



The Silken Twine

A Zine by
the Black Ven Poets

Strand #1
May 2026

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“Joy & Woe are woven fine
A Clothing for the soul divine
Under every grief & pine
Runs a joy with silken twine”

William Blake
“Auguries of Innocence”

Editor’s note: It has been a joy to draw together this first issue of *The Silken Twine*. Thank you to Sarah for the inspiration and the name, and to all the poets of the Black Ven Stanza for their contributions. I hope you enjoy reading, Clare Bryden.

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listen

Liz England

if I speak of birdsong

not words

another pattern

a calligraphy

of notes and semi-quavers

condensing in the warmth of a birds breath

a sonogram

written in the sharp cold air of a frosty morning

listen

the rooks toss black splinters of sound

into the sky

listen

a wren its trembling melody

like warm water on the skin

listen

the rounded vowels of a wood pigeon

slide down the throat like honey

listen

keep it safe inside

on rewind/replay

sparks of joy

spooling down

to silence

Hawk

Clare Seal

A hurled javelin
bone feathered, so light no child could lift. Talons
ready to unzip the breast of Sparrow.

Wintering dusk, a cloister of cawing squabblers,
above. Crow, outlander, black cassocky wings, locks on,
Hawk gives chase.

Hawk is an impudent
corkscrew gift at my windscreen, bloody prey wrapped
tightly, prayers unheard.

Putting Away the Birds

Bridwell Park Fair

Matt Bryden

He folds each part into its drawer
with the glass-polish of a maître d':

toe, thumb, heel, scapular...
crown to tail. Nape and hind-neck,

belly and breast. Each ear
snuck into the palm like a bar of soap.

Then the heads are slipped from their lecterns.
Residua of bone and feather

dust the drawer-linings like chalk.
White plumes litter the lawn.

Only when each bird is quite extinguished
inside the glossy, black magician's boxes

does he sit outside the windowless van,
raise a roll-up to his lips and exhale.

I've never cut anyone's hair let alone my dead dad's
Ann Pelletier-Topping

I wrap a warm towel around his shoulders
wet his white hair with an atomiser
until his neck is soaking
try not to get soap in his eyes

the backs of his ears are crusty with dirt
but I don't tell him

*

he isn't wearing his glasses and can't see me
but I can see le mal qu'il a
in the windowpane, the blue ice
of his eyes melting through his lashes

*

a bluebird at the window
its bill pecking at the glass
can it see us in here
my hands reaching deep into his head
trying to rinse the past
écoute papa l'oiseau il pleure

*

I tilt his head backwards and pour water
he looks at me unseeing
unsure if he recognises me
the soap slops onto my bare feet and runs
to the edges of the room
l'oiseau a-t-il peur

*

the comb hovers
while I decide how best to part

I don't know how
his hair is now black
les mots me coupent

*

as I begin to snip
his reflection flickers

je le vois bien, his blue tie
his baton poised on the soft flesh between index and thumb
and down and away, across and up
painting the air in the cold room

for his own imaginary orchestra
his whole body fluent in bassoon, oboe and horn
as Prokofiev's Pierre et le loup
spins on the stereo

tu vois papa l'oiseau s'en va

*

clumps of black hair fall to the ground
un enfant-loup lopes past the tree line the wide tundra

how can I trim the small hairs on his nape
maladroite que je suis avec ces gros ciseaux

*

his head comes to rest in the cup of my hand
fontanelle safe and soft as thistledown
repose-toi papa l'oiseau il reviendra

Namesakes

Matt Bryden

In Roman legend, a virgin queen of the Volscians
so swift she could run over a field of corn without bending a single blade,
or make her way over the sea without even wetting her feet.

Euphemus, too, could run across the rolling waters of grey sea
undamped. His toes alone sank in as he sped along his watery path.

We who never feel the sun on our bones picture the moor
the hours before badgers come. Fingers to the glass
count the days till our daughters first see the moon.

But for me

Joan Dance

Oh yes I'm holding on but
you have no idea how weak the thread is.
You reach out to me unthinkingly
in early morning bedrooms.
A circle of certainty as you dress for the day.

I am small to you. Oh I blend in seamlessly.
Here to button up and bear witness to your untidy edges.
An O with two eyes open wide.
Mouthless I keep schtum.

I might have gone into precision engineering or double glazing.
But oh
I felt the pull like so many types -
horn, plastic, wood, brass -
who serve by holding things together, holding things in.

When you arrive for the committees, chat shows, premiers,
who do you think is your fixer, seeing to the undone.
I smooth your way, oh yes I do.
Oh no! you'll say one day.
You'll miss me when I'm gone.

berlin

Abigail Price

we were waiting for the underground train at jannowitzbrücke on a cold wet
 day in september when the fall had come early and it felt like winter instead
 felt like we should hibernate as the train arrived

i saw us dash by in its doors you tall and handsome in a black coat upright like a
 pillar *my pillar* beside you i stood small in velvet and
 i was content and i was happy that this was me *that this was us*

three stations later we climbed up oh the night air oh the berlin rain
 it was hanging as threads in front of us and we made our way to an italian
 restaurant of candlelight and corner tables where people can be alone and

together *we were alone* drinking red wine out of vases
 eating beans and carrots wrapped in string touching your arm again
 and again memorising it as it was because tomorrow

in this city which bleeds on to *every wall* tomorrow
 messages from deep inside you will cover your skin

when the hyphens die then i will begin

Abigail Price

in early spring the ants came

silent

hyphens

crossing

the

kitchen

floor

i told him i feared more would come
but he rolled his eyes like he always did

and then one day i followed him
found the reason he could be so cruel
and she wasn't even pretty

when i came home, i came home
to a swarm of ants over the threshold
feasting themselves on powder

throwing

themselves

against

the

stairgate

there are no hyphens any more

The Useful Tree

David Birch

Six in a row along the path
by the slow green Isis: *Betula Utilis*
parchment pillars silent
in the creeping dusk.

Utilis - the 'useful' tree's pale bark
bore text in Sanskrit, was wrapped around
an injured limb and stretched tight
against Himalayan rain.

Walk towards the bridge
to meet their cousin *Albosinensis*,
the Chinese Red, elegant at a fork
on the frosted gravel.

Enjoy the generosity of trees:
here's one to heal your wounds
and keep you dry and one to make you long
to stroke his copper skin.

Midwinter

Hilary Taylor

the sun's morse flickers on my eyelids
and finds a cobweb of scratches on the window
a surprise gift as the spun pebble of our train

skims across flooded fields
in this held half-light of the year
where nothing can begin or end

laughter from a group getting off
as more squeeze on and we shuffle
bags and coats to make space

light fades as the Wye stitches its lazy course
between England and Wales
a silver thread that slips away into the darkness

as rain scratches on the window to be let in
and the year leans forward into the dark

The Hollow Way

David Birch

“A route that centuries of foot-fall, wheel-roll and rain-run have harrowed into the land” (Robert MacFarlane)

We duck into the steep tunnel of the hollow way
to shelter from a summer shower, and gaze up
the bone-dry path to a gate to the open sky
suspended between banks and overhanging trees.

Rain filters through branches, barely reaching
the dusty floor of leaf-skeletons and hazel-husks,
boot-broken and pestled into gritty fragments,
where sett-spoil spills across the narrow track.

Scant scraps of life survive in this netherworld:
exposed bones of bleached and twisted roots,
wreathed with ivy, fern and nettle, stripped
by the scouring years of frost and flood.

Once through the gate, the rain has cleared,
the sun warming the wheatfields and gleaming roofs.
We are poised between the dark and the golden:
the track behind us and the open fields below.

Windmills

Terry Dyson

In the flatness of a sleepwalker's dream:
by the Welnay, by the Lady's Fen,

brushing up against broken fences
which pepper the outstretched hand,

trail the wash of wellington boots,
as sails creak to the suck of the Wicken.

Dread black tentacles, the whistle
of eels hunting down those midnight fears.

Somewhere a mention of corncrake
starting her tractor over and over, sweeps

to the dykes, where a shock of voles,
unsure of the rumours, boldly paddle on

to the thwack of artillery, the rumble of war
by hack, by hawk, stealing all loosestrife,

skirting baggy roots; and as sedge and rush
storm on, defiance bugles a chord or two.

Marsh Harriers shrill, insistent, insistent
throughout the Wash, above the Wicken,

over the Lady's Fen.

Gaza 3-6-5

Clare Bryden

*Dartmoor covers 365 square miles,
one for every day in the year.*

So we play Dartmoor 3-6-5, a game
tracking down features of interest,
one target in each square mile —
evidence of bygone industry,
strip farming, stone walling,
circles, rows and standing
stones of sacred import

and graves, yes Grim's Grave,
Jay's Grave and Stephen's Grave,
Childe's Tomb and The Coffin Stone,
yes and Hangman's Pit, Gibbet Hill,
Boundary Crosses, Bloody Pool,
Target Railway, Shell Top,
New Waste, Bleak House,
Look And Weep.

Our troop of seekers
have dedicated books and maps,
reference websites and a Facebook Group
where we ask each other questions —
Are they practising live firing today?
What were these ruined buildings?
Who used to occupy them?
Where exactly is the target?
How do we get from A to B?

*Gaza covers 365 square kilometres,
one for every day in the year.*

Saturn Swallows the Future

after Goya and Rubens

Abby Crawford

To keep it from swallowing him. Whole,
this is how the myth goes. But why

does Rubens launder him with sanity?
The rational father, contemplative,

as if the torque, the press of fingers, the bite
were not cruelty, but a methodical solution.

The unbothered self floats free

of its own dirty violence, the torture
committed by some other hands.

Goya, who cannot parse countless afternoons,
deaf, delirious, confronts on his farmhouse wall

each morning, the inescapable truth:
we are exactly what we do.

This is how the myth goes: a goddess
swaddles a stone to save her son.

The stone, to survive the gut
of power, must look like what power wants,

be useless
and wait.

stand still

Liz England

let momentum cease

strata settle

imperceptibly

stand still

submerge in detritus

skin cells

legs of spiders

space-dust from a moth's wing

falling

forming the solid weight of earth

identity is only a shadowy outline

appearing and disappearing in a muddy puddle

or a glint of moonshine in an owl's eye

The Mollies

Clare Seal

I caught a wind north,
heard there would be coins
to be farmed out of the sea,
beguiling in the sun.

A boy in a man's world,
Now, men in the birds' world,
all of us caught, a storm, spirit's fury,
stripping sinews, dissolving flesh,

bones that would rot
with the carcass of the ship
swimming down into the grey,
slimy green, dark water.

We are not lost, yet not at peace,
our souls slipping into albatross bodies,
wandering in fulmars' frames,
skimming over waves.

*Mariners often believed that the souls of drowned sailors
lived on in the bodies of fulmars, known as Mollies*

EXMOUTH BEACH, DEVON

Terry Dyson

Tonight, in a bah humbug mood, we slip
out of the tame house and drive
to the slack beach, despite the hangdog
vibe, indifferent rain, the winter's dark.

Nowhere nearby to park (for free).
They won't be having our pound of flesh.
So we walk from afar to reach
our sand, all puckered grit and cool.

The ocean stretches away, stretches us out
as though nothing has ever happened here,
shtum water; whisking each whoosh-wha
skin skim spin swim.

We imagine small fry scudding, half astir,
half asleep, burbling through dense.
Behind us, up the ramp and runnel,
a lifeboat drips insights into the gloom.

*the sea is a cauldron:
young & old, svelte & lardy,
green & jaded
winsome at times, moody.
90% crazy wild.*

February

Fanny Balcombe

A lot of dying's going on round here;
each morning brings more news to blight the day.
Perhaps it's just the down-time of the year?

For instance, Keith, in Garden Cottage near
the back end of the village, slipped away.
A lot of dying's going on round here.

And goodbye Ed, sweet-natured, full of cheer,
whose piano was his life ... but not today.
Perhaps it's just the down-time of the year?

Then Gary's tattered lungs refused to clear:
he's given up, just stopped. No more delay.
A lot of dying's going on round here.

And now young Edmond's gone. It makes one fear:
not even fifty and he's on his way.
Perhaps it's just the down-time of the year?

We speculate: who's next to disappear?
Please let it not be me, we softly say.
A lot of dying's going on round here.
Perhaps it's just the down-time of the year?

The pub

Joan Dance

Down a London lane
off the swerve and crisscross,
settled down in old brown wood seclusion.
History and anticipation,
the air full of it.
Lies and stories polished here,
the sheer brass of it.

Still infused with smoke.
Choked with generations of blokes joking through their lives.
Full throated swearing, layers of slang
preserved in every paint coat.
Stink of secrets leaching out of walls in the Ladies and Gents
privy to pickled truths.

Me and people I knew might have tumbled through and drunk here.
Was it fun to be fun here?
I can't remember. I never was a regular.

Memories that don't have homes to go to
push to the front of the bar
calling time.

Some of our conversations

Clare Bryden

Some of our conversations have become
songs. The air that is essential silence
humming comfortably beyond all sense.
In sparer moments out of blue, a psalm
for every consequence — delight, appeal,
lament, contentment with a job well done,
a catch at martins tending urgent young.
Angelic frequencies re-tuning all

my worrying away at memories
of awkward words — those sighs and groanings spun
to lyrics in unfathomable tongues,
a miracle of calming harmonies
that, soothing, hush to pulsing lullaby —
our songs that hold the light at close of day.

Black Ven Stanza

The Black Ven Stanza is primarily aimed at editing and providing feedback on work-in-progress poems, for personal development and to encourage performance, submission or publication.

We were thrilled to partner with Quay Words and Literature Works during 2024-26. Thank you for your support.

New members are always welcome.

Sarah Acton is the convenor and presiding genie of Black Ven Stanza. She is a writer and performer weaving oral history, myth realities, story and expanded cosmos connected to places and landscapes.

Website: blackven.org

Sarah and the poets featured in the Zine can be contacted via the Black Ven email address: blackvenpress@gmail.com

Poets featured

Matt Bryden is the locum genie of Black Ven Stanza when called upon. His most recent book is *The Glassblower's House* (Live Canon, 2023). He is Royal Literary Fellow at the University of Exeter and co-host of Uncut Poets.

Website: mattbrydenpoetry.co.uk

Instagram: @mattbrydenpoetry

Fanny Balcombe is a retired English teacher and head-teacher. Lifelong poetry-writer, unpublished but keen to try. Born and bred Londoner, moved to Devon and loves rural life. School governor, churchwarden, Rotarian, rebel at heart.

Instagram: @fannybalcombe

David Birch worked in education and lives in Devon. His poetry frequently explores the relation of people to their landscape, environment and past. 'The Hollow Way', 'The Useful Tree' and more of his poems can be found on *Wildfire Words*.

Bluesky:

@davidbirch.bsky.social

Clare Bryden is a writer and web developer based in Exeter. Her interests are primarily humanity's place within the natural world of which we are part, and the related theology and psychology of connectedness. 'Gaza 3-6-5' first appeared in *Elsewhere*.

Website: clarebryden.co.uk

Bluesky: @clarebryden.bsky.social

Abby Crawford is a Devon poet, based in Exeter. Her work is often ekphrastic and mythological, drawing on philosophy and the natural landscape to explore identity. Her poetry has appeared in *Ink Sweat and Tears* and *Gypsophilia*.

Website: linktr.ee/abbymcrawford

Instagram: @abbymcrawford_

Joan Dance has worked in a variety of settings including street markets, universities, event sites, cinemas, town halls and advertising agencies. She lives in London (a bit) and Devon (mostly). Her poems have appeared in *Dreich*, *Pulsebeat* and *Wildfire Words*.

Terry Dyson currently lives in Devon, and along with spreading the cream on a scone first (and arguing about it), likes to write poems about the immediate surroundings, historical events, and the liquorish assortments of life.

Liz England is a Moor Poet who lives near Dartmoor and enjoys writing about the other than human living things in the environment, in the hope of maybe narrowing the gap between us and them.

Ann Pelletier-Topping is a poet of Québécois heritage, based in Devon. She holds a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. In 2020, she won second prize in the National Poetry Competition. 'I've never cut anyone's hair let alone my dead dad's' first appeared in *Lighthouse*.

Abigail Price is a writer, funeral celebrant and former journalist. Her poetry addresses the complexities of relationships, grief and theology. A pianist and singer, her best achievements in life are her daughters.

Instagram: @abigail_price_celebrant_writer

Clare Seal likes to write poems about some of her miraculous friends who wear feathers and help her play, think and work things out, laugh and cry.

Instagram: @clare_seal_maker

Hilary Taylor is a poet based in Totnes with publications in magazines and anthologies. She has been short-listed for the Bridport Prize and long-listed for the National Poetry Competition.



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