

# a little branch

WOLFWORDS ANTHOLOGY 2024

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MITALI GUPTA

## Preface

Welcome to the second WolfWords anthology. We chose this year's theme, 'Wild', because of its resonances with the wolf, our appropriated College symbol, and for the wide range of directions it seemed to offer.

So many submissions were worthy of inclusion, and selection was a challenge. In creating this anthology, we have sought to represent not only the best WolfWords, but also something of the range of form, style and thought, as well as some of the interesting ways in which the poems spoke to each other. The arrangement over the following pages reflects some of the conversations that we heard, and you may hear others.

The poems conjure diverse landscapes and venture into territories such as translation, evolution, and memory. 'What does it mean to look wilderness in the eye?', 'Where, as humans, might we fit?', they seem to ask.

They share moments of loss – of weathering, jagged edges, and uncertain futures – and also moments of warmth and renewal – little branches reaching out from wild soils. 'Would there be any story if it didn't pour down?', one poet muses.

The English Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, thought of his poems as elusive wild creatures. For him, writing a poem was about capturing something that was already out there, in the wild – a notion famously expressed in his poem, 'The Thought Fox', and one that will resonate with many who write poetry. There is also a sense that, once written, a poem is released into the wild. Once set free it has a life of its own, meeting with other minds, other poems.

And so, as we release these wild words, we hope that they will find their own way and make fresh tracks.

*Caroline Banerjee and Debbie Pullinger, Editors*  
**Wolfson College, Cambridge 2024**

## **I See a Bird**

It falls at my feet  
And taps on the concrete;  
Reaching for something beneath.

Sometimes, I think about a future  
Where nature calls back its own.  
I wonder if the rivers will glow  
Under a canopy of wires and screens  
Filling the dark sky behind.

Or if it will be suddenly quiet  
Once the satellites fall and the lights disappear  
So all that's left  
Is an ectopic wilderness  
Seeping through the cracks;  
A small blossom in a storm of grey.

The bird flies away  
I start to think  
So much that it's  
Hard to find  
Where the ground ends  
And where I begin.

JULIA DA COSTA

## Cuttlebone

I

Here in Scottburgh, I find things on the beach.  
A menace to the crabs that pop from the sand  
Like pimples, but this one is different. Chalk-white,  
It looks like a surfboard for a sea creature. I fish it  
From a knot of kelp and show it to my father.  
It's a cuttlebone, he says. People feed these to parrots.  
He breaks the bone in two even shark's teeth: one for  
The seabirds, another for me. With my own teeth  
I taste the brittleness around the skirt of the bone,  
Chew on mystery.

II

Seagulls fly with the updrafts, meet the saline spray of  
Waves shattered like crystals on the rocks as my father  
Unveils another mystery: death. We were there when they  
Pulled that boy from the water, from the white horse he  
Rode into oblivion. I am wondering what creates waves,  
About how seabirds always know where they are going,  
Whether it was a shark that killed that seal we found in  
Cape Town, tumbling like laundry in the grey breakers.  
What is a cuttlebone anyway?

III

The chill of the glass soothes the pain of the discovery  
In the moon-blue glow of an aquarium somewhere far  
From Scottburgh. I am the same age my father was then,  
And have begun to think I know too much about  
What happens when there are no more mysteries, when  
Our lives are totally taxonomised. I know, for instance,  
That when you die, you wash up alone on the beach,  
Your bones become food for the seagulls, your soul  
Roars within a shell.

KEANE FARLEY

## Human Boots

Human boots muddy troubled waters

– thorns, trampled, seek revenge  
for years passed-by  
unaware of nature's feet upon the path –

they are exposed to wilder things than these;

storms,  
icy breaths,  
parched summer's glare.

At times, all that's left behind is  
an imprint of a sole  
retreating up the hill.

But often,  
much more too.

TOM WILLIAMSON



## A Little Branch

in my garden, solitary. Seeded from a stem, its sapling sticks arise like insects from a body, wiry, they feel the unknown of viscous air in a state of nature,

wrought in the wilderness, it is a mangrove, a pine, three oxeye daisy stalks. I stalk it like a predator, a mother, a partner who cares too much to leave

room for growth. It is stunted, perhaps, by my gaze, I chart its growth like a scientist, x and y axis with trends like its limbs, a positive correlation with the ground.

Outside a 10 foot radius it might be lost, akin to the wilderness, a beast. At least it does not know organised living, a part of the system, network of roots, rats of the

race. Even wild animals stumble into domestication, a parent presence: teaching. Tennyson said harmless to the wild-flower yet wildness speaks only of its

human relation. A little branch is now a big tree, a myriad of bronchia, I breathe its O<sub>2</sub> and it is cultivated by my human hand.

CHARIS HORSLEY

## epikliros

in aulis, i lie for a higher power  
not for nothing; they will come  
– sobbing on their knees, i expect –  
pleas bleeding from their teeth  
and salt carving their mouth and lungs  
crazed, in their beg for absolution  
and i will have nothing to grant

maybe from my pocket i shall pull a forgotten twenty,  
– blue and torn and dirty –  
i will kiss it sweet with spit and stick it on their forehead,  
request a mournful song

and i will ask, what is more, for deliverance;  
through the gentle weeping of the winds  
– for Echo will have only a dull string to play –  
and when their countless eyes meet mine, it will be in sorrow.

perhaps then, i will run out of breath  
i will sit, quietly, at the feet of the universe  
and let a thousand hands stroke my hair,  
and forgive the world;  
for the sin of taking all my lives,  
for leaving me a tree in the forest,  
that never made a sound

not long now; they'll be here soon  
meanwhile my cave is warm and i know the knots will keep.

AFRODITI SAKELLAROPOULOU

## Bouquet of Self-Pity

*colchicum autumnale* **meadow saffron** my best days are past  
*rubus idaeus* **raspberry** remorse  
*rosmarinus officinalis* **rosemary** remembrance  
*prunus cerasus* **cherry blossom** impermanence  
*rubus allegheniensis* **blackberry** envy  
*salix babylonica* **weeping willow** melancholy  
*clematis* **clematis** poverty  
*anemone* **anemone** forsaken  
*parmeila* **lichen** dejection  
*caltha palustris* **marsh marigold** desire for riches  
*filipendula umaria* **meadow sweet** uselessness  
*dianthus* **dianthus** make haste  
*helenium* **helenium** tears

*populus alba* **white poplar** time  
*poaceae* **grass** submission  
*erica* **heath** solitude  
*angallis arvensis* **scarlet pimpernel** change  
*ribes* **currant** thy frown will not kill me

RENÉE DUMENIL

## Garden Memories

When I first started working at Wolfson  
Outside in the beautiful gardens  
I never did imagine  
I would still be gardening here  
Twenty three years on

I've endured the cold winters  
Sweated out the hot summers  
Watched all the trees in time and place  
From blossom through to leaf fall  
And finally to silhouettes  
Hide away the memories  
Of my time spent in the gardens

The future looks uncertain  
With our winters getting wetter  
Summers getting dryer  
But one thing I know is certain  
I will still be gardening here  
Twenty three years on  
Writing another poem  
About my time spent in the gardens

PHILIP DE LUCA

## The Garden of Death

There is a skeleton hugging a sprig of bluebell  
To its hollow chest in the orange of an e'en.  
Love is everywhere, as far as I can tell,  
Though not always seen.

So much lingers though it does not last.  
A ladybird crawls on my screen  
Which must seem vast  
And mean.

A moment of being at four in the morning  
Because the world is like a bean  
One day adorning  
Green.

CONNOR JOHNSTON

## **Born to be Wild(e): A Villanelle**

I've been thinking of Oscar's fate –  
How the man of culture was so defiled,  
How the public disdain would not abate.

It's strange to be the object of hate  
When your character's inclined to be mild.  
I've been thinking of Oscar's fate.

The accounts of his last years relate  
How he took sick like an abandoned child,  
How the public disdain would not abate.

February is the ominous date,  
When the dossier of spite was compiled.  
I've been thinking of Oscar's fate.

His eloquent defence was too late:  
The Marquess of Queensberry was riled.  
How the public disdain would not abate!

Yet time was when nothing could sate  
The play-goers' passion for Wilde.  
I've been thinking of Oscar's fate –  
How the public disdain would not abate.

PHILIP WARD

## Wild Goose Chase

(After Thom Gunn's 'On the Move')

A gang of motorcyclists  
shattered the peace of rural life  
as summed up in verse  
by a poet well liked.

On reading the lines a sculptor  
visualised riders such as these  
and decided to create a piece  
of her own, but in stone.

The finished work  
provoked a hefty debate  
about speed, death and  
the aberrant fast lane  
of life, and man wedded  
to his infernal device.

The sculptor took to heart  
the comments made  
then returned to the verse,  
reread the words. She began  
to hear the motors revving,  
felt the mud splashing,  
the leather sweating,  
and sensed the blind madness  
behind goggles or helmets.

The sculpture in stone  
– the artist reflected –  
far too static, a fixture,  
in place and time, and so

she resolved to smash it,  
have done it away.

The broken pieces now  
without any iconic appeal,  
a warning instead to rebellious  
youth or bikers out to provoke  
uproar, dare fate,  
only to end up in a pile

never to race against  
flocks of birds in flight.

HANNELORE HÄGELE



GRACE BATLEY



## A Fish Out Of

Moving countries  
is like trading your backyard for a fishbowl.

You  
turn sidewalks into aquariums,  
studying the synchro swim  
of each color-sorted school.

You  
watch them flicker through light blue  
water that washes over willing gills  
and bends to Darwinian fins.

You  
pace alongside, peeking  
into coral bits packed with  
pubs, parties, pints.

You  
hold up the fishbowl  
and inspect its contents.  
It's cool, clear – complete.

Because glass isn't water.  
And you aren't wet.

KATIE CAVANAUGH

## Karoo Drive

Schreiner country: flat mountains,  
Holocene plains  
Colony of ants and flies

Golden birdsong breasting and hovering  
Over termite mounds, cleaving muddy little footprints

Voices of the land overheard. Conspiracy  
Of bluegum leaves carrying news  
From vast hinterlands beyond  
The highway's ear-shot

From a rusty barrel, poised  
Like a photographer, I imagine bush clumps turned kelp  
Sky tide sways the scattered foliage, encloses meaning  
Like urchin skeletons under upturned roots

Swallows, weavers, little red ones whose  
Names I've been too lazy to forget  
All diving, flapping,  
Totally absorbed aesthetes of flight

Heirs of the dinosaurs, oracles, bearers of truth in their hollow bones  
The secret of flight is apathy  
Freed from the self-importance of theatre,  
Tedious ancestry, they hold

In their beaks ancient utterances, are become  
Their parents and grandparents, have eyes that saw  
In their peripheries the original enunciation.  
One verse parsed, rung out, untranslatable

JOHN HENNING

## Work

A hawk without a name  
Circling  
Above the University Library  
Round and round

What are you doing?  
Or is that how you spend your time?  
If you are aware of your death  
Would you still  
Repeat the same motion?

Higher above  
Enormous clouds  
Rolling across  
To unknown destinations.

RUOSHUI (ZEN) ZHANG

## Around

Within the Self, the savage storms, the feral attacks and the reprisals,  
they all rage

Yet around – never have days been any calmer

Every smile brighter, every hug tighter, every memory sweeter

Slowly, the world changes, the Self resiles, efforts congeal,

Relationships seal and stresses heal

Surely, the Self awakens and stretches forth

Taking miniscule, tentative steps; maybe one now, maybe one later

It feels very much all one's life's worth

Yet – the Energies around surge through the fibres, moulding them  
to be greater

Imbuing them with a new sense of purpose and will

No time to kill; life goes on, back and forth, a musical trill

\*\*\*

Who would have thought of something so punishing being also so  
nourishing?

The wilderness within engendering the tenderness around

The warmth around focussing the fickle Mind to hope and pray

Life's contradictions, once again, on display

This too shall pass, so, now, live!

KRISHNA KAKKAIYADI

## Pause

The serpent's flowery skin keeps falling in the heart  
Falling towards the first greeting between us and the mountains  
Falling towards the first thunderbolt that the postman  
    desperately tried to deliver  
And then, and I just need then this pause  
To elaborate on more bubbles  
That dissolve into the wine of the moonlight  
Which colours my new clothes with a halo  
In the halo is the train station where all serpents' heads turn  
Where people don't dare to cry ...

CHEN MA

## Beastmen

The heat of summer stalks the evening  
As Channel four's new entertainment airs  
Within the dark frames of the idiot box.  
Two tigers, young, mighty, incarcerated, are made  
To gaze upon each other's stripes and see what each has to  
offer.

The knives of their eye slits have little trouble  
Piercing the veil of the glass wall that so rudely  
Cuts in on their little dance. She doesn't mind though,  
Lying on her side, all leisure, taking in his youthful gait,  
Sun kissed fur, while meeting his eyes but never  
For too long lest the game come to a premature end.

He minds plenty. Hammering each step into the  
Ground, tensing the muscles in his limbs, never taking his eyes  
off her.  
His mouth slightly ajar, teasing out the white daggers  
that fill his head:  
Moon crescents in a deep night.

The tempo of his step catches her and already  
she's mirroring the sway of his body,  
up and down they march the length of the glass, together.  
Back and forth, stripes blending  
in a cover of pitch, masking all they would do if they found the  
means  
To enter each other's spaces.

It was over quick. The zookeepers, the men  
Who had orchestrated the affair, had only just shut  
The gate again as the blood from her jugular

Crept towards the exit. Her body strewn across  
The dirt breath leaving her lungs life ripped from  
Her body her powerful jaw her vibrant eyes.  
The elegant black slits, never to cut through dark again.

It's just what happens sometimes, explains one of the keepers,  
they wished for more tigers, more attractions, more fun.

(She just wanted company)

But he's a good boy, he says nervously into the camera,  
He's a good boy.

LOUIS RYAN

## Hunter's Instinct

An owl arrives.  
the sound like air  
pushed through teeth  
the creature lands and lifts  
with the swoop of my lids  
pinching the snow of its skin.

Camouflaged,  
if not for its peppercorn streaks  
the bird leaves a crater a pupil deep.  
It must've seen something  
someone to greet,  
a neighbour or a stranger or me.

One good reason  
to shake out of heaven's embrace  
reminded of gravity –  
perhaps, it is a hunter's instinct  
to sense the weak.

I don't meet its eyes at first.  
Stare into the wound around it  
two wings, like strikes  
fanned out by edges of a knife  
become the new soles of its feet.

a thump, a gust of wind  
an out of sync heartbeat  
I guess it's time to leave –



My temporary friend  
A beast  
A ballerina  
Object of envy.

SASHAWNE SMITH

fox in the undergrowth  
I worry about  
my bank balance

TOM ZILLE

## Fruiting Bodies

I want to rot  
To lay down in this earth and  
Expand  
Bloat  
Play corporal host to a million life forms  
Find the worms making a home in my liver  
Ants building highways up my vertebrae  
The wasps burrow deep behind my eye sockets  
Singing  
a continuous tinnitus  
My flesh a party unbounded by size  
I want to dig my fingernails into the dirt  
Spore miles of mycelium between me and the trees  
A web of conversation;  
an eternal networking event  
Hold this earth between my teeth until one dissolves into the other  
Life passing gently in tides, I sink into  
this eternity; Immortality  
Sapping cyclical forevers that roll through me like waves  
As those whose body holds but one life  
Wander across my unmarked grave  
I feel their footsteps echo through my roots  
Slow march to meet me  
Weddings, harvests, celebration, dance, love, death  
Everything drops to me eventually  
But while it walks the surface  
I will fruit mushrooms from my lungs to meet them

POLLY DENNY

## Stardust

I am not a realist.  
Don't tell me what can and cannot be fixed,  
for I like to believe nothing really is unbroken or untainted  
(if you don't believe me just look at the moon)  
and there is a certain beauty in not being whole.  
I think of that hike when it rained ferociously and  
how you held my hand on the walk downhill;  
how it was the start of our story.  
(would there be any story if it didn't pour down?)  
When I look at the stars,  
don't tell me what's there to look –  
sometimes I see all those who used to be and  
sometimes I just speak to the stars about you.  
Don't tell me I'm too emotional,  
what am I if I cannot feel?  
In loss I have found the capacity to love more,  
in longing I've come to appreciate the here and now.  
I am not a realist, no –  
I have stardust in my eyes.

GARIMA LEKHWANI

## Wolfson From Here

At Wolfson, we learned from everything –  
From people from texts from trees,  
From songs heard and sang  
Grantchester walks  
Barton Road leaves,  
From morning birds' resolve  
And glowing kinship of eves,  
From first-day fears, last-day words,  
Projects finished, projects birthed.

And if those days seem far off now,  
Down here, on South Louisiana time,  
That openness proves intact,  
When learned in new postures towards place,  
Towards a world that still will haunt,  
Opening without hesitation,  
Emerging outside interpretation –  
Asking still for our response.

The other night, I saw a momma possum  
Coming out from beneath a fig tree,  
Carrying babies that could not walk or see.  
At times I might shrug off such a sight –  
Or frame her as an invader of my space! –  
But time is helping me sense the lesson,  
The import of her trembling gait,  
Her information about who we are and what we must do –  
Her echoing of that proclamation: ring true.

CHRISTOPHER MONIER



GRACE BATLEY



GRACE BATLEY

## Contributors

**Grace Batley** is currently studying for an MPhil in Education (Knowledge, Power and Politics) and is researching post-industrial masculinity, specifically in Northern towns in the UK. She is from Barnsley, South Yorkshire, which is both central to her research and is the location where these photos of her dogs were taken.

**Katie Cavanaugh** is a postgraduate studying Creative Writing. Though her dissertation is an original screenplay, poetry has always had her heart. She plays for Wolfson's joint soccer – sorry, football – team with Darwin and St. Edmund's, and is involved in the Wolfson College Boat Club.

**Julia Da Costa** is an undergraduate studying Veterinary Medicine. Before joining Wolfson, she completed a BA in Fine Art. In 2022, her work was shown as part of the Tate Collective's 'Cyborg Futures' display.

**Philip De Luca** has been a gardener at Wolfson College for 23 years. He has experienced every wild moment the gardens have been through, using all five senses, working through every season. He has made his areas of the gardens into places that all people and wildlife can visit, work and enjoy.

**Polly Denny** is studying for an MPhil in the Faculty of Philosophy, as well as being a poet, performer and workshop facilitator, working to explore emotion, confidence, and imagination. She has performed on stages such as the Albert Hall and with partners such as the BBC; she was the Young Poet Laureate for Bath, is an alumna of Roundhouse's Words First Programme, and a UK National Slam Champion.

**Renée Dumenil** is a postgraduate in Creative Writing with a budding enthusiasm for poetry. Residing in the Scottish Highlands, she is inspired by Scotland's sublime landscapes and rich folklore.

**Keane Farley** grew up in South Africa. He is a Philosophy PhD student writing on the aesthetic appreciation of non-human animals. He also moonlights as a writer.

**Mitali Gupta** graduated from Wolfson with a Master of Law in 2023. She grew up in Delhi, India, where she practised law before moving to Cambridge. Mitali enjoys poetry, photography, and art, drawing inspiration from anything that moves and captivates her.

**Hannelore Hägele** is an art historian. Reading and writing poetry has opened a new way of exploring the visual arts for her. She has long-standing connections with Wolfson College, as a PhD student, Junior Research Fellow, Senior Member, and as a choir member since 1998.

**John Henning** is a PhD student in the Faculty of English. His doctoral research is about South Africa and Ireland's literary connections from the late nineteenth century onwards. In the past, he has written about such strange and dissonant topics as publishing mishaps in the career of Sol Plaatje, the pop music afterlives of Arthur Miller's plays, and dementia in the work of Japanese novelist, Yoko Ogawa. He has worked as a schoolteacher in South Africa, experiments with writing in his free time, and never says no to a friendly set of tennis.

**Charis Horsley** is an MPhil English Studies student, working on the afterlife and afterlife landscapes, with a particular focus on Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. Her poetic interests include ekphrastic poetry and the links between visual representation and poetry.

**Connor Johnston** is completing a master's degree in English Studies. During his undergraduate degree, he was awarded the Lord Alfred Douglas Prize and the Dart prize, and he has been published by Renard Press and *Southward*. Connor is an avid lover of form and rhyme, and like his favourite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, believes that all poetry should be read aloud.



**Krishna Kakkaiyadi** is an alumnus and a solicitor working in intellectual property litigation in London. His writing has been an unreliable companion over the years, walking hand-in-hand at times but falling behind and in absentia for most. Last year, Krishna was diagnosed with Stage 4 Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Time away from work and the necessity of chemotherapy brought the companions back together, and helped them explore and express the joys and pains of Krishna's cancer journey.

**Garima Lekhwani** is a postgraduate student pursuing an MPhil in Public Policy. She grew up in India where she worked in the Civil Service before moving to Cambridge. She has been writing poetry from a young age and also performs spoken word poetry.

**Chen Ma** was awarded her PhD in France in 2022, and her research topic was the complicating of Chineseness through the lens of female characters' engagement with landscape in Asian American novels. She is currently studying for an MPhil in Education, specialising in children's literature.

**Christopher Monier** is an alumnus (MPhil, 2010). He is a poetry scholar and translator, and currently teaches in the departments of French and English at Nicholls State University, in the Bayou Region of southeast Louisiana.

**Louis Ryan** is a first-year undergraduate studying English literature, scrutinising the world by day and dreaming of becoming a writer by night.

**Afroditi Sakellaropoulou** is a girl and a friend and a number of other things, circumstantially: a student of Philosophy, a researcher and a legal professional. Mostly she likes to ponder and talk and share those activities with the world.

**Sashawne Smith** is a postgraduate studying Creative Writing. She writes poetry sporadically and can often be found lamenting about the novel she is writing. She was longlisted for the Alpine Poetry Prize in 2022.

**Philip Ward** is both a Senior Member and an alumnus. These days he's a non-fiction writer, specialising in literature, music and biography. His most recent book is *Encounters with Michael Arlen*.

**Tom Williamson** is a postgraduate materials scientist and classical musician. Writing poetry is rare for him and he can most often be found performing or composing music, or tending to the Student Garden when he's feeling inspired.

**Ruoshui (Zen) Zhang** is a PhD candidate working on the intersection of modernist poetry and modern German–French philosophy. His daily routine is to wake up, make a lemon tea, and write a poem on the bench outside the Club Room.

**Tom Zille** is a PhD student in English Literature who writes short-form poetry, mostly haiku and senryū.



Wolfson College  
Cambridge