

ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING AND CREATIVITY inspired by Mary Oliver

SOUL FIRE COLLECTIVE
September 2022

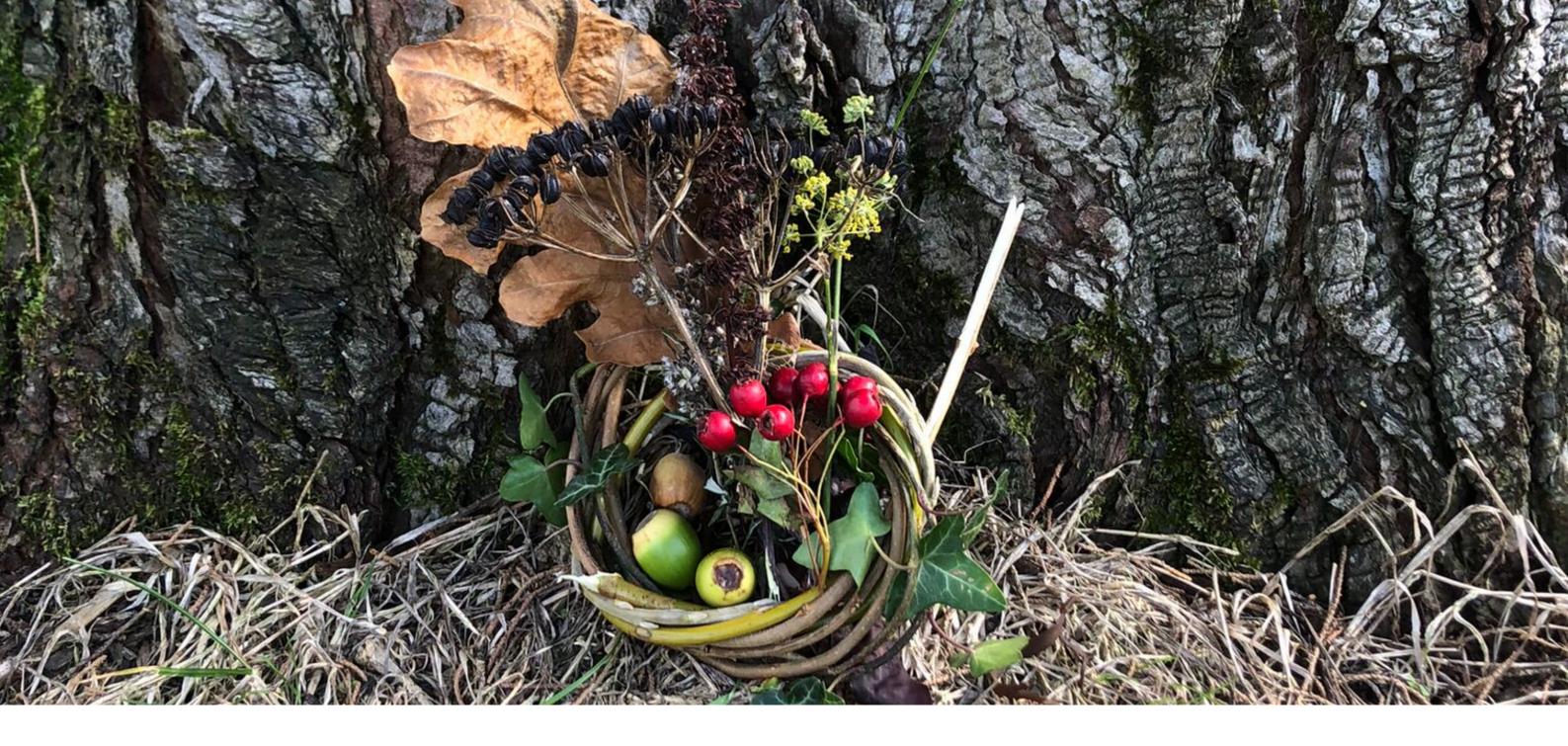


The Soul Fire Writing Retreat in September 2022 was held at Start Bay, Devon. Soul Fire Writing Retreats are spaces for changemakers and activists to get together and reflect, imagine, and co-create. They are co-designed and co-facilitated by Max Hope and Sophie Christophy.

For this retreat, we took inspiration from Mary Oliver (1935–2019), an American poet with a reputation for work inspired by her connection to nature. Her poetry and prose are full of wonder, humour, and a profound reverence for the wild.

We wanted to co-create something that we could publish at the end of the weekend, something which communicated our collective and personal commitments to change making, authenticity, speaking our truth, and speaking from the heart.

This collection of poetry, prose, and artwork – an anthology – is the result.



Listen
Breathe
Pay attention
There is beauty.

Sit
Heal
Pay attention
What do you want to do?

Rest
Do nothing
Pay attention
Nature is always there for you.

The constant ebb and flow of the sea mirrors your breath.

There is consistency

Always the breath, always the sea.

Pay attention

SARAH ALLEN



I am drawn to the glimmer
To swim into the shimmer
Until all I can see
are endless shades of blue.

From dark and wet

To light and airy

This I call horizon therapy

Just the sky, the sea & me Just the sky, the sea & me

Where the light meets the water I feel free

BONNY TYDEMAN



I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT A PRAYER IS ...

...but I know how to sit in the sun and absorb its warmth, to hear and really listen to the bird song and the bee buzz.

I know how to let my body curve into a shape that feels like nature.

I know how to howl, even if I don't often do so out loud.

I know how to cry, and laugh, and how to hug and really mean it,

And how to not hug, and mean that too.

I don't know how to bear the world, but I know it has something to do with trees, and small things, and slow movements, and company in my grief.

I know that in any of these moments, what is important is not how to save the world,

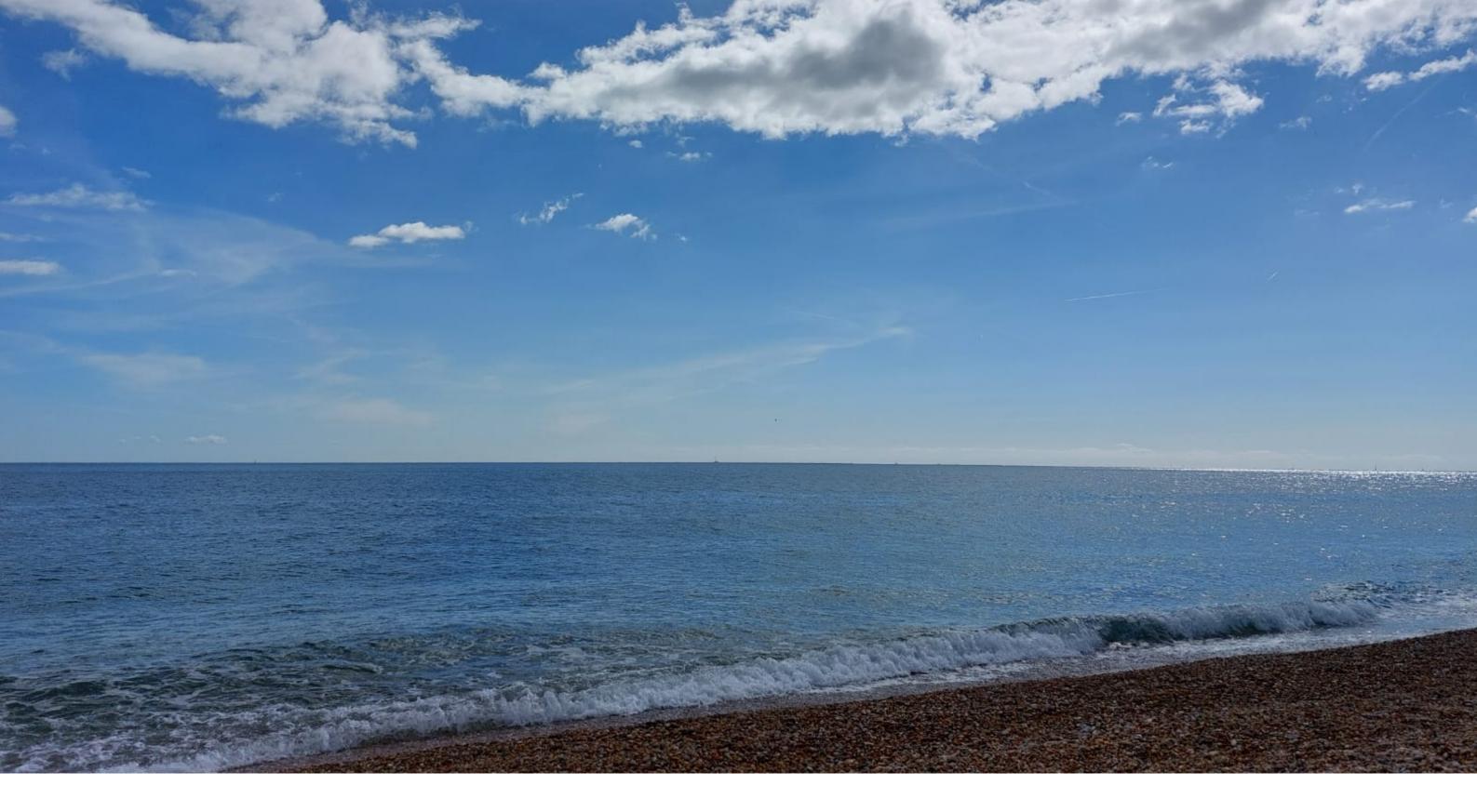
But how to breathe

What is important is that I love this child that this plant should grow that when I pick blackberries I should thank the bramble, that I know which hands to hold, and do so, unreservedly.

(with huge thanks and acknowledgement to Mary Oliver!)

JENNY ROSE





She's vast, yet still returning to the same point you cannot mistake her. Nothing else will take her place. Reliable, Always present, Only getting bigger. All consuming. Does she intimidate you? No. For she knows, Whatever is within her, whatever directions she is pulled. There is only her that she is sure of, Her Ocean.

ATHENA LLYWELYN



When it came time to say goodbye I looked up to give thanks and was surprised by Gaia herself.

Of course.

All the while watching as we had maryied
Standing around with her arms open in prayer:

For a better world For love, and change

For the seeds of hope,
gathered as magpie treasures,
pocketed in notebooks
and scattered all across the land.

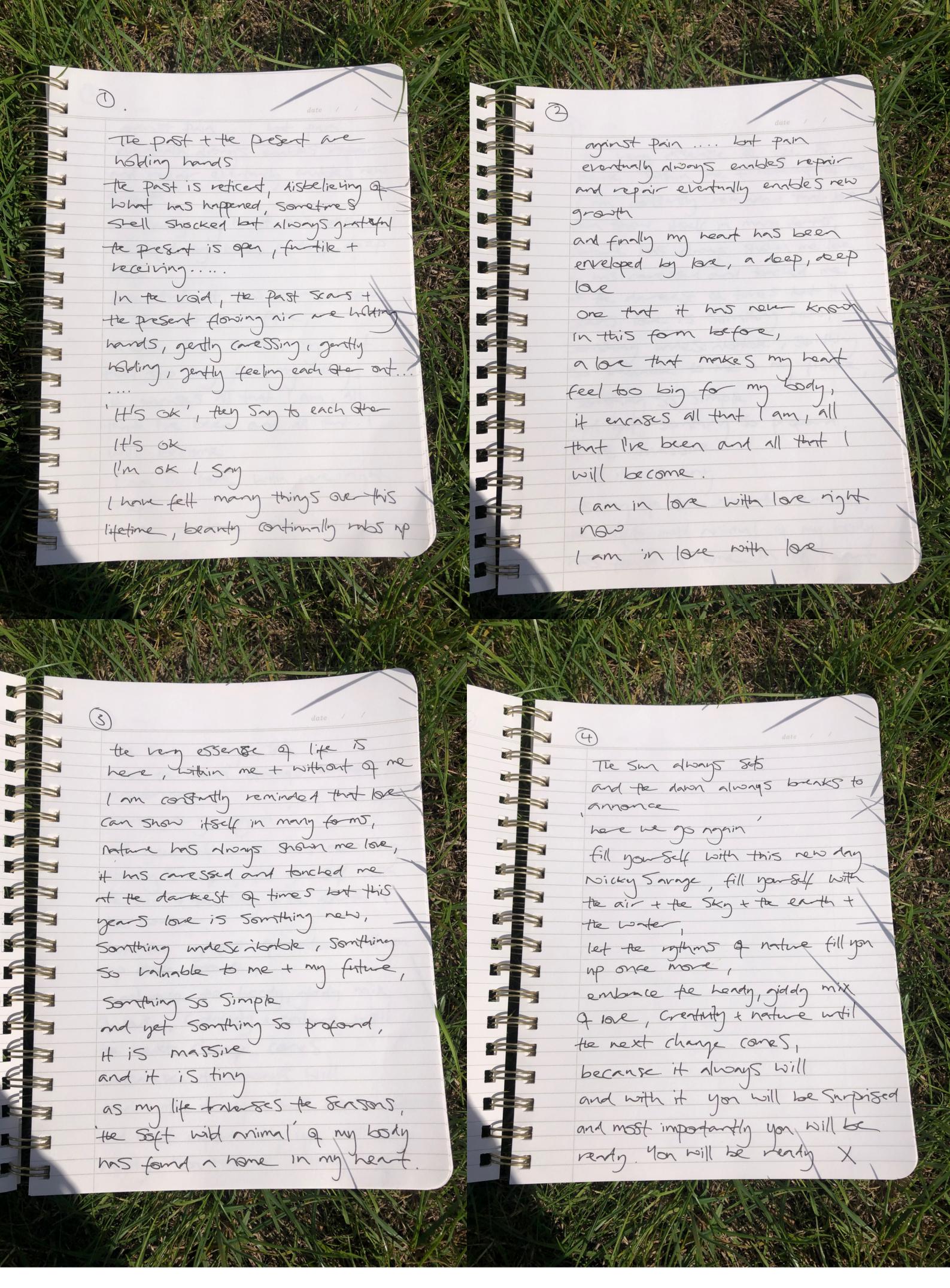


I am a wispy cloud on an autumn day
I move and shape-shift through the sky
Leaving wisps of myself behind and gathering
new ones

I am a wispy cloud on an autumn day
Spurred on by the crisp breeze and joyful as the
warm sun glitters on the sea

I am a wispy cloud on an autumn day
Sometimes meeting other clouds and finding it
hard to keep my own shape

I am a wispy cloud on an autumn day
One day I won't be





NICKY



I DON'T KNOW WHAT A PRAYER IS ...

Is it a call to arms? A wish? A dream? A silent poem to the invisible gods? An answer to a question? I'm not sure what a prayer is... or to whom it's intended

but I believe it's rooted in the essence of being human. A being of nature.

I feel it with my bare feet on the earth and my hands dipped in the river.

I know it in the turning of the year; of birth, life, death and rebirth.

I see it with my own two eyes and feel it through my whole body.

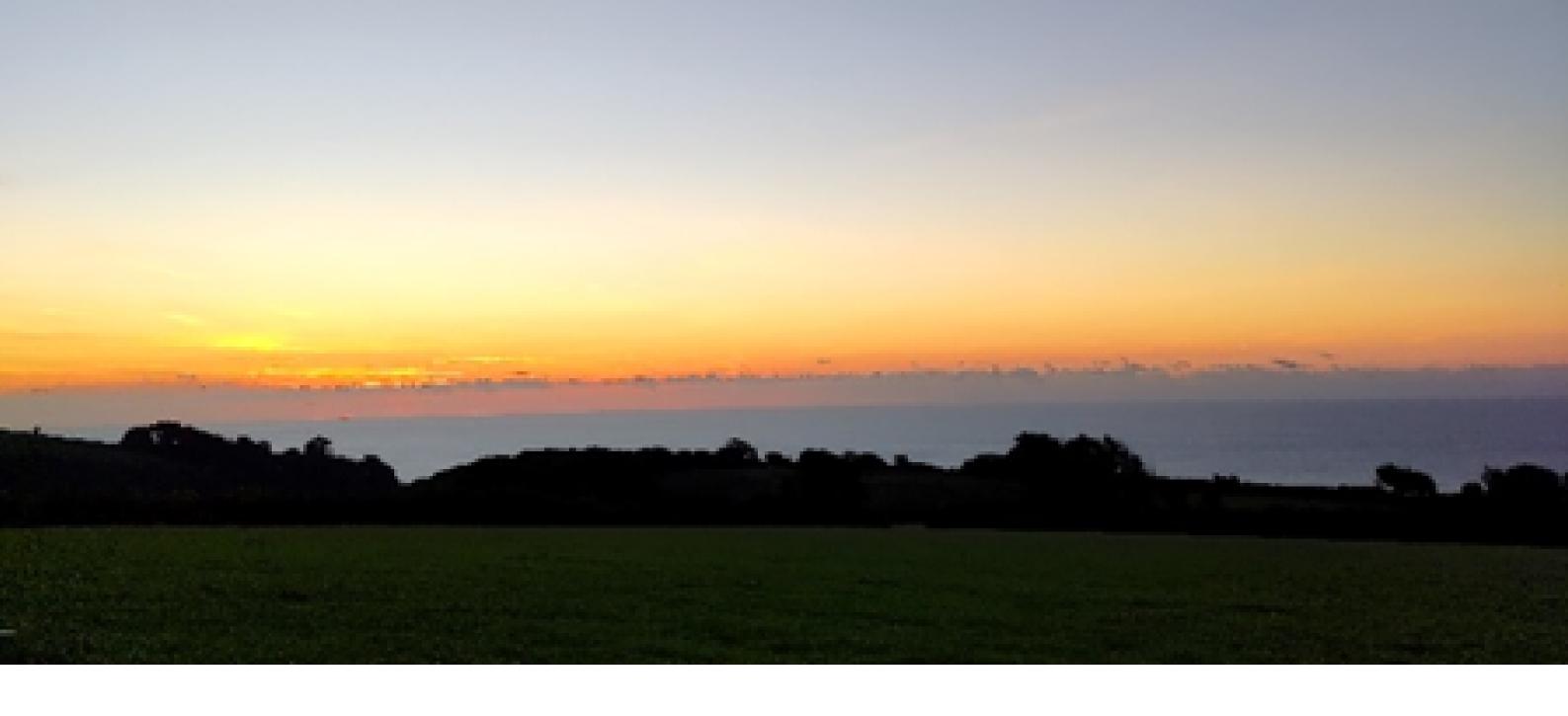
I feel it in the connection of real people, human interactions with wonderful souls.

Not sat isolated and alone, not swimming in a sea of bodies but connecting with true, authentic beings in the simple quiet moments. They often start with "hello".

When I stop to listen; to really hear the world around me, where I see open sky and horizon beyond, the questions I need answering are already answered, they're there within me.

Is that a prayer?

LORNA



SUNRISE OVER START BAY

I stand here as darkness cracks skies gently open, light easing, widening through the moments into the becoming of day. The gentling of pinks into blues into golden hues flow, as birds pour silhouetted from trees like taps releasing the essence of dawn.

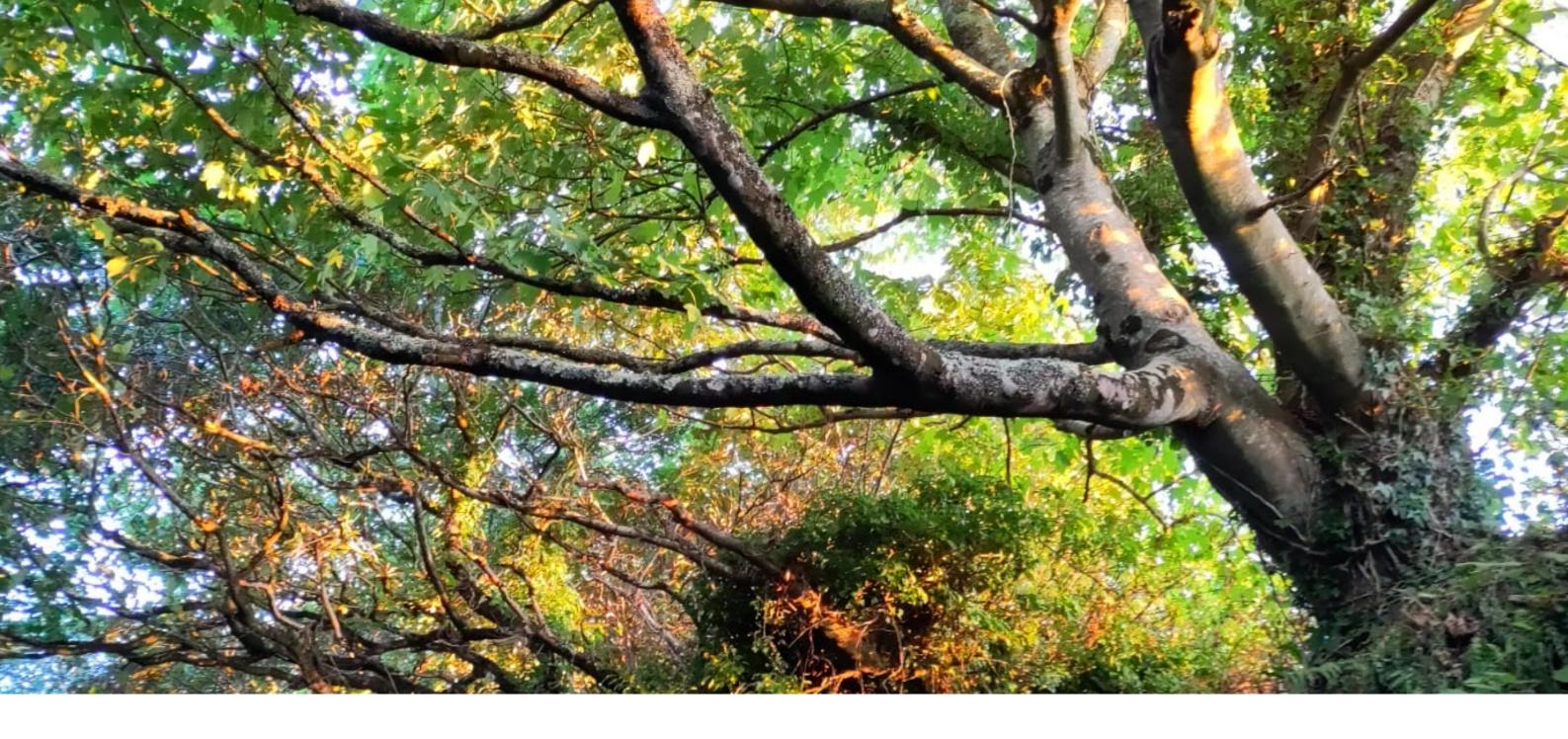
Day softly becomes, as it flows from this moment through to the next, to the next, to the next, to

What if we pledged allegiance to the timelessness of time? Held it up in celebration of the very endlessness of itself; the sweet paradox of nothing existing beyond that impermanent moment in which it becomes and unbecomes, nothing to hold it other than memory, with everything always becoming and being and moving into the next moment, and the next, and the next...

What if we held time in the same way we hold space? With doorways wide-open to be filled with endless deep breaths and far-flung horizons; soft invitations to flow out beyond edges and endings and instead pulse into the next, and the next...

What if we gave time more space? Allowed ourselves to grace these fleeing moments with freedom to flow into the spaciousness that lies within their essence, that essence which we all-too-often restrain and curtail, stop-short and restrain because (we blamably sigh) "We've no time."

Nature never hurries, and yet everything always, always happens perfectly on time.



GETTING UP EARLY BECAUSE OF MARY OLIVER

Do I really belong here?

This early morning
when the grass is still wet
and all is in shadow?

Do the dawn rising birds care that I am listening?
Is their song welcoming me to this briefly quiet moment of a new day?

Maybe their call is one of intruder alarm.

Or perhaps my eager presence in their garden is nothing to them at all.

Respectfully, I sit still.

Pen in hand, hot tea by my side,
I am called here by the lingering words of Mary Oliver to pay attention

and write

The sun lights up the crown of the tall tree.
Whether or not I know its name or the feel of its bark,
Its blazing leaves show me that soon I will be warm.
Wild geese fly silently through the light changing sky.

JO McANDREWS



ON ATTEMPTING TO WRITE ABOUT THE SEA

What is there left to say about the sea, after so many others have said it all before? Like talking about love, there are no words that do not seem over-familiar. The sea offers us so many metaphors for ourselves and life – but we've heard them before and how do we find meaning, when all has already been said?

I do not really know how to talk about something so vast, so consistent, so powerful. It is the reflector of everything I throw at it. I see myself and my life held and given back, like the tumbled pebbles, like the spray, like the feather that drifted against my feet on a gentle incoming wave.

I can see my whole self in the sea. The colours, smell, moods and expressions. It is delight, grounding and total sensory embodied experience. It is awe and mystery and freedom. It is the wild. It is creativity, washing over me, surprising me in its ebb and flow.

The sea calls me to my wildness and shields me from having to be that wild.

The sea comes in and goes out, smoothing, filling and flattening; nothing stays. Each tide, the beach is remade and becomes a new canvas. The sea swallows footprints, rubbish, stones; shadows of my children flickering at the edge of my vision – small then, and enchanted by the constant magic of sand and ocean. Layers of memory stack like sedimentary cliffs.

The sea lives and loves, kissing the pebbles with exquisite carelessness. I didn't expect to see love at the beach. But then, I didn't expect to find you – and here you are, loving me in the same indescribable way, love that cannot be put into any original or convincing words.

That bird out there, ducking its head under the water as it rides the swell, doesn't need to talk about the sea. It simply lives it.

JENNY ROSE

SLAPTON SANDS

FAR IN THE DISTANCE,
THE GAP BETWEEN THE GLOUDS
AND THE SEA.

SPEAN, UNTIL THE LAST BIT OF JUICE HAS COME OUT.

LOW FEMING PLANES. LOVERS, LITTER PICKING.

ATTEANGER CROW.

STEALING?

HOW FAR 70 40?

SMOOTH STONES, TURNING AND RETURNING.

CRASHING AND FROTHM

WHO HAS GONE OUT SWIMMING?

SOLHIE CHRISTOPHY

BEING A MAGPIE WITH MARY OLIVER

She said that sometimes there are no rules. And for some reason that was reassuring.

We went down to the shore.
On an ordinary, extraordinary day.
And filled our pockets with lichen and seeds.
Molly flew by in a tiny plane
Checking we weren't taking her lover's name in vain.
I gasped.

And laughed.
This, too, was reassuring.

She said that sometimes breaking the rules is just extending the rules.

She told me that I did not have to be good
To pay attention and then patch a few words
together

Which is what I did.

These are my words. And her words.

Mashed together in a way that makes sense to me.

And maybe to others.

It doesn't really matter. Which is reassuring.

The sea had work to do

And so did I

For this is my one wild and precious life.

My introspective and ambitious life.

It's a cycle of invention and reinvention.

Peeling back the layers until the soul can settle

And sing.

I had to save the only life I could save.

She told me so. And I knew anyway really.

But I didn't know that she knew.

She spoke directly to me.

She saw things and showed them to me.

She helped me heal.

Myself.

And my relationship with poetry.

Reassuring.

Mary Oliver.

I went down to the woods with her.

Or with her words, at least, stuffed into my pocket

As I entered the darkest of times

And emerged again, more whole

With my soul on fire.

Mary Oliver.

I went down to the woods with her.

I must love her very much.



No one asks the sea who they are.

The sea just

is.

Full of mysteries below the suiface,
but unquestionally

The Sea

Hello sea...

Here I am

unquestionally

Me

HWR

The sea was warm today

I was expecting it to be cold

For My Fingers to feel like ice.

But it was warm, and I would Not have known that if I hadn't stepped in.

HWR

The breeze!

The waves

The pebbles...

Sounds Feels Sights Smells

Did I notice any of thunfirst?

Or did they all wash through me at once?

strange howit is not overwhelming.

No, Sea. You can draw me in, but you will not suck me away. How far I go Is up to me.

HWR



I DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT A PRAYER IS

I don't know exactly what a prayer is, but I recognise the love involved in making a cake for a group of radicals who don't get looked after enough. A beautiful fun cake in honour of the birth of a poem. A celebration of the story of a Portuguese woman, a grasshopper, and a woman who paid attention to them with words.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is, but I know the surge of blessing in being delightfully cared for. The grace of belonging and being included in a moment of joyful generosity.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is, but I do know the tenderness of a heart undone by a gift given purely for the beauty of it.

I think I know something of what a prayer is.

JO McANDREWS



THIS ISN'T MY BEACH

This isn't my beach.

My beaches have seaweed, scuttling hermit crabs, shells of all shapes and sizes.

My beaches have long stretches of white shell sand for as far as the eye can see and crystal blue sea which shines, no matter the weather.

My beaches have diving seabirds, cheeky otters and seals bobbing in the deep.

This beach with bumpy stones right down to the sea seems so lifeless in comparison, even when the sun is so beautifully shining down. The sea is clear enough and the pebbles are exciting to look at but it's not my beach.

When you feel so deeply connected to one stretch of land, entangled from your toes to the tips of your weather whipped hair, your soul is full to the brim as if it were a cup ready to overflow. These soul-filling spaces enliven and inspire, igniting the spark of curiosity, awe and wonder. My beach is wild and unforgiving but equally unforgettable. The seaweed is ripe-pungent at times, it fills your senses and makes you wince but for me, that's the way a beach should smell. The soft sand is made of minute pieces of shell and so very sticky; it hangs around with you for weeks and when you find it in your pockets, it's nothing but a fine white dust. When I find it tucked into the creases of my clothes, it makes me smile a knowing smile.

I know my beach intimately; the strandline curves in reply to the shore as it pulls away each turning tide. The treasures left behind are magical; shells galore, crab pincers, twisted seaweeds and wonderful sea junk. Here, there are only rocks. And what little sand there is... is only tiny rocks.

I want to run free, or at least amble along picking up treasures until my back aches from standing then bending so often, but here I trip and my feet get stuck in the sinking boulders below me. There is no strandline, only more rocks.

And it sounds different here. I hear people, all around me. I don't want to hear their conversations but I can't help but hear them when they move past me. On my beach, it's often only me and my family. Our little haven of solitude, filling our soul-o-metre to capacity. We run, we play, we dive in the surf and we rest. A rolling parade of togetherness. But this beach here is not a beach for playfulness.

This is a love note to my beach. You are the place my soul feels at home and my body knows the shifting sands.

May you forever be wild.





DRIFTING AFTER THE SURF

I walk down to the shoreline

To give myself wholly

to froth and to fronds,

to caressing and foaming
and the stroke and the roll
of that first wave who's coming
towards me to beckon me in

heartbeat is pulsing
and nerves are bright-tingling
as waves whisper, roaringly
drawing me inwards,
and downwards
and onwards
and ever-more deeply
far out with the pull of the surf

of me
is now floating
and tooing and frowing
in tug and in tumble
in the rough-hewing
head-over-heeling
and wheeling
of pushing and pulling
and toying and straying

I begin to become undone

the crystal-clear waters
move icily through me
and my blood begins dancing
and pulsing and singing
and I find myself curling
then whirling
unfurling
and I step myself into the deep

I'm turned over and over in the smoothing of scratches, waves sheening my spikes and then pruning my edges, my outlines and shadows are pummiced far from me and cast into waters of yesterday's sorrows as I dance in the tossing and turning and frothing of this-ways and that-ways, of should-haves and must-be's through the rising and crashing of might-haves and won't-be's and the smash and the roll grows to bursting crescendo whilst the tug of the land seems to grapple and clamber my soul stretched so tightly twixt edges and boundaries as the will-nots and can't-bes grow louder and louder and the me-ing inside me rises up to the surface surging faster and faster to sit high on that moment

of pause

I am surfing on top of the wave

I glance to the shoreline
to safety and knowing,
the mapped-out-adventures,
the stories of doing,
a world that is written
in blueprints of order
and carvings of purpose
and meaning and forming

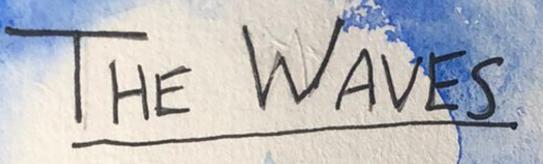
and this moment of breath
as I rise to crescendo
sees me smile to the shoreline
and turn out to horizons
that beckon my being
with untold becomings
and depths ever deepening
with stories unfolding
to allow the becoming of me

I drop with the rightening,
the tiding and shoring
right over the smash
and the roll
and the flowing
and out from the wave
to the darkness beyond it
flowing right out to the drift

I'm floating right here in the drift the softness becomes me as I flow to my edges and feel my beginnings and infinite endings I let go of the shoreline and give thanks to the surf as I float oh-so-gently towards my becomings and my self starts unfurling to reach out into darkness and now swim in the promise of endless unfoldings of what is, of right now of what simply is flowing

and my goodness it's good to be here

RACHEL MUSSON



NEVERY WAVE
THAT CRASHES,
IS A MOMENT
OF INVITATION

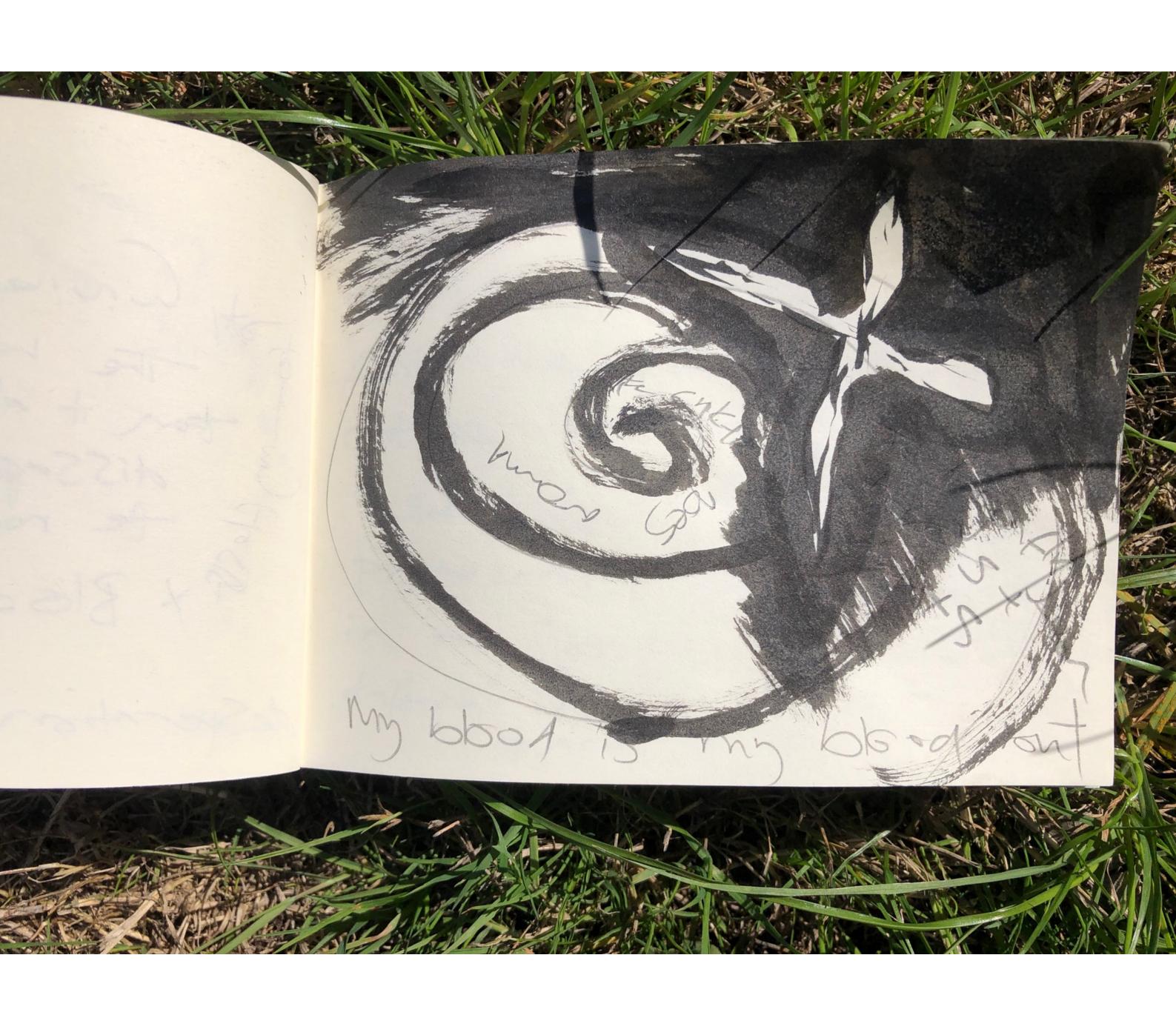
A DOORWAY,

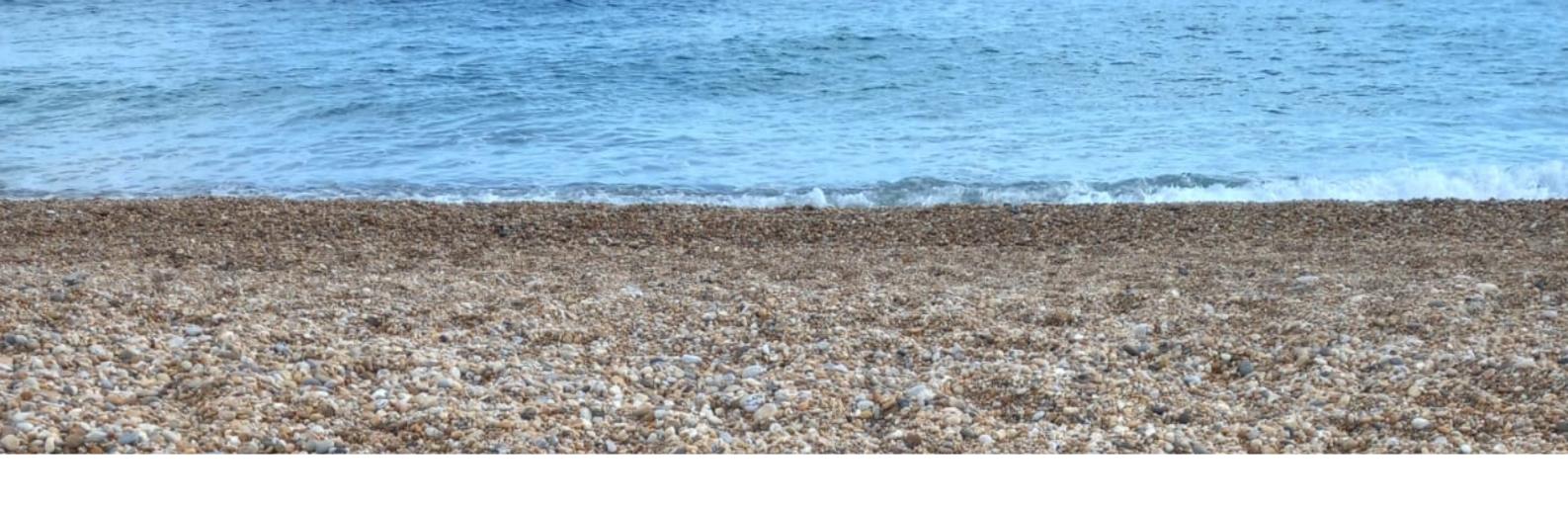
WITH ONLY A MOMENT TO CHOOSE.

SMOULD I GO IN?

WHAT WILL I LOSE?

SAPHIE CHIRISTOPHY





CALL OF THE SEA

I love that sound.

The crackle rush and smash of it.

The breathing in and out of it.

It gathers me up and sets me free Gathers me up and sets me free Gathers me up and sets me free.

> Can't stop, Won't stop.

Don't stop.

Don't stop.

You are calling me.

I feel it in the quickening of my breath.

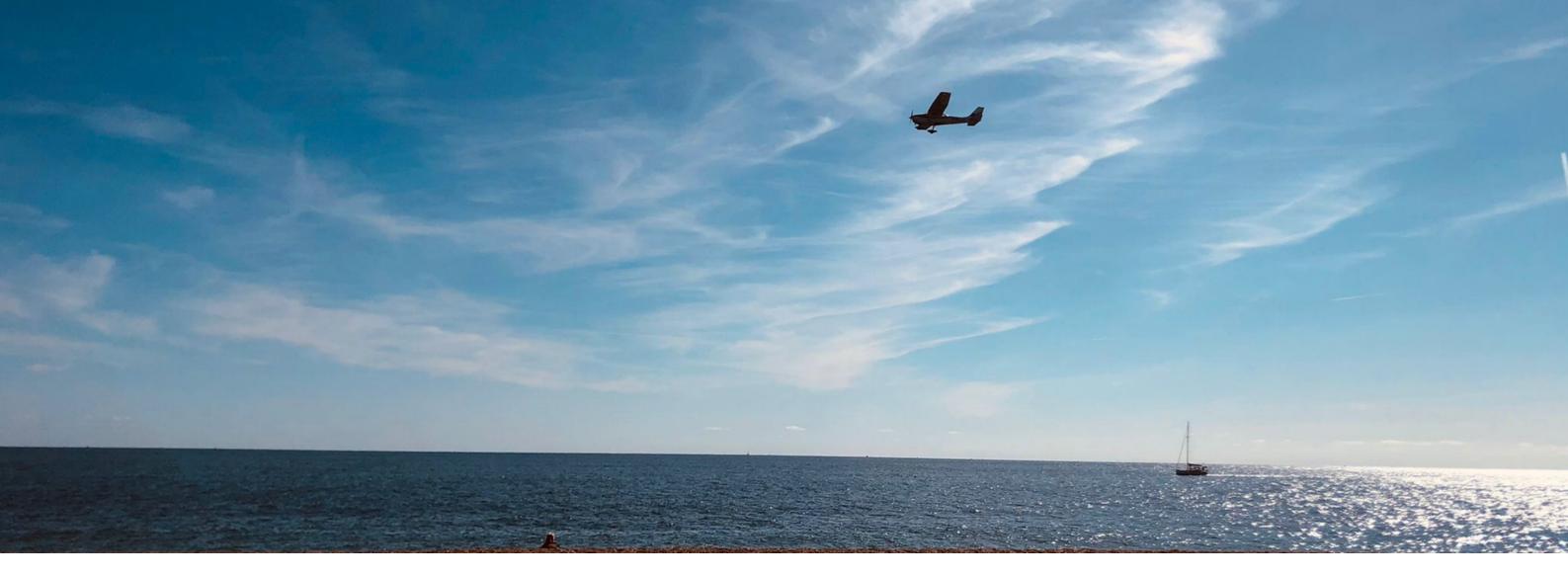
A smile that tugs at the corners of my mouth,

Loosens the waistband of my jeans.

My toes tingle My eyes narrow My pen wavers

It is time.

SOPHIE LOVETT



THIS MOMENT

Sitting here, warmed by the glory of Autumn sunshine, on this beautiful shoreline of blue and pebble dash, low flying plane and sailing boat idyl. The air is still and occasional spoken words echo through intermittently. There are many people dotted along the beach, moving in slow motion or not at all as though captured by serenity.

An older man sits contentedly with his fishing lines and parasol, gazing out to sea. Later his family arrive and he becomes animated and smiling, showing the young boy how to fish with a smaller rod and line. The child squawks and plays tricks on his captive audience "look up there!" he cries.

"Ha ha ha! Made you look!"

The sea is breathing long and slow, each in and out breath dragging the scree a bit further away.

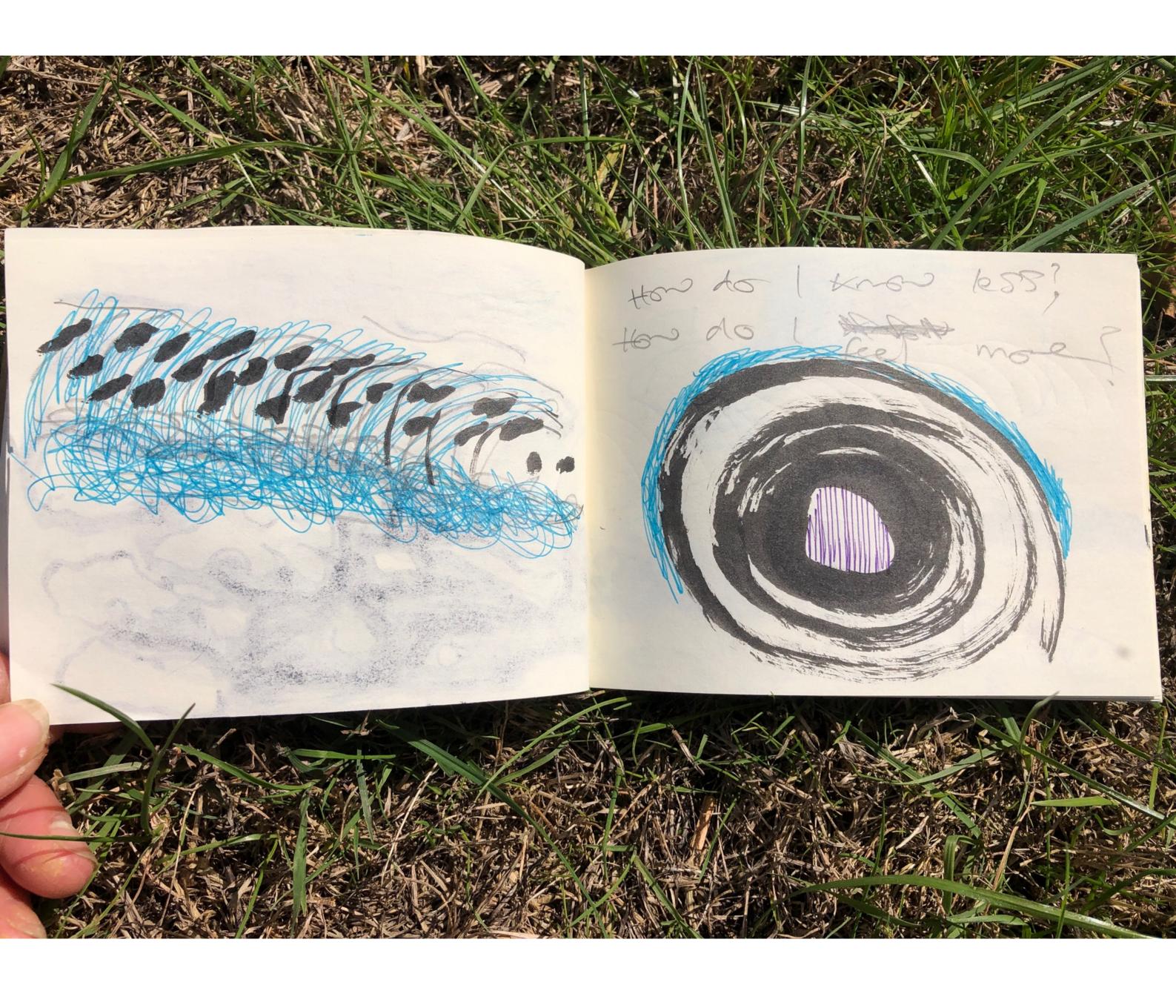
I'm wondering if the ocean has a sense of its own existence, if it's a sentient being?

I sit higher up the beach at first on the tidal hump, then walk bare foot to where the water hugs the pebbles; Should I submerge in the clear blue? It's warm enough but the drag of the stones in the big dip makes me feel anxious.

I choose simply to stare far out to the horizon and let my thoughts dance, some go onto paper, others spot pebbles for my pocket.

On leaving I glance backward; the tide is going out and miner bees hum around the sand banks.

Everything continues without me.





MIRAGE

Looking down
It seems as though
You lie just beneath
The surface.

Every detail
Yellows pinks and greys
Magnified
By salty tears.

I am sure
That I can just reach down
And touch you.

I take a breath
And kick
Down
Down
Down

To nothing.

Gasping, I return to air.

You are not as close As I had thought.

So why can I see you So very clearly?

SOPHIE LOVETT



At first the waves are too loud

Amplified along the pebble bank

Feet buried

Feeling the pull and the pushhh

All that white noise we've listened to,
to drown out
the silence

I take a moment
The ocean becomes a heartbeat
I recall
the absence of yours
frantically searching.
Rubbing my temples.

I feel again now the absence of yours I push back

For a moment I think I've found a shell, dusty pink and lined, only as I sweep pebbles away do I realise I'm touching my toe.

Later, a breath in a field and the rippling of grass and the dance of swallows

The unending movement of it all, your stillness

It's not the darkness that scares me, it's the love.

It's not the darkness that threatens to break me, it's love.

KATIE



IN AWE OF MARY OLIVER

I have no idea how to write a poem.

As a child, I took the time

To make it scan and make it rhyme.

Then I learnt it would be neater

To pay attention to the meter.

What shit poor guidance from those ignorant teachers.

I was curious, I had things to say, something moved me to write.

Letting go of rhyme, I tried writing poetry by

Starting a new line whenever the previous one looked long enough.

But it was all a mystery, this poetry.

Now I see they were building a cage to capture my dangerous creativity.

A bear cub made to dance from foot to foot in chains

A wild grown bear will not allow this outrage.

She has her own unfettered dance.

Why didn't they invite me to sit beside a tree?

To listen until some words were precious enough to tumble onto the page?

Every word I wrote was controlled and judged by those whose own thoughts had been stifled years before.

Then I was shown other people's words, the ones who had made it, who were declared brilliant, and I was made to force out ignorant analysis, picking through the ashes of the dead bones of their techniques. It didn't matter whether or not the words lit me up. I was told that these great men described perfectly the human condition.

They got away with that atrocious lie for so very long.

Luckily, their mean curriculum never included Mary Oliver, so I was free to discover her words of balm and blessing from a lover's mouth.

A feather on a broken wing was lifted on prayerful breath.

I still don't know about poetry, but now I know that there are those who do.

Maybe they could teach me.

There is grieving to be done, and listening.

JO McANDREWS



REALISATION

Nervously meeting new people
The 'welcome' circle
The Vegan meal
And then...
Huddled under blankets
Around the camp-fire
Wood burning, crackling, sparks flying
In darkness
We listened
We felt
We understood
Sharing our reasons
For being here.

Next day at the beach
'What can this place tell me about my life and work?'
Wading into the sea – it's obvious
The tide is going out!

Time has passed
I'd hardly noticed
Where did the last 20 years go?

A yacht sailed by, I waved
With the taste of salt upon my lips
The sound of a low-flying plane
Made me turn in the water
To admire the manmade machine
As I floated on the rocking waves
Swimming carefully
So not to get tangled
In the fishing line
And hoping the fisherman
Would not be lucky today!

Swimming back...
An astonishing
And magnificent bird
Flapping its wings above
Surprisingly close
A cormorant perhaps?

'What can I bring back from here that will help?'
Stepping from the waves onto tiny gritty stones
And pebbles of many shapes and sizes
I reflect upon the bowl of glass
On my dressing table at home

With smooth pebbles all neatly inscribed
With a memory and date
In a silver pen
Sometimes with a picture too
Dating back to 2001
Twenty-one years ago!

Looking down I see my answer to the question
A rough and 'wrinkly' looking pebble
With grey lines running through it
I pick it up knowing it could serve a purpose
I'll put it where I sit and write
As a reminder of the aging process
Time will not stand still

I thought that every day
Was just another day
That just one more didn't matter
I hadn't really noticed...

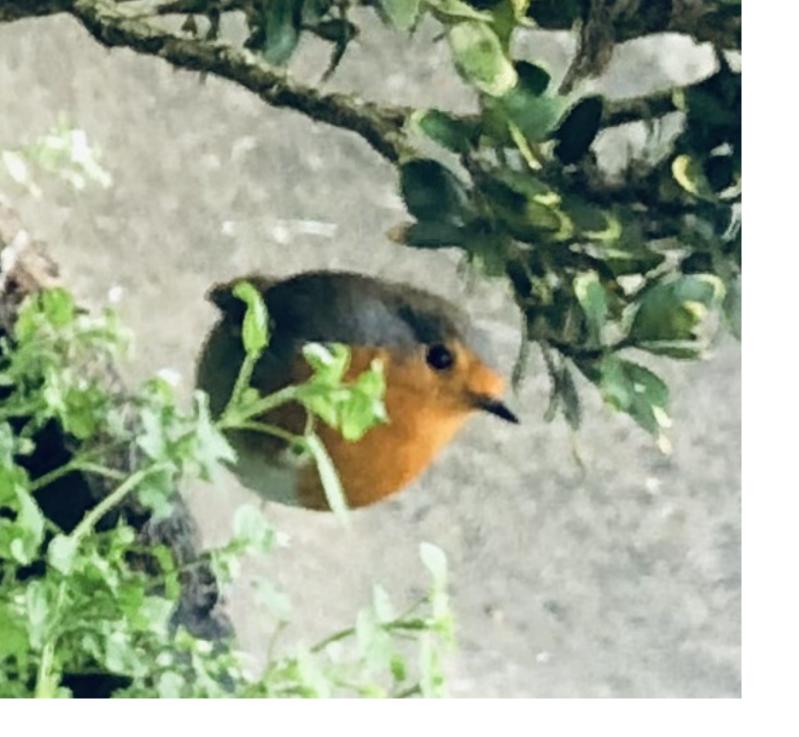
My children grew up a while ago
Now I am a grandma
The circle of life is circling
My body and reflection
Are trying to remind me
That time is passing
And not standing still
How could I not have noticed that?

A deadline is a deadline
A deadline gets things done!
Suddenly the word resonates
With a very different meaning:
'Dead'
'Line'

Now I see the preciousness
Of each and every single day
The 'Line' is the journey of life
The end of the line is death...
With no extended deadlines.

A writer must write Before it is too late!

ROSALYN SPENCER



NOTICING

The kind faced robin who gently lands beside me
The slightly too cold sea breeze that passes through, rustling
leaves and making me shiver
The sunlight appearing suddenly and unexpectedly through the
clouds

The little wasp buzzing curiously around my leftover cake crumbs
I'm just noticing

The constant chatter that makes me question my path
The judgments and raised eyebrows I rarely see but which
always feel present
The doubts, the worries, the fears
I'm just noticing

I'm not doing much, except just noticing And yet just noticing is all I really need to do. Wasp What is here for you, wasp? There is no food amongst these salty stones no place to rest by this relentless sea. and wishing wasp elsewhere. SL



The moments of contact.
Where I feel seen, met, held.
When the more-than
Swoops down
Or rises up
From within
and demands to be seen.

It is these moments that I live for.

When the invisible door

That stands between me

and the world

is blown open

And suddenly

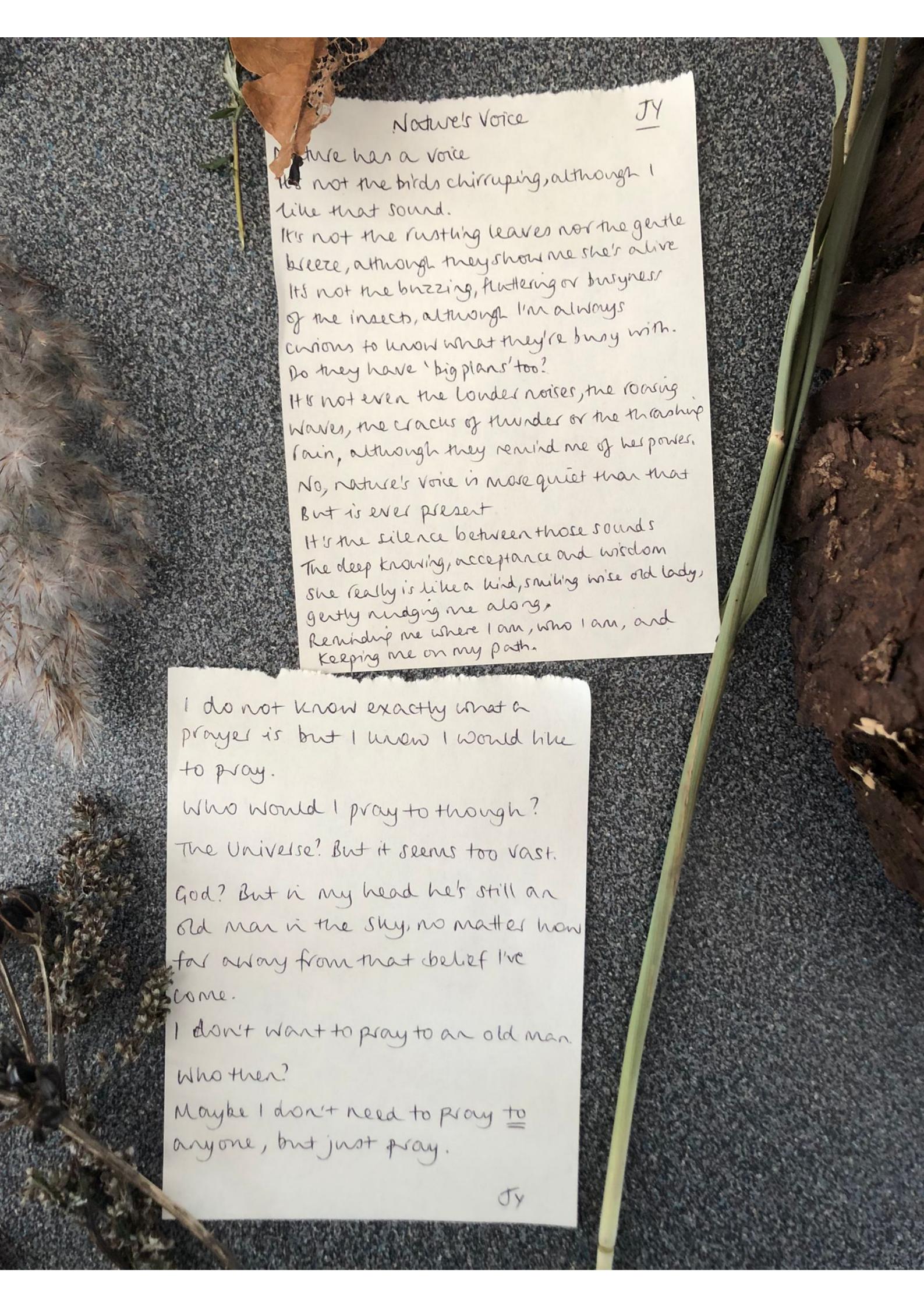
Everything

Comes into focus.

These moments of clarity
When everything in front of me
Is loaded with poignancy
As if time were writing a poem in space
And everything seems to be
in the right place
And all i have to do
is let it in...

Hello grass.
Hello flies.
Hello nagging doubts in my mind.
Hello sore shoulder & aching brow
Hello all the questions – who, where, what, how?
Hello dread
at losing
the grace of
this now.

BONNY TYDEMAN





AFTERWARD

Goosebumps On salty skin.

Fingers white And purple.

Clinging to the warmth
Of the sun.

Savouring the chill Of the sea.

Sinking into
This liminal space
Where every cell
Shimmers.

(Though I know
I really should
Put some clothes on)

SOPHIE LOVETT



SOUL FIRE COLLECTIVE

SEPT 2022



Sarah Allen * Sophie Christophy * Max Hope *
Claire Imhasly * Gem Kennedy * Athena Llywelyn *
Sophie Lovett * Eve * Jo McAndrews * Katie *
Rachel Musson * Lorna Norton * Jenny Rose *
Hannah Rowan * Nicky Savage * Rosalyn Spencer *
Bonny Tydeman * Josie Yeung

Sarah Allen: blogger at

https://www.rhubarbandrunnerbeans.co.uk/

Sophie Christophy: consent-based education activist, believer in ethical self-direction, lover of integrity, alignment and nature.

Witchyaf. Insta: @sophiechristophy www.sophiechristophy.com

Max Hope: writer, facilitator, activist at https://maxhope.co.uk/

Claire Imhasly: facilitator at The Meadow, @meadowlearning

Gem Kennedy: facilitator and activist at www.gemkennedy.com

Athena Llywelyn: artist and poet, instagram @athenallywelyn

Sophie Lovett: writer, mother, teacher, dreamer at

www.raisingrevolutionaries.co.uk

Eve

Jo McAndrews: mother, writer, radical thinker, elder listening to the young <u>www.jomcandrews.com</u>

Katie: Mother, bereaved mother, unschooler, writer, mover, heart

beating. https://www.instagram.com/sorrels_space/

https://sorrelsspace.wixsite.com/blog

Rachel Musson: Director of ThoughtBox, Regenerative Educator,

Systems thinker, Climate activist, RSA Fellow

https://rachelmusson79.com

https://twitter.com/rachelmusson79

Lorna Norton

Jenny Rose: Writer, facilitator, exploring what healing and inclusion looks like for those of us in bodies with chronic health challenges. ofowlsandancestors.wordpress.com

Hannah Rowan: Hannah is a queer single parent who looks after her father. She has a busy life and big dreams. Watch this space.

Nicky Savage: artist, creativity teacher/ coach and carpenter

Rosalyn Spencer: www.rosalynspencer.co.uk

Bonny Tydeman: Artist and soulful leadership coach - www.soul-

beam.com, @soul.beam

Josie Yeung