



**Queer
Reparative
Poetry**

an anthology

edited by Tom White

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Introduction

Is queerness a practice, a different way of being and behaving in the world? If so, how might that affect the way we write? Those were the questions raised in a series of workshops that I delivered at the Manchester Poetry Library in August 2023. The poets who attended those workshops responded in very different ways.

Is queerness a way of being and behaving in the world? The theorist Eve Sedgwick¹ suggests that there is a practice which queer people excel at; namely, the ability to find sustenance in a culture which tries to deny it to us. Sedgwick calls that practice ‘reparative’. Unfortunately, reparative practice is becoming increasingly important as the UK becomes ever more hostile to queer people and to trans people in particular. It’s sobering to think that ILGA-Europe (the European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) now ranks the UK seventeenth for LGBTQ+ rights, whereas in 2015 it ranked first.²

In the workshops, we singled out several reparative practices to explore:

Excess: This is the practice of asserting abundance within a culture that would prefer to deny that to us. (Think of Ballroom culture, where queer people of colour parade the catwalk in opulent outfits.)

Relating: This is the practice of drawing strength and inspiration from people and organisms that we feel a connection with, when society at large seems hostile.

¹ Eve Sedgwick (1993) *Touching Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press.

² ILGA-Europe (2023) *Rainbow Europe Map & Index*. Available at: <https://www.rainbow-europe.org/#8666/0/0>

Recuperating: This is the practice of finding value in the products that society deems marginal and obsolete – as we are often made to feel. (Think of Leilah Babirye’s sculptures made from rubbish.)

Over the course of three workshops at Manchester Poetry Library, we investigated how those reparative strategies might inform the way we write poetry. It’s a pleasure to share some of the resulting poems, all of which were written by workshop participants. It’s a pleasure because the ability to find sustenance within a culture which is often antithetical to our needs and desires is something to celebrate. It’s the ability to make something out of nothing. It demonstrates resilience and ingenuity. Those are all characteristics which the poets in this collection demonstrate in abundance. Enjoy!

Tom White
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Poems

Claire Gulliver

One day the wait will be over

Half of me upside down
cracked, clouded,
damp as Sunday
tossed into a wire basket outside a second hand shop
my name unreadable.

She brushes the raindrops off me.

Samphire Glossary

After Sean Hewitt

In the language of samphire, Sea
is made between stems -
currents sounding
the *sss*
and the *eee*

Salt is felt in the skin
a soft body admitting
just enough

Tide is remembered as thirst
cell-deep puckering
want

love is mouthed
in phosphorescence.

Ruth Yates

Lavender Says

Honestly I feel honoured
to have been such a big part
of your life so far
even that quiet shadowlife

so much left unsaid

the houses on the hill
the sunset
the mud around the pond
your house

now let me line your path

I met you
in your grandma's drawer
in a field full of me full of me
in ice cream in scones

where I reminded you

you too are strong
your stem is long
you are very nearly
unbreakable

you smell good baby

no need for thanks
and by the way
for us there's nothing
that's not queer

so own it like we own

our stink

our fragrance

our paperiness.

E Walker

Brevity

Spat-gum, wrinkled, white and almost-fresh wet.

You see it too soon and too late – before the delicate asteroid
is flattened under trainer sole, but after having been lovingly crafted

by my teeth, my saliva, my fillings
determined mastication as a gift (in godknowswhat nth chance)
for your stride, your foot,
adhering you to the world and, more intentionally,
my mouth,

until stretching our lost connection in your lifted step.
Nothing but a stringing irk for you now.

Maggot

All right, caterpillars, I'll bite;
what is it about that word – as the snow
drifts on a sentimental New York
that you have never known –
what is it (and it is just a word) –
in this age and climate where you can stream
uncensored whenever you want, as loud
as you want – what is it about
that word – on the days that the powers
decide to no longer prevent hive
attacks on the young Q plus – what
is it about that word – when you've spent
the rest of the year doing nothing to protect
the butterflies and ladybirds and
dragonflies and wasps or have actively ignored
all the glinting creatures above you – what is it
about that word that makes you feel so
fucking festive that you need
to hear it in Tesco or on the van radio?

Keep in mind, beloved mites, when we're all
together at the Ugly Bug Ball, pissed
on fermented fruits,
bauble antennae and tinsel limbed,
I will wrap Mothra wings around you, sing
out that word with you at the top of our lungs
and use just the words of your response
as barbs on the proboscis shoved
down your throat under the mistletoe.

Luca Fois

a bird

my wings are spread out wide,
i fall. my eye
follows the thick line
containing my shame,
my peacock
blue body;
you see my
shape: a bird.
not a wren a crow
a sulphur-crested cockatoo,
they are too
crisp. i am just

 a bird, my home was a wooden
 sky on your wall, part of a calendar
 decor; my friends: a tree a bear
a cloud. after the fall, you picked me
 up, put me in a pocket.
 forgotten, i pivot

 on the hardened glue
on my back, on the itch
 of my belonging.
 what have i become?
 a bird-shaped wooden
seesaw. with my left eye i
 see you smile content
 when you crush one
of my wings; with a reproving
finger you push it to the ground.
 watch me when i rise
 the other, responding
 to the pressure
 with my pleasure

Autumn Matters

From Rishi Sunak's speech at the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester 2023

I can confirm

We are

controversial

parents know

Patients should know

people

can be any sex they want to be.

a man is

a woman is a woman.

common sense

should

talk

to

that wise Prime Minister

same-sex

marriage is

love

autumn

matters
to say that

we should never be afraid

Summer Green

Something

I am torn in half
the sense that I used to hold something sweet
What are you painting?
Do you know that you are sat in a field of opium?
Prescribe me something good,
tell me something good.
That this thrumming loneliness is a 'must-read'
That the light left on won't cost me a penny
That you heard her tell me I'm not worth any
Thing. That this thing
is sad and funny
to undress
the phone and apologize.
I just want a t-shirt
but I'm scared to reach in
thrust a hand deep
for you hold the hangers and I reckon I'm getting too old
to let go, hold your own
in the corner of my wardrobe
ironic, now empty
as I have nothing to shame.

Somewhere

Somewhere under the pile of clothes
a heaving and growing cistern on my chair
Somewhere in all the old train receipts
that smudge the linings of my pockets
and print numbers on my fingers
Somewhere in the back of the fridge
welded stiff to the shelf in polar ice caps
Soon maybe I could plant it all in the garden
reduce the raging weeds and wild flowers to a soft lull
Maybe I could just put it all in there
cover it in shit and see if roses grow
a sinkhole of my very own making blanketed
with grass ripe enough you could drink it
green like my fingers could be
I could get a watering can and tend to it my
pile of vibrancy wildlife rich seeds, a new life
I could give it to myself
not without,
but on top of.

Lianne Wilson

Buried Treasure

we found once, discarded
beneath the hand-me-down mattress,

a porn mag.

a real one, like in the movies.
SPECIAL 3D EDITION!,
the cheap red-cyan specs
tacked to the front
with, hopefully, glue.

this must have been the 2010s
and I swear we'd invented
the internet, but there it was.

we didn't need a porn mag.
nobody needs a porn mag.

I wish we'd kept the porn mag.

but imagine packing up again
love, have you boxed the porn mag yet?

diligently carting Becky, 19,
and her baps from rental to rental
with the smoothie-maker from my ex's dad.

Tresor Ynkleudhys

ni a drovyas unweyth, tewlys 'ves
'dann an matras kevres-res,

kylghgreun porn.

onan gwir, 'par hag y'n fylmys.
SPECIAL 3D EDITION!,
an dheweder rudh-pers prisel
stegys orth an gudhlen
gans, yn hwovenek, glus.

yn sur hemm o an 2010ow
ha re dhismygsyn an kesrosweyth,
my a'n te, mes 'thesa ena.

nyns o res dhyn porn.
nyns yw res dhe nagonan porn.

my a vynn may hwitthen an porn.

mes dismyg fardella arta
melder, 'wruss ta fastya an porn hwath?

halya yn tiwysyk Becky, 19,
ha'y splyttys a rentyans dhe rentyans
gans an jynn smodhigow a das ow hyns.

peach

Excess

Bite into my skin
and suck my sweet
juices until they drip
down your mouth, your
chin, your neck -
I'd like to lick it off
so it doesn't stain,
dry and sticky.

Indulge in me but don't
let it show, selfish,
excessive. They can have
their cake and eat it
but I can't have sex
without it being too
much, excessive,
gross, and sticky,
staining your face
for them to shield
their eyes from.

I'll take your eyes
and kiss them, brush
them with mine, my
eyelashes, my cheek,
my tongue, my lips.
I'll take your lips and
bite and suck your
juices dry, licking every
drop and staining a tissue
so there is nothing for them
to shield their eyes from.

Keli Tomlin

Cumming Out

t t t tiny tiny pieces

shatter / sing / tumble over
the tabletop to each sweet finger
pressed clasped each sweet

WORLD

wait ing > becoming,
thrumming,

- - -

- - -

thrum-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-ming

shake the mystery // be s e e n // stand and be
counted

each and every dry eye to linger...linger...linger.....
this line is

clear..... ine is
clear is croxxed white hot swxxt hot swxxt burn HOT soft x x x

x x x

x x x

| | | | |

so o o f f f f f f f f f t

(s o o o f u c c i n g h o t)

:

a haven

:

hope

Infatuation

You paint my face, straighten my curls, and watch from the shadows as I take the lead
We roll on the bed and laugh till we bleed, each peal wringing loose another, until we are bone dry
We sit higher than Christmas, our feet dangle through the ceiling, as we wonder how to clean our dirty footprints from the walls;
It's okay to want that, you say, I think I want that too.

You root at end of my street, we are so small, and your hand is raised and
I wish I'd known then about the monster you were going home to
One day you cut off your long, long hair and I see (for the first time) who is buried beneath
Every beaded bracelet, every roll-cornered notebook, the tiny bag you take everywhere
I kneel at your feet and breathe and breathe, until finally you weep;
It's okay to want that, you say, I think I want that too.

Night hours spent in each others' silence
I recall the scent and scratch of your purple cardigan
Bright eyes filled with faith I don't understand, but knowing you do makes me feel better
I quiver every time you raise your hand to speak
Grab your beer, cackle, and lick the final drop straight from the bottle
It's the first time I've ever been aroused in public.
I am seventeen.
Your fiancé and the rest of the class look on in startled silence;
It's okay to want that, you say, I think I want that too.

Simon Maddrell

Sex, Drugs & Ice Cream

I became obsessed with drink
all because of a boy
that is to say it was a game
to hoodwink my desire

or maybe, it was my sin.

I became obsessed with sex
because of boys
that is to say it was a cycle
of fucking and sucking

or maybe, it was a sin.

I mixed it up then with drugs
all because of a boy
that is to say it was my desire
to fuck, and be fucked

or maybe, it was sin.

I moved on to new passions
loaded them with ice cream
that is to say food is my thirst
and sex my hunger.

A Certain Fish

Time has no intention like fishing for no fish.
He bobbed naked in a small boat near an old castle
a wounded king, his willing groin maimed.
His healing the preserve of seven bold knights
whose swords can only sever sinew and muscle.

Tiger sharks don't like the taste of our bodies
but they swallow first anyway, like with GHB.
His beauty cast me a glance, I made a certain
choice. Me, his off-sprung daddy, an inheritance
I tried to drown at birth. But fish don't drown.

A certain answer was pricked from my arm,
a seeded question left untouched to spawn.
I bobbed naked in a small boat near an old castle
with no intention to fish, this time.

Hongwei Bao

Dream of the Orchid Pavilion

I often wish I lived in ancient China.
Not that I worship gods or goddesses,
Or that I'd like to pay tribute
to emperors or empresses. But that I could
be one of the men, the literati,
who would wear long robes all day.
Their silky sleeves wave like ribbons.
Their long hair flows like waterfalls.
They walk together, shoulder to shoulder,
hand in hand, on bright, moonlit nights,
when there's no cloud, across the pink
oceans of peach blossoms, along the murmuring
zigzagging stream, where lanterns
float downstream, leading
to a pavilion surrounded
by assorted orchids. They would
have green tea, play the zither,
and drink rice wine, one cup
after another, till their smiles mellow,
till their cheeks redden. They would then
compose poems, in running hands that flow
freely on rice paper, and then read
them out, praising each other's beauty
and talent. When the night's deep,
and the wind's up, they would wrap
one another with their silky sleeves, and leave
long kisses on each other's rosy cheeks.
They would then lie down, between wine-
saturated breaths, next to the orchids, covered
by peach-flower petals. They would then fall
asleep in each other's arms, and in poems
and dreams, centuries after centuries.

Why Do You Want to Visit China Now?

Why do you want to visit China now,
in a hot summer when the scorching sun
reflects the glaring glass surfaces of the high-rises,
burns the skin and melts the tarmac?
In a place where people assume
that you speak fluent Mandarin but you can't
understand most of the popular cultural references?
In a place where everyone around you is talking
about how to make money and bring up kids
but on these topics you have very little to say?
In a place where you must hide being gay and try
to find an excuse to explain why you are still single?
In a place where you are seen as a native
but feel more and more alienated?

Why don't you just stay here?
For a summer that is neither hot nor too breezy.
A temperature above 30 is considered extreme heat.
In a small town where life is uneventful
and you can hear your grey hair growing in the silence.
In a country where the Union Jack is flying high,
as high as inflation and hate crime rates.
In a continent where a war is raging on
and people became increasingly indifferent to rising figures.
In a place where you are forever seen
as a foreigner, a migrant, an outsider.
In a place where you call home but will never
feel completely at home.

And why is there a summer, and why
do you have to decide at all?

Tara Singh

i am useless

i am from outer space
earth is not a great place
to be i don't know why i ever came here
you seem to have taken the skin from my neck & placed it into
 next week
don't call me pussy cat
i ain't nobody's pussy
my brain is bigger than yours
my hairstyle was inspired
by the pouted round head of poppy
reaching up to the sky
i am much older than i look
if you want that to be true
watercolour is all
that my delicate fingers can handle
give me some clay & i will break
we always have it at the weekend
the wails of the weather
the cheese cuts through
some of the storm of life
i would never only use myself the once
being of a good quality with three ply
pillow soft when fresh
i don't need to eat cheese
i just choose to
the tweed on my elbows add depth
to the nose
don't call me pussy cat
i ain't nobody's pussy
my brain is bigger than yours

blurbblurbblurb

*oh beautiful soul with your heart full of love be prepared to be
devastated and uplifted*

by this collection of angelic poetry.

*the humble writer feels blessed to be able to share their words
with the world.*

*many of these poems came to the writer in a dream. they
believe it to be their destiny to gift these poems to you,
the reader. to take this journey, to find your truth.*

b-e-a-u-t-i-

fulsoul with

your heartfull

o -

f- love be

prepared

t -

o -

#BeDevastated

#AndUplifted

by this,

collect

ion of angelic poetry

the humble writer feels

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their (words with the) **world**

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poems

t

o-

you

the reader **t**

o-
take this journey **t**

o -
find your **truth**

Further Reading

This section includes details of three queer reparative practices – excess, relating and recuperating – and how they might be applied to poetry. Each section is accompanied by a list of poems which demonstrate those practices.

Excess

Excess is how we assert abundance within a culture that would prefer to deny it to us. As the theorist Jillian Hernandez puts it, the aesthetics of excess ‘embrace abundance where the political order would impose austerity’ on marginalised peoples.³ In poetry, the practice of excess might involve being excessively verbose (long sentences with numerous clauses), using an excessive vocabulary (words which seem too poetic or esoteric) and demonstrating excessive imagination (taking an idea too far). It might also include using typographical innovations – going to extremes with the layout of a text, the use of punctuation or spelling. This could unlock an excess of interpretations and an opulent looking – or sounding – poem.

Suggested Reading

John Ashbery: ‘The Instruction Manual’ in *Collected Poems 1956-1987* *

Caroline Bergvall: ‘Goan Atom (Doll)’ in *Meddle English*

Julian Talamantez Brolaski: *Of Mongrelitude* *

Jos Charles: *feeld*

Harry Josephine Giles: *Deep Wheel Orcadia* *

David Melnick: *Pcoet* (online: tinyurl.com/46y53xa8)

Nat Raha: *Of sirens, body & faultlines* *

Phoebe Stuckes: ‘Paris’ (online: tinyurl.com/yckr5zf3)

Books marked with * are available from Manchester Poetry Library at Manchester Metropolitan University.

³ Jillian Hernandez (2020) *The Aesthetics of Excess*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 11.

Relating

A study by 'Just Like Us' found that young queer people are twice more likely to experience loneliness than their non-queer peers.⁴ A similar study by AgeUK found that loneliness is more likely to be experienced by older queer people than their non-queer counterparts.⁵ With loneliness so prevalent, it is vital that we develop ways to draw strength and inspiration from people and other organisms that we feel a connection with. In poetry, this might involve writing *to* someone or writing *with* someone (through collaboration or responding to an artist's work). It might also involve writing with other species – engaging with an animal or plant.

Suggested Reading

Amanda Ackerman: *The Book of Feral Fauna*

Chen Chen: 'To the Guanacos at the Syracuse Zoo' in *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* *

CAConrad: *Advanced Elvis Course*

Colin Herd & Maria Sledmere: *Cocoa and Nothing*

Paul Legault: *The Tower* *

Tawnya Selene Renelle: *Prompts*

Danez Smith: 'acknowledgements' in *homie* *

Books marked with * are available from Manchester Poetry Library at Manchester Metropolitan University.

⁴ Just Like Us (2021) *Growing Up LGBT+: The Impact of School, Home and Coronavirus on LGBT+ Young People*. Available at: <https://www.justlikeus.org/blog/2021/11/25/lgbt-young-people-twice-likely-lonely-worry-daily-mental-health/>

⁵ Age UK (2018) *Combating Loneliness Amongst Older LGBT People: Exploring Findings from The Sage Programme in Leeds*. Available at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/combating-loneliness-amongst-older-lgbt-people-a-case-study-of-the-sage-project-in-leeds/>

Recuperating

As queer people, we are likely to have been made to feel unwanted or useless. So it makes sense that we might be drawn to cultural products that society rejects. Perhaps (since we ourselves identify with those products) in showing them love, we show love to ourselves. That seems to be what the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick means when she writes that ‘the reparative impulse wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.’⁶ In poetry, recuperating might involve writing about unwanted things. Or it might involve taking inspiration from useless things to write in a useless way (completely descriptively or derivatively).

At other times, we might need to recuperate queerness from something which is not intended to have a queer significance. That might involve damaging or breaking an object. As the theorist Sara Ahmed states, ‘queer use becomes an act of destruction, whether intended or not. Queer use in other words can be understood as vandalism’.⁷ In poetry, this might manifest in erasure techniques – scoring through the lines of an existing text, in order to excavate a new poem from it.

⁶ Eve Sedgwick (1993) *Touching Feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 149.

⁷ Sara Ahmed (2018) ‘Queer Use’, *feministkilljoys*, 8th November. Available at: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/11/08/queer-use/>

Suggested Reading

John Ash: 'Skiadion' and 'All Purpose Elegy' in *Two Books: Anatolikon / To the City* *

Jay Bernard: *The Red and Yellow Nothing*

Billy-Ray Belcourt: 'Flesh' in *NDN Coping Mechanisms* *

Kate Durbin: *Hoarders*

Robin Coste Lewis: *Inhabitants and Visitors*

James McDermott: *Erased*

Tommy Pico: *Junk*

David Trinidad: 'Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera' in *Dear Prudence: New and Selected Poems* *

Steffan Triplett: 'The Black[Outs]: Listen' in *Nepantla* *

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