporting the teachers and artists working with you to bring them to life.

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A very warm welcome to the readers and creators of the Barbican Young Poets anthology 2016; a poetry anthology produced by Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning to showcase the work of our immensely talented community of young poets.

The Barbican Young Poets come together for fortnightly workshops at the Barbican between September and March each year. Throughout the programme, under the inspiring leadership of Jacob Sam-La Rose, they explore a diverse range of poetic genres, styles and themes in order to push their developing voices in new directions. They study the craft of writing, and they explore, through collaborative project opportunities, the power of performing their material live. Through this process, each poet goes on a journey, discovering what is unique about their own artistic voice, supporting and challenging each other, and evolving together as part of a collective of young artists. And it doesn't stop here – the Barbican Young Poets are drivers for change – their fresh, diverse voices are increasingly responsible for defining the shape of the poetry scene locally, nationally and internationally, and they are an essential part of the community of young artists who we support and develop here at the Barbican and Guildhall School of Music & Drama.

Creative Learning aims to shape and deliver new approaches to engagement with the arts. We are committed to working with young people to unlock their creativity and bring their voices to the foreground. We are dedicated to providing young people with access to outstanding arts events, giving them a platform to be creative, and enabling them to gain skills and get jobs in a 21st century economy. The inspirational work of the Young Poets continually feeds into our vision for world class arts and learning, and we are grateful to them for their sustained commitment to the programme.

This year, we are privileged to have Jacob Sam-La Rose join us a tutor on our brand new BA in Performance and Creative Enterprise, for which the Young Poets programme has been a great inspiration. Building on the way that Jacob has worked with the Barbican Young Poets over the last eight years, students on our new BA have already benefited from Jacob's practice, as he takes a lead on the spoken word strand of the course. On behalf of all of the participating poets and Creative Learning staff involved in delivering the programme, I would like to thank Jacob and Assistant Tutor Rachel Long for their commitment and dedication to each of the poets. Jacob and Rachel's passion for each and every young person they work with makes an extraordinary contribution to their development, as they flourish as young people, and push the boundaries of what it means to be an artist in the world of today and tomorrow.

It is ever a delight to work with such a talented group of young people; we hope you find the same enjoyment in reading the work collected here in their anthology.

Sean Gregory

Director
Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning

25 poets, each with their own individual voice. 13 sessions. 9 writing prompts and challenges. Two facilitators, two guests. Three members of staff from the Barbican's Creative Learning Department. The building itself. Photocopied handouts (even in spite of the drive to be more efficient with paper). Countless sample poems, references to poetry collections or supporting texts, and cups of tea. The all-important mid-session snacks. Commitment; the drive to write and submit poems regardless of academic deadlines, the pressures of daily living and personal tragedies. Fear, in healthy measures, and a willingness to extend oneself beyond any borders, boundaries or limitations that may have previously been accepted. These are only some of the ingredients that have contributed to this year's Barbican Young Poets anthology.

This year, we welcome Rachel Long as a new Assistant Tutor on the programme. We also welcome Rikky Onefeli and Lorna McGinty to the team. We extend our thanks to Inua Ellams and Paula Varjack for guest sessions they facilitated. We thank each poet for everything they've brought into the room, everything they've left on the page and everything they've invested in their work over the six months the programme spans.

And we thank you: the reader. We thank you for celebrating with us what these young poets are capable of, and everything they can go on to achieve.

Jacob Sam-La Rose

Artistic Director / Lead Facilitator

Lauren Monaghan-Pisano

Theatre and Cross Arts Producer, Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning



Awe (n.) Definition II

i.

Seeing a body for the first time, meeting
a man at his funeral,

staring him in the eyelid
his face is washed out.
Afro-European,
ashy brown.

You are waiting for him to breathe,
end his cold, skinny nap,
then walking away.

ii.

Watching others weep in his presence.

You imagine they are not used to gardening.
“He probably needs watering”, they think.

iii.

A young man, chilled by the open casket, stares
at the cushioned white lining,
the polished mahogany,
or the clothed stone wall beyond it,
crying from the fear of him.

iv.

The space between the eardrum
and the striking of a bell.

XY & XX & YX & YY

I was born into tight t-shirts and loose jeans.
Into blue painted tiles and loud tractor cars,
thrown bruise first into aggressive handshakes and puffed out chests,
I was born into boy.

I was born into grasping at tears and opening doors.
Into muddy football games and locker room silence,
smothered watertight with unmeasurable heights and lost expectations,
I was born into boy.

I was born into colourless face paint and bitten down nails.
Into punching walls death, and clenched sore fists,
buried garden deep with narrow tightropes and fatal falling mistakes,
I was born into boy.

I was born into toy soldiers and tarnished rugby boots.
Into thought out drill routines and gelled-back hair,
sealed with the lid shut on navy measured boxes and trumpet marches,
I was born into boy.

---18 births later---

The pulsing wine lipstick took hold of my cracks.
The slick matte polish drowned over my index.
The neatly crafted skirt hung just above my nerves.
I was never asked to be boy.





Embracing the Spirit of 'And What?'

I watch him turn the piece of tangerine over in his fingers.
He turns it on its side.
There's a blemish where the core should be,
then orange rim.
He wonders whether this is how Hiroshima looked from the heavens,
just a blemish,
just a sedate stain.

He presses down middle finger on the top,
thumb on the bottom,
the flesh bursts.
He thinks,

I've never seen them open like this,
and wonders whether that's what God thinks
of those many black bodies that are shipped or cut down
those black boys who are shot on an instant replay
those black boys who are shot on an instant replay
those black boys, *those black boys*
who are shot,
who are shot but are the aggressors.

When specks of blood fill the air like pulp
and time peels away their skin,
how will God measure this level of loss?

Examples of Confusion

1. Familial estrangement

I tug a strand of hair out of my scalp and thread it neatly into my mouth then pull it through the gap in my teeth, taut

as though it were a moth unable to find the quickest way out of the family living room, ignoring the wide open door – batting the window with a pair of dust-brown wings.





Jessica Chastain is Floating in Zihuatanejo

Like the evening I quit my 0600 sales role just before Christmas. I left them cold sandwiches behind me like Andy Dufresne left the sewer, like it was a birth canal, clutching his Pacific ocean beach house soap bar. You see me? Yes, I'm as unoriginal as they come. Waking up late on mornings, a groundhog, cursing the alarm. *No, no it's not me it's you*; believing all *six impossible things* about optimism before I skip breakfast, consider lightly the horror of starvation against the letdown of lost time; tell my body *Baby, I'm sorry*, remind it of how, were I my mother, *it could have been somebody's* by now; refrain that *tomorrow is another day...* although *I'm walking here*. Granted, *yes, only on Earth, and not for long*, but *I'm walking here*.

Kinetic

1. Energy cannot be destroyed, only converted; potential to gravitational to kinetic.
2. Every action, an equal reaction.

So serenely, she
reflects spectres of life,
orchestrating with her magnetism
genteel control, calming repetition.
A face that sailed a thousand ships.

The waves are
a metronome of her bidding,
crashing and converting
her oblivious gaze
into a constant watchfulness.

She draws them,
melancholic, yielding,
to mobilise an assembly of
restless currents into
rapids curving into each other,
rising into white foam avalanches.
Ovations clapping in the salt air,
drying the lips of a skipper,
tossing overboard,
wonder, fear, worship, terror.
"Do not try to be Poseidon" he says.

Cradled to the momentum of
her rhythmic silence, the men will read fables
of mermaids and monsters in their cabins.
They will trace the 28 guises
with which she guides gravity and
learn the fundamentals of physics.



Nicki Chua



The Day Lady Died

After Frank O'Hara

Bastille day, he told me, 3 days earlier, 56 years later,
his vocals husky with an age of Gauloises and Stregas.
Oozing jazz in my ears, hungry to hear precious nostalgia
like a vinyl for me. Lady's voice raw in its beauty,
made phantom flesh, sound and sheer will of force
balanced in perfect harmony. Missing only Mal Waldrons'
fraternal fingering of the ivories.

I'm sitting in O'Hara's loft, imagining him
swaying to the jazz in my headphones.
JD Honey tasting like his experience, that night,
where he and I sit like two ghosts trapped
in a dimension where art meets experience beset upon
every angle.

Yet I am the odd changing face this year,
looking to get my taste of the Big Apple.
He told me the burger was just part of the
archeology I'm rummaging through with curiosity.
"Be gentle with your inquisitiveness, he states,"
in his phantom croon over the crackling of
the turn table in the corner of the room.

"Do you ever wonder why she didn't look it up?"
Her lips gentle in song, the last of our breath sung forth
like the ruffles protruding from her dress. Her heart captured
with her eyes shining with true sentimentality and love
for what she's doing. The photographer caught her at that moment
we all held our breath.

I feel him dissipate at his recollection, I feel the pull of this
memory he's sharing. He's breathed it into a fantasy,
I can even hear the band hold the arrangement
tightly in Stormy Weather, when she holds that last note in
what can only be the eye of a tornado of her talent.
No more will we have another, he sighed mournfully.



Mesosphere

I am mid-air
right in the space between the layers of the atmosphere
I used to know those words
are they stratosphere mesosphere?

In the space between spaces
where the air is too thin to breathe
the sunlight too harsh
all burn, all dry.

Like the over toasted slice of bread
Inedible lifeless crumbling away
like my resolve to send those texts
why eating breakfast alone without conversations
about perfect buttering, optimum cheese to ham ratios
backspaced off the screen
bitten back from the call.

No breathing
no moving
that is when you know you exist.

Suspension of the bodily functions
Brings a sudden jarring awareness
of the body itself
an acute observation of its absence.

Like this half of the bed uncrumpled,
the now lonely toothbrush in the glass above the sink
why sleeping alone and no longer
seeing happiness through an eyelash curtain of sleep dust
backspaced off the screen
bitten back from the call.

When this cloud dissolves,
and memories evaporate,
the body will fall
and falling
moving
dropping
will feel again like
living.

That is why I am so busy,
working my way downwards.

St. Peter's Close

Bramble slowly edges out old concrete,
trodden flat yet still it pushes on. I wonder,
careworn in this care home chair, which was put there
first?

The ground around those weeds is dry, their thirst
has helped them wage their war,
see how the concrete cracks before them?

See how I try to fight my boredom?
Sitting here, I wish I were a weed,
neither tall nor proud but strong and sure to last

when other blooms of beauty fold into the past.
My fall from youth was not so elegant,
years wasted with my face towards the sun.

Now I see I could have fought the concrete, won
some measurable victory.
I would have settled for a single inch.

My bones might break beneath a pinch
or memories fall between the cracks I cannot close.
That would be a sour sight

if there were any here to see it. Night
approaches on a steed the colour of wet tarmac
with shoes, as sharp as scythes, upon its feet.



A Game of Subtraction

After Antosh Wojcik's, *Five Gazelles Running Through A Sonnet*

Supine, here. Half-truths spooling out the corner of your mouth, sticking to the walls. In the morning, the mould sprouting in my lungs. Around us, your lies, measureless.

Telling you to leave reminded me of how an uncle delivered an eviction notice to the divine:

pasted a note in Tamil to the trunk of the banyan tree in the yard, apologising:

"I have to cut this tree down."

The gods, eyes wide, learning to comprehend that even a mortal can leave them homeless.

"One of coordinates of your life is gone," his brother told me at his funeral. That's it, he was trying to warn me: everything dissolves. There's nothing for it then, except to make a go at it, at this, at life, in the best way we know how.

We both learned that month how it feels to hold something while knowing you are losing it: to feel a life grow dimmer, a person turning distant.

Grief in the moment of losing, antecedent to loss: a big black bird with heavy wings beating at you from within, the motions ceaseless.

I thought he might open his milky eyes, turned transparent with age,
when I spoke his name,
blue sterile gauze covering my feet. A prologue to neglect: the fluids filling the body,
blood dripping from his nose,
eyes he could not open, bruises on the inside of his arm, blood coagulating in the brain.
I wanted to honour his yellowing skin,
body placed on the granite on the living room floor. Death certificate affixed to his chest,
a body regulated, positioned,
made ready for dying a more public death. Even the dead deserve a ceremony of air,
flesh upturned to sky: here. You. Borderless.



Examples of Confusion

An uncut woman
is not a clean woman,
the nurse translated, meant to say
the doctor needs to open you up
the stitches were done too tight, everything
will be okay.
Meant to say
meant to
but said mada hishod haysanin:
don't you have no shame?

The scar healed wrong,
layers of skin grew but never closed it up.

You should feel ashamed of
what they don't know.

He's always on the ward for dying patients
how does he make it past the Angel of Death each night?

It feels awkward
to use my full name,
it's too immigrant to say out loud.
They argued on what to call me,
he wanted a name that I couldn't run away from,
she wanted a three dimensional one.
Said I was her Luul,
carved and sculpted in the womb, too precious
to let go.

She gave in.

The drive to Heathrow was grey.
Somehow Londoners call this summer,
they don't know that warmth is in colour.
Why does leaving feel like the coast, bare?

Mum's laugh is recorded
over Zainab's wedding tape.

The Listener

They called him Tom the Mong
he liked it when wave froth scattered.
He was with them that night in the dunes
squeezed into a Vauxhall Corsa, agreeing
Yes, his Mum was fit, he'd do her too.
No one laughed. Spliff. Glue. Hey Mong,
have some of this. Hercules inhalations,
becoming stardust and rubble.

There is a small Welsh village that jostles
houses up to the sea for inspection. Inside
a living room, a man composes choral
music. Pulls notes with his hands
from dustbins, stories from porches
where young men struggle throats around
Please, one more night. He moulds them
into sooty terns, cormorants, seagulls.

People who hear the music comment
It's so beautiful, compared to Justin Bieber,
he should be well famous. But with tweets
and hair gel to apply there might not be time
to grieve a local boy turned to rubble.
Let alone sculpting him a song.
Fingertips smoothing spindly lengths,
slotting bones and blowing in feathers.





Wasn't It Kind of Wonderful?

Men as water
slipping between women
as broken fingers

Men as the cactus plants
women as burning kitchens
used for oxygen

Men as prodigal sons

Men as germination
seed firing from outside itself
reaching towards women as the sky

Men as sunlight
confined to the nature of falling
on humans in prison grounds

Women as the ground

Women as penny sweet wrappers
to be torn open by children
as Andy Dufresne

Women as weak currency
in circulation
gold bodies bent into palms
folded into dark spaces

Children as ceiling fans
tangled in hot air mothers

Children as fish in tanks
Children as bottled water
Children as suitcases
Children as sliced fruit

Children as wilting plants to be sold
eventually dying at tables and desks

Humans as two hands of the same body
picking itself apart

Humans as worker bees and honeycomb

Sinusoidal

Survival is a hard promise to keep. You can empty yourself, unload and strip and still sink, all your thoughts and belongings laid out in the sediment with your limbs among them too tired to rise, find land. You try to remember the drill. Last time around the consultant slid the list of emergency numbers across the desk but it's another thing to dial, to admit this new disaster, to beg. Sometimes when the sailboats come they find you already lifted, flying, chasing glory in the sound of the seagulls. You've ditched any thoughts of loss. You know you will fly forever. You are a thing of light. The sand surely won't rush to meet you. But when it does, you are frighteningly solid. Stillness is only ever a moment on loan.



Reconstruction

Rig the mast and raise it
once it's stuck inside the bottle.
Masts and sails built separately,
attached with strings and hinges –
the careful art of construction.

There's nothing natural about
being corked inside a capsule.
The ship will break free,
its hull pulsing over waves,
christening the shoreline with glass.





Little Coal Boy

Knows burns intimately.
Made to hold his fire in a freckle of candlelight,
beneath marred surface, his soft marrow is left
simmering. You do not approach him for fear of what he could be,
fostered by unlit rooms,
mothered by hands that iron him faceless.

How could you not see them
being piled high?

There were so many of them.
He watches them wane until they are nothing
but lost stutters.
He can no longer tell softer stories of himself,
no longer knows the border between his skin and
the darkness you discard him in.
He would crumble if held.
Unsunned, he learns to wear his shadow well.

How could you not see them
being piled high?

Exhausted carbon copy,
one day, bleeds dry.
Little coal boy hardens.
Severs edges.
Commits himself to the task of becoming
impenetrable.

How could you not see them
being piled high?

Psalm 151

- 1 I was born crying
at the first sight of the world,
begging my mother to push me back in,
because the darkness of the womb is
holier than all the light in the world.
- 2 The chances of living untainted
are as small as
the chances of skin surviving
direct contact with the sun.
- 3 O God have mercy on me
for what I have become.
An infinite well of excuses
for why I grew distant from light.
- 4 I am a staggering disciple.
A Red Sea searching for Moses
to grant it a new face.
- 5 Call me typical human
tripping on mistakes.
- 6 God do not judge me for what I have become.
I signalled my fear of being conquered
by the things I was created to conquer.
- 7 Ask my mother for evidence,
she'll tell you I cried at
the first sight of the world.
- 8 I could see evil trolling in the air,
a cigarette lodged between its fingers.
It tried to poison my oxygen, but
- 9 I fought it off with a strength
I prayed my fists into.
- 10 From then I knew I was unprepared for this
world of fighting darkness.
- 11 But a baby's cry is seen as nothing more
than lunch breaks from cuteness.
No one ever realises they are trying to
communicate with God.





Study of a Breakfast Table

There would be coffee,
there would be bread,
bleached napkins, by the window,
even the pot of cream,
but you're not there.

A morning
like any other
except you've entered the script
without entering the scene.
Just a figure in your chair
having been washed of darkness
skin taut, mouth clean,
shoulders tender
but you're not there.

A blistering morning
where you aren't. A kiss
with mouth full of crumbs
but no you. Only a shape.
I wet the neck with a towel
till my fingers drip.

When you come alive
you won't believe me. My hands disarmed,
torso wide open and it's true.
I'm lining my words out by the butterknife,
you read as if you're newborn.
Look: your collar is still damp.



Straight Teeth

After Memory by Stephen Dunn

What we choose to say about our past becomes our past,
I've done enough icebreakers to know.
When they ask for an interesting fact, I
will always say I've never been to the dentist.
This'll get oos and aas, but when they examine my mouth,
the time I beheaded that snake
edges closer to fiction.
Falling between the train and platform,
merges into a film. Like my mother running
through the village. The huge banana leaf
shielding us as we dodge mango-size rain
sinking pits in to the red earth.
Never having been to the dentist
is difficult to believe. And my teeth
suggest I know nothing of adventure.



Tania Nwachukwu

Learning to Steal

When your mother rolls the Baoding balls
between her fingertips
you wonder how she balances them so perfectly.

You tried to replicate her movements
with an apple and an orange.
They fell from your untrained fingers
and lay bruised on the kitchen floor;
your mother calls a maid to retrieve them.

Filtering through plug holes
matted with the hair of centuries
tangled.
Strands that cling on
and strands that strangle the others
as tightly as hair wrapped
around hands, moulding fingers
from white to purple.





My America, My New Found Land

Ripped out each silver hair, she saw
it all hallmarkable, fine hair
from England, from the low countries
clawed back from the sea.
She took it to a jeweller shop - his eyes
loomed prism-large fly-specked
in lenses turned this way and that,
what year
- yes it could have been a fine year -
and the strands were singing foul
in the soup-light of some adoring flame.

Cool water cackled at the jawing metal
stamp-end, punching hungry,
she had nothing left to give.
Discreet the needles gutted into cushion,
sprues folded fitful into leather-dark.
Wrapped about her knuckles,
held aloft, it held the sun awhile:
Fine silver, fine hair from England.

She clodhopped to the dockyard
where they shaved her
shipped her hair off to America
to the new world, to Philadelphia, it
was spooled carefully, it lay as
shadows of the sugar barrels
or the rum.

Kept safe in ordinary days
in little carving boxes,
when the neighbours came
they spread it out
the charted length of table,
just to glisten: fine hair, such silver from the old world.

Back home she spread
large and rich into a Chesterfield,
knees propped up with newspapers, waxing fatter and far off as the moon.
Touched the flats and naked
places in her skull each crater, every roundness
humming unfamiliar with the heat
of candles, and of other rougher places
in the same skin.



A Fox Crosses a Road One Evening in Soho

Wait for the light to change.

You are a child in the supermarket, lost.
Quake amidst the condiments, pray
for your name on the tannoy, the flurry
of Dad's shoes to Aisle Two.

You are the till girl, zero hours. Stand
with empty hands, glassy face. Dream
yourself setting everything alight,
as the self-service checkout pontificates.

You are my grandmother in her last days, tiny
and brave, when they took her car keys away.
Stare at the laptop we bought you. Decide
you are too old and it is too new.

Bristle as I watch you from the top deck, dreaming.
Pour bleach on these streets! See the boughs of the trees
creep triumphant through bars and cafes. Peel
up the pavement! Free the long-flattened stargazing weeds –

Green. It flashes in your eyes, cold glass
in dark earth. Cross amidst a throng of tourists,
tramping through their Fridays towards the future.
Disappear. Not one person looks down.



I Stand On Light Bulbs, Wait And See If The Burn Or Gravity Will Work First

Here is a fossil
caught in a lightbulb that bled
from a form that lived
in the dark,
the boiled shadow of a clock.
Clock that knows there are
31,536,000 seconds
in a year,
it's had the time to count.
Number amount of ticks
and tocks that can become a
coffin, who knows how
heavy
a lid can feel.

Feet are woken
by flap of claw,
centre of gravity spins
sparks and burns and burns and
dies. Makes
the dust hum, a song spilt
over steamed kneeling sand
a tune spun in
the belly, the womb
of a spider. Web to catch
reflected heat, on/off, a switch left
hanging on a rope. Its feet almost
reaching the ground.
Gravity shifts.

Fossil, or what was fossil
is dancing on a ballroom goldfish
bowl floor. Has memory
that does last longer than three seconds. Muscle
memory wonders how long it'll take for
this fixture to fall. If
gravity will stop spinning again, or if
it will always be a particle of a particle of
flame playing dress-up as the sun.

about the spinning top at the end of inception

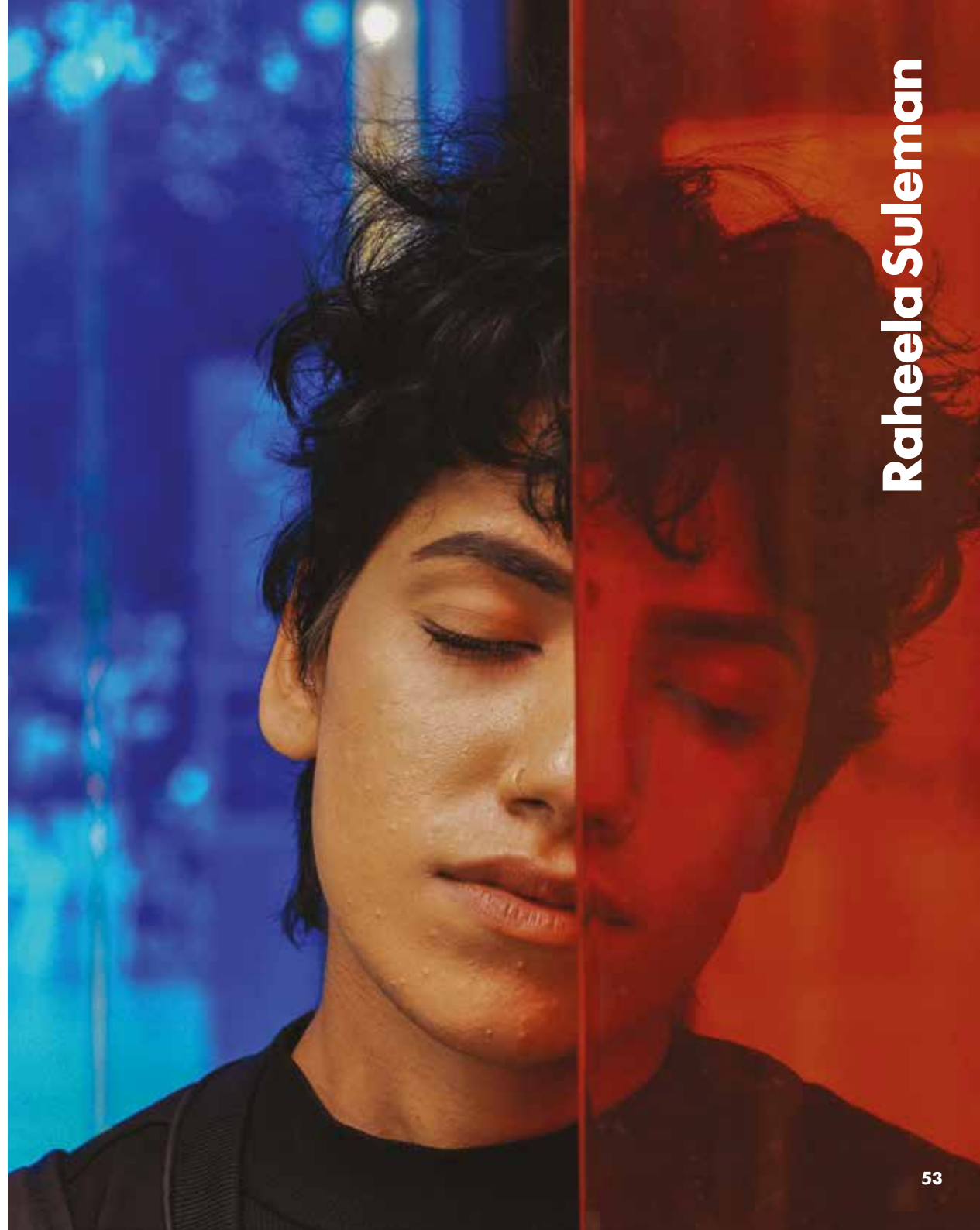
i kept my brain cut into pieces in a jar, one quarter left in a head, so I have someone to talk to after they hit the mute button. it's a never ending word document, a printer producing counterfeit money, a spinning top told me it would drop dead.

something alive that lives in a swimming pool of chlorine stained skeletons, like a quarter of an organ waiting in a bath of ice, bloody teeth on the carpet at the dentist's house, inside out vertebrates scattered on a lily pad, hands in the hands of the one you used to rock, paper, scissors with, a real scissor-hand that snips off your nose.

a leaking ceiling that i used to hate. a phone with seven missed calls from three different people. when i said goodnight i was an earthworm growing into a new body. i nearly drowned as a trout with nikes dipped in algae by the corner of the street. when you see a white crouched figure on an ocean bed with lips swaying like seaweed, you should scream out of politeness, it is my ghost.

the room is filled with cinema air. you kicked yourself and now you have a dark green bruise on your leg. the alien called himself kid a. you were sure they sang by your bedside, three fingers on your forehead the year before. the dial kept ringing. the world crossing its legs in the waiting room. how did it move this fast over six hours.

your sister complains of how loudly you talk at three a.m. her mouth a goldfish bowl of cornflakes. in mid air the bubbles leave her sighs. without the full brain you found them hard to recognise, toothpaste and saliva dripping down your chin, a carpet made of my tongue, always stained and frayed in such distinctive ways.



Maybe I'll Be The First

In the car, shreds of 8am light pool in,
the half-moons under her eyes.
She told me she's been searching all her life –
her spine now a heavy root from years of reaching
and stretching and slipping between rock and struggle.
She is a small tree, in a big storm
refusing to be displaced.
Yet every so often
anger strips her tongue
into a lashing whip,
burns hot coals in the pit
of her stomach, blows black smoke
through her heart.

In her village, she watched many close to her fall. She told me
there were murmurs of dreamers hearing an oasis calling,
whispering honey as they slept and schemed,
letting the sweetness drip in deep waves. She said
she wants to know just once, if it is as warm as the dreamers say.

For my mother, I am trying to learn what freedom looks like
in this body of mine. What it tastes like in this mouth or feels like running
through the thick of my hair and the small of my hands. I am trying
to grasp freedom with my teeth, the tips of my toes. Trying to catch it
on my eyelash, for her.
She does not know freedom,
has never known freedom,
but I've seen it
looking good, sauntering elsewhere.
I want it.
The choice to go
where I choose when I am ready.



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Barbican Young Poets is for young people aged 14–25. It runs between September and March each year, and is free to take part in.

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