

Thu 10 Feb
7-8.30pm

Five Bodies

Live transcript

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KEYWORDS

language, poetry, harbour, lake, thinking, poem, water, long, feel, word, mouth, river, read, body, reading, people, basketball, slip, mojave

SPEAKERS

Natalie Diaz, Nina Mingya Powles, Olivia Aherne

00:03 Olivia Aherne

Hello everyone, welcome. My name is Olivia Aherne. I'm the curator of exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary. And tonight, it's my pleasure to welcome you all to our second series of Five Bodies, an online programme of poetry, writing and text. For those of you tuning in for the first time, Nottingham Contemporary is a contemporary art centre based in the East Midlands. We work with artists, communities and academics to reflect on contemporary art, society and visual cultures. This is the first session of the new series titled Entanglements, which investigates poetic ecologies in the Anthropocene, aiming to open up new conversations about coexistence, resilience and sustainability. Five Bodies was imagined in conjunction with our colleagues Sarah Jackson, who runs the critical poetics research group at Nottingham Trent University, and Dr. Linda Kemp, a research fellow also at the University. Tonight's event includes AI driven live captioning, which can be accessed via a link in the YouTube chat. This will open in a separate window

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on your browser and within that you can adjust the scale and layout to suit your requirements. Now to our speakers this evening, I'm delighted to introduce Natalie Diaz and Nina Mingya Powles. Natalie was born and raised in the Fort Mojave Indian village in Needles, California, on the banks of the Colorado River. She is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Tribe. Her first poetry collection, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, was published by Cooper Canyon Press and won an American Book Award. Her second book *Postcolonial Love Poem* was published by Graywolf Press in March 2020 and was a finalist for the National Book Award, the Forward Prize and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2021. She's a 2018 MacArthur Fellow as well as a Lannan Literary Fellow and a Native Arts Council Foundation Artist Fellow. She was awarded the Princeton Holmes National Poetry Prize and a Hodder Fellowship. She is a member of the Board of Trustees for the United States Artists where she is an alumni of the Ford Fellowship. Diaz is Director of the Center for Imagination in the Borderlands and is the Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Chair in Modern and Contemporary Poetry at Arizona State University. Joining Natalie this evening is Nina Mingya Powles. Nina is a writer, poet and maker from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently in London. Her poetry collection *Magnolia* from 2020, was a finalist in the New Zealand Book Awards and the Forward Prizes. She is also the author of several zines and pamphlets, as well as a food memoir, *Tiny Moons* from 2020, and a collection of essays, *Small Bodies of Water*, from 2021. The event this evening is titled *River, Mouth*. Natalie and Nina are going to read for around 10 minutes each and then they'll be in conversation together before giving us a final reading. As always, if you have any questions, please send your thoughts through the YouTube chat and I'll field these to our speakers towards the end of the event. To begin with Natalie and Nina would like to pose a question, what is a body of water that is meaningful to you? We'd like to invite you to post your responses in the chat. I'll now hand over to Nina for our first reading.

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03:49 Nina Mingya Powles

Thank you so much, Olivia and Sarah as well, for her organising and Natalie, it's such a joy to be doing this with you. Yeah, as Olivia mentioned, we would love (if you want to) pop in the YouTube chat a body of water that's meaningful to you. And I've got the window kind of on the side of my screen so it'll be lovely to see some of your places popping up as I read and you can continue to do that throughout and we've got a bit of space for questions at the end, as well. So I'll start by reading a few poems loosely connected on the theme of water and also I think how we are entangled with different languages, which we'll speak about later. And I've got an image to start with, which I think will appear imminently which is a body of water of my own. And it's not the one that is nearest to me now. I'm speaking from London, but the one on the screen here that's Wellington Harbour in Aotearoa, so the southern most tip of Te Ika-a-Māui, the North Island of Aotearoa . And the particular vantage point is actually looking back at the city from Matiu / Somes Island, which is a small island, an uninhabited island in the middle of the harbour, to the nature reserve, it's really beautiful. But it was also in the late 19, in the late 1800s, was also a quarantine Island. A number of Chinese immigrants were sent there, and one famously passed away there, never left the island. So it's a fascinating place, quite a kind of haunted place. It's not a view of the harbour that you normally will see from anywhere, you know, from my parents' house, from any other point because you're in the centre of it from that island. So I wanted to share that, it's a place I think about a lot and dream about a lot. And I'll begin with a poem that takes place in the water of that harbour and it's called Last Summer We Were Underwater. If we could get the poem which is the next slide along, perfect. Last summer, we were underwater and we asked what are you doing there moon? Our bodies neck deep in salt and rain. Each crater is a sea you said & dived under the sun. Before I could speak water rushing over your skin. The place where chocolate ice cream had melted and dried there like a newly formed freckle on the surface of us. And the islands crumbling

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apart softly over sea caves, somewhere opening my mouth into the waves to say you are you are you are I'm going read now a few fragments from a sequence that I think is the central sequence of my book, Magnolia Mulan, which is called Field Notes on a Downpour. And it's quite long, but I'm going to read a few bits from that which are out of order. Field Notes on a Downpour. The first character of my mother's name, wen, is made of rain and language. According to the dictionary together they mean multicoloured clouds or cloud tints. There are so many things I'm trying to hold together. I write them down each day to stop them from slipping, mouthfuls of rain. The blue undersides of clouds, her hydrangeas in the dark. Also in the dictionary under "wen" - language, character, script, warm, lips, lines, veins/cracks in glassware or Jade. It was the summer of the watermelons. They were everywhere. tumbling out of fruit shops all along the footpath. The ripest ones split open in the gutters. Every day there is another downpour. More than a hundred characters share the same sound. "zong" assemble, put together/ always, footprint, trace, the uneven flight of a bird. In the morning outside your apartment, the wet leaves from last night's rain had already been swept away. The lady at the fruit shop asks me how I can be half Chinese and still look like this. She points to my hair. We come up against a word I don't know. She draws the characters. She draws the character in the air with one finger and it hangs there between us. "juan" curl, to have tender feeling for, to abandon, a net for catching birds. Some things make perfect sense, like the fact that "wave" is made of skin and water, but most things do not. That night there were cracks in the ceiling where the rain fell through and dripped down the back of your T-shirt then on to my arm. Last week two hundred white tundra swans were found dead beside a lake in Inner Mongolia. Two days ago I smashed a glass jar of honey on the kitchen floor. The glass broke but the honey held its shards together, collapsing softly. I'll just, I'll read one more poem, which is a bit newer, something that I worked on in 2021, last year, for Dead Women Poets Society, which is an amazing poetry collective. They try to resurrect past

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women and non binary poets in the events that they do. We had an online seance and I was commissioned to respond to the work of the Korean American artist and poet, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose book *Dictee* came out in the 80s and is a really strange and fascinating and rich text and I don't think I'll ever fully understand it. But I made this zine called *Seams: Traces*, because I became interested in the fact that Cha worked in the costume department at the Met in New York not long before she died. She was killed, actually, and sometimes her death, very often her death, overshadows the work that preceded it. So I wanted to write something about that complicated feeling. But I'll just share one poem from the zine. This is it here and it's quite small and it folds out. A little show and tell. But this poem is called *Snow Language*. Your handwriting resembles mine. Small looped threads, I touch them. Entering *Dictee*, I pass through veils to enter a landscape of dust and lunar snow. You speak in remnants, gestures, utterances. Ghosts are not enough; memory breathes. You wrote to your mother from Seoul: Every bird that migrates North for spring and South for winter becomes a metaphor for the longing of return. Your mouth opens. The sky opens. Fragments float down. Snow gloves, snow geese, snow drops, from heavy clouds. Language of spilled water, language of mist. Before snow, after snow, snowshoes. Language of white cloth, of commas. Bordered language, demarcated language. Snow blindness, snowcapped, swallowed language, folded language. Snowy Owl, Snow Pea, snowdrift. I am trying to listen to the silence. Snow mother, snow fall, snowfields. Your language of women is the language of snow. Thank you. I'll pass over to Natalie who will read.

15:18 Natalie Diaz

Gracias for having me. I'm joining you today from luckily, I'm able to be in my homeland, so ahkamaat land. Gracias to Olivia and Sarah, this has been this is a really beautiful energy and space you all have created and it's definitely changed my week. So I was lucky enough to be with some of your poets

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and writers yesterday. And yeah, I'm still, I'm still tinkering with lines I wrote alongside that group so I really appreciate it. Also gracias for bringing me in periphery and to be alongside Nina. It's been really lucky to begin what feels like an opening of of the ways we might converge and diverge, not just on the page in work, but you know, as poets and writers and language makers and language wonderers alongside each other. So I appreciate that. One of the ways that I have come to this always, of course, because I'm in the desert, and also I'm in a desert with a river, which people sometimes don't associate that, and my river is one of the most endangered rivers in the United States. If, you know if you were to Google the Colorado River, you would see that it's in our space, it's the lowest our reservoirs have been. I'd better start a timer, or I'll go all native on you and be talking forever. And so I think a lot about ocean and ancient ocean, you know, because my desert was an ancient ocean, I think we forget a lot that the land emerged from the ocean, you know, that, that body, that life was here long before us and somehow imagined land and somehow imagined us on it. And so it feels very important too, to think alongside Nina and her work and, and to think about the importance of diaspora and movement as well. So I'm going to read two poems to begin with you all. I'm going to read a poem called Lake Loop which is very much about water and just a kind of meditation toward water. And then I'm going to read a newer poem that I will be taking advantage of you all because me reading it here is going to help me revise and edit a bit, it's a little bit more centred in my my desert so. Lake Loop. Because there was yet no Lake. into many nights we made the lake, a labour and it's necessary labourings. To find the basin not yet opened in my body, yet my body, any body, wet or water from the start, to fill a clay, start being what it ever means. A beginning. The Earth's first hand on a vision quest wildering night's skin fields, for touch, like a dark horse made of air, turned downward in the dusk opaquing a hand resembles its ancestors, the war, or the horse who war made, what it means to be made, to be ruined before becoming - rift. Glacial, ablation and breaking.

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Lake-hip sloping, fluvial, then spilled. I unzip the lake, walk into what I am - the thermocline, and oxygen, as is with kills, rivers, seas, the water is of our own naming. I am wet we call it because it is a happening, is happening now. Imagined light is light's imagination, a lake shape of it. The obligatory body, it's dark burning, reminding us back, memory as filter, desire as lagan, a hydrology - The lake is alone, we say in Mojave. Every story happens because someone's mouth, a nature dependent - Life, a universe, here at the lake say, she wanted what she said to slip down into it, for which a good Lake will rise - lake which once meant sacrifice, which once meant I am devoted. Here I am, atmosphere, sensation, pressure, the lake is beneath me, pleasure bounded, a slip space between touch and not, slip of paper, slip of hand, slip body turning towards slip trouble, I am who slipped the moorings, I am so red with lack. To loop-knot, or leave the loop beyond the knot. We won't say love, because it is, a difference between vertex and vertices, the number of surfaces we break, enough or many to make the lake, loosened from the rock, one body's death is another body's ache, lay it to the earth. All great lakes are meant to take, sediment, blade, wrist, wrist, the ear, let down and wet with stars, dock lights distant but wanted, to be held in the well of the eye, woven like water, through itself, in and inside, how to sate a depression if not with darkness. If darkness is not fingers brushing a body, shhhh she said. I don't know what the world is. I slip for her, or anything, like language, new each time, diffusion - remade and organised, and because nothing is enough, waves. Each an emotional museum of water. Left light trembles a lake figure on loop, a night-loop. Every story is a story of water before it is gold and alone, before it is black like a rat snake. I begin at the lake, clean once, now drained. I am murk, I am not clean. Everything has already happened. Always the lake is just up ahead in the poem. My mouth is the moon. I bring it down, lay it over the lake of her thighs, warming lamping ax, hewing water's tender shell, slant slip, entering like light, surrounded into another skin where there was yet no lake. Yet we made it, make it still to drink and clean ourselves on. Then maybe this poem is

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too long so I'll read another poem, and then I'll stop there. So I'm going to read a poem from Postcolonial Love Poem. Especially I think we're talking about language as well and the languages that carry waters in different ways for us. So this is about the Milky Way and the ways that the Milky Way is a part of our story and existence here in my tribe. How the Milky Way Was Made. My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red-fast flood. Able to take anything it could wet -in a wild rush - all the way to Mexico. Now it is shattered by fifteen dams over one-thousand four-hundred miles, pipes in pumps, filling swimming pools and sprinklers in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. To save our fish, we lifted them from our skeletoned river beds, loosed them in our heavens, set them aster - 'Achii 'ahan, Mojave salmon, Colorado pikeminnow - Up there they glide gilled with stars. You see them now - gold, god-large, green sides, lunar white belly to breast - making their great speeded way across the darkest hours, rippling the sapphired sky-water into a galaxy road. The blurred wake they drag as they make their path through the night sky is called 'Achii 'ahan nyuunye - our words for Milky Way. Coyote too is up there locked in the moon after his failed attempt to leap it. Fishing Net wet and empty slung over his back - a prisoner blue and dreaming of unzipping the salmon's silked skins with his teeth. Oh, the weakness of any mouth as it gives itself away to the universe of a sweet-milk body. As my own mouth is desired and dream to thirst, the long ways, the hundred-thousand light year roads of your wrist and thighs. I'll stop there, now we're coming, now we're coming into conversation part. The part I've been waiting for.

25:43 Nina Mingya Powles

Feel like I'm resurfacing from deep somewhere after listening. It was really, really beautiful. Thank you.

25:52 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, gracias a ti también.

25:55 Nina Mingya Powles

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I feel like that last one you read of the Milky Way, there was a lot of repetition of the word mouth, in the previous as well. The different parts of the body of a lake and how our bodies slip into or touch or commune with the lake. It chimed with the kind of title that we picked I think, which is River, Mouth, . Because I just I thought that captured really nicely, something of the body and the way we cannot separate the two, our body and the water around us. Yeah, but maybe we could start by talking about a bit about our different languages and the way that we write through them and into them, or away from them as well. Because you've worked with speakers of the Mojave language. Can you talk a little about that work that you do with those speakers and your own journey with that language?

27:22 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, it's very lucky, I did this after graduate school, I came home and I did this, like in a different kind of full time way. I was really lucky that for five to seven years, but five solid in this particular way I was almost immersed in the language because I spent every waking hour with my elders and they wake up very early. So it was one of those situations where no matter how early you are, you're always late, because they were already awake. One of my best friends and one of my teachers, Hubert is a singer. So he sings the sun up, which means he gets up early, and I could just never quite make it there on time. But it was a really beautiful I mean, language is a relationship so it's a really beautiful relationship, but it's also made me more of who I think I would ever have been without my language. Its taught me a different kind of, you know, patience or slowness, you know, in some ways, it pulls you out of time. And it also like, it threads a lot a different kind of loss into you. You know, and I think as you work with language too, it's such a gift when we gain and then there's also the the loss that's simultaneously happening of those things. I think something that it's offered me that I feel like we're meeting here too even like you were saying with the title and you had offered a word that had the I'm just so I'm so interested in like the idea of radicals and water and you can choose to speak

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toward that or not but but I think even as we're talking about mouth and river it's a way to decentre the human body and I don't necessarily just mean our sensual body, I mean the ego body, that ego body part of us that thinks we have to know things or that judges what is knowledge or that even judges ourselves and I think a lot about even the mouth like you know, we say the mouth of the river but I also believe that you know, because we know these waters were here first that I have a mouth because the river first had a mouth, you know so there's a way that you're you're kind of flexing back and forth and physicality and presence becomes something very different. I know that I would have a very different relationship with my body if I didn't have the language I have in me. Yeah, so I, you know, I want to come back to you again, you know, it may be of interest to you to kind of share to like, the language you offered that I think really bloomed and opened up the possibility of where we would arrive in this conversation.

30:23 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I'll share a little bit about that. I grew up with fragments, kind of a background soundtrack, I guess, of a combination of English, Haka, Cantonese, and also little bits of Mandarin, which I would mainly hear when whenever we'd visit my grandparents. But I grew up in an English speaking place, an English speaking household. So I did not really ever feel strongly connected to those languages. Although I think I also grew up with a kind of consciousness that these languages were inside me in another way, not one that my kind of my Saturday language school classes, which I hated, which I completely refused to go to, not in a way that that traditional language learning could necessarily get at. So it was much later that I decided to formally take up Mandarin. And I've been thinking a lot about the accessibility of this language compared to others. I guess other East Asian languages, in particular, because Mandarin is the one where there's resources and courses. Very, very much not endangered in any way at all, kind of growing rapidly. Whereas then you have Cantonese, which is a very, very widely, very much alive,

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growing as well, but very, very politicised. And then you have Haka which doesn't necessarily have a written script. So I started pulling these threads together when I also went on a full immersion kind of course, for 18 months. But I found myself continually looking back towards poetry for a more, a more playful, and more tender, kind of a slower and kinder way of engaging with language and pulling the pieces apart, and weighing the pieces, like in my hands, or in a poem, in a way that like memorisation and, and drills was just not going to give me. So I think that's where I started to become interested in decentring English as the kind of the centre of my linguistic universe, which it is, but I think that I have a physical, a physical knowledge, or a different kind of fluency of these other languages, which are also a part of me, but it's definitely taken, it's taken time. And so many of us have this shame and this guilt when it comes to language. So there's there is always that loss, like you said, and this feeling of fluency being a very unstable notion, like what does it mean to be fluent, it could mean so many different things. And it could change day to day, depending how we feel in our bodies when we wake up. Or it feels like it's within reach, but it could just slip away, like, at any moment. So I became really interested in that, this unsteady ground and this, this in betweenness, which I think poetry gives me.

34:22 Natalie Diaz

It's, I think it's a lucky thing actually, like the inbetweenness, because I think that that is one of the largest problems for me with English is, is that it's such a powerful structure of knowledge and it has told so many of us about ourselves. So for me, I mean, I feel like my Mojave language works differently in that I mean, my teacher Hubert is one of the most curious people I know, even about, like his own language, but of course, like he was just told not to speak it and then given English, which was like this is what things mean, you know, versus this is how things feel. And as you were talking about, like taking it apart, and the pieces in your hands like that, like, as you say like that is poetry. And I think that's where

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the physicality I find often missing in English that I'm able to take from Mojave into English is that I love to take apart the words, you know. And so for me etymology is not just the OED, we talked a little bit about this in the workshop so for those folks who are here, I'm speaking a little bit to them as well. But it's not just about that, it's about all the different people and ways that the words have touched in since their beginning. You know, since they were first spoken, who spoke them? And you know, what did it mean to be spoken from that body? And that's like, one of the really, for me, at least one of the really lucky things to work with Hubert is that when I ask him about pieces of words, you know, he helps me like, pull them apart, and you realise, wait, there's a body in there, or this word is about touch. And I know we wanted to talk a little bit about words, but I don't want to over jump but if it feels like an okay, time for you to talk about a couple words that we, you know, Nina and I, for those of you we were thinking about like a way that we could introduce some words that we feel are like foundational to us right now, or really engaging us or even where we might arrive. And so what I mean by what you just offered of saying to pull things apart is a word that's been really important to me. Lately, it's part of my poetic practice, it's part of what I mean when I say, I want to treat every body on the page, like the body of the beloved. And we have a phrase. It's shortened form, and as a term of endearment is Muuhan. So Muuhan. We have a long u, vowel. So muu, han Muuhan. And the phrase it comes from, like a larger kind of phrase, and resounding which is nu muhan. So it's kind of new muu hank. And we have like a funny K. We're allowed to stack consonants together as much as we want. But nu muhank and it is, it's about relationality. And so it can be used with lovers. But it can also just be used with people who want to have a similar kind of care. So in someways it can very fastly be translated as like, okay, like we see each other. And that's kind of I know, a cliché, right now, it's like, I see you, I hear you, you know, and that that's supposed to, like, make us feel better when when we feel alone, right? So it's almost like, no, no, I see you, I hear you. But like, the verb for seeing is

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in it, but it's, it's saying, like, I see you, I'm watching you but it means that kind of like care and relationality. And then where it comes from, in a different kind of physicality in relationship to land is that it's also the way we talk about that moment, in the moment in a day, or evening, of both, when the sun and the moon are, one is one is coming up, and one is going down. And so we say like, Nu mu hank, like they're seeing each other, they're seeing each other, they're holding each other and like, one is holding the other as it's going down so that the other one can lift up. And it's a phrase to me that like I know, as I get older, I'll learn more about what it really means, you know, but right now, it's just been such a generous space for me to think about the ways I engage people or treat people. So that was like, when we were talking. I was like, that's the word I think I want to kind of bring into the conversation. And so you know, what is what are some of the words are a word or phrase that that you have been, you know, orbiting or carrying inside you?

39:24 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I have a couple but I'll share the kind of nice, lighter or nicer ones. But that was beautiful to learn your word and it made me think of the first poem I read was about a particular swim. A late afternoon swim in and very often, the sky above, I guess, perhaps the whole of Aotearoa, particularly above Wellington Harbour, and some as you'll look up in the moon will have risen but the sky will be so blue still. And that's a particular kind of Wellington feeling that I really miss and adore. So, that made me that made me think of that just beautiful. Yeah, my word is is an English word. And I think I often just as I have kind of shame and guilt around my scraps of other languages, I often feel that way about English. I'm like, kind of stuck in English, but also it's our shared language, which, and the language that I'm writing in and the language I grew in, so it definitely, it is who I am. But yeah, my word is simple, I guess it's 'harbour'. I love that it's both a noun and an action. To harbour something. I keep having dreams about a harbour. I guess it's a recurring dream. My therapist knows as well. But they're not always bad dreams. But very

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often, I'm standing on the edge of it. And Wellington Harbour is curiously round, you could stand on one side of it and you might think you're on the edge of a lake, or a crater because it was a crater, rather it is a crater. So it was a dormant volcano. I think that's right, anyway. But yeah, there's a very small opening of the harbour which we would call the harbour mouth but you can't always see it so there's a sense of enclosure. But it's also volatile, you can feel quite exposed. So I'm interested in the word harbour as I guess a It's a lot of like, metaphor, metaphor, words going on here. But as a vessel or as, as something that can hold you, a shape that can maybe contain all complications, all these in between feelings at the moment that I'm encountering, in myself of the strange time of transition at this. Yeah, this very odd, still in a pandemic, but some wanting to be moving out of it. And so, yeah, I'm feeling a kind of a closeness with this word, and I just double checked because I have to do that I double checked the the Mandarin word for harbour is, of course, Gang. G A N G, Gang. And the character does, of course, contain the water radical, which is three drops of water. And so it's part of the kind of the water radical vocabulary that I'm often thinking about, which I became a bit obsessed with when I first started learning or relearning Mandarin. And it was just as simple as a way of helping me get into the language and to try to, because I was constantly getting lost. And so a way of separating the words was categorising and radicals is a really useful way of doing that. And there's hundreds and hundreds of water radical characters and of course, harbour, makes sense that harbour is one of them. So that's mine. Yeah.

44:06 Natalie Diaz

Well, it's I I'm really struck too by harbour right, because again, I think this is like another example of what the land and the water teach us because I think harbour is our human word for what this crater and this land offered. So as the ships were going out, you know, so I'm interested too because harbour again is more related to human and dwelling versus related to water, but I also love how the word has the water radical

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in it, because I feel like the English word doesn't, as far as I know, etymologically, I might be wrong, but the English word doesn't hold water in it. And yet the word that you introduced to us, and that we were using as like the opening to our conversation does hold the water in it. And so I just it feels to me just kind of like this beautiful cycle of returning to, I mean, I think the word you'd use when we talked earlier was like elements, right? So the ways that even though sometimes like our languages can dislocate us, we can also build them or return them so that we are also returned back to those elements and to those lands and things and yeah, and I still I've been thinking, since we talked the first time that just about the wind, like it was barely windy here. And I was like, I can't complain about the wind, because I've heard of, I've heard of the wind, where Nina comes from so.

45:47 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, absolutely. And I think harbour also has a particular colonial connotation, particularly in Aotearoa, and many, many parts of Asia and the Pacific. Which is such a core part of my lineage. And my current way of being, the way we as humans congregate around bodies of water by building harbours, or bridges over rivers and so on. I feel like that is something that I'm constantly, you know, whether I like it or not, I'm confronting, particularly now living in somewhere where I never thought I'd live to be honest, when I was young, which is the centre of Empire. It still is, and it's an unavoidable fact when you walk out in the street. But yeah, to be living here, and then writing back to these other places, other colonies is, yeah, something I think, reading, reading your work and reading just the way that you write about water in the body has, I think, really, fundamentally changed and altered the way that I then view the world as well. And so yeah.

47:33 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, I'm something I'm, I need to learn more about this, because I feel like I'm just being like some sort of, I mean, I think 80% of most of what I ever do is just wonder and

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guess. So it's kind of like a what if, but sometimes I say it was such like conviction that it maybe seems a little bit more scientifically proven, but I read somewhere and I would love to when I have some time to press more on this or just, I mean, there are I'm sure there are scholars who have already done this work. So I don't mean to assume I'm the first but I was reading somewhere that's how, you know, things are going awry. As soon as someone says, well, I read this somewhere, because, you know, who knows where the source is. But that, that the Latin language and so of course, moving into the English language, but that, I'm paraphrasing now, so I'm paraphrasing and philosophising at the same time but that it, it was a riverine language like it is, it grew from the land from a land of rivers. And you know, and I think of like Alice Oswald's work, for example, that my students and I spent a lot of time with this, this past semester, but yeah, and so I mean, I think like the English language, like you were saying, it's also our language, and I think it it's, it's beautiful, and it's quite capacious. I think it can be more beautiful and more capacious when we enter our other languages into it, instead of simply translating. But it has a real like capacity to hold and carry and image water. I mean, I'm always like searching and looking at the words and in the workshop yesterday, one of the things that that we talked or that I showed was just a list of, I use the digital OED because it produces that side list of words. But I put in river for them, so they had like, just off all the words in which river is uttered. Sometimes compound words sometimes like you know, phrases, and then also hydro. And like, the language is so beautiful and so active. And so I was really just interested in, I'm interested in that, and I want to know more about it because I think I'm always looking for ways to introduce and this is one of the reasons why I think your work is so compelling to me and like, such a kind of a pathway that I want to be able to continue going down because I think bringing in our languages, whether they're in pieces or phrases or words, they resound, right, because it's language is physical. So it's like putting, putting those languages together to touch and see like, well, what's

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the third thing that might happen? Or the fourth language or words that might come about? So that's been really lucky. But yeah, I don't know if anyone out there knows more about how to how to connect Latin back to rivers, but I have a lot of faith in it so.

51:07 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I love where you said the language is touching. And then that creating a third, a third space or happening right like you write a river is happening, it's happening now. I feel like we keep, we are often talking about a language's or a poem's capacity to hold as much as we ourselves are carrying or holding. And for me, I don't know about you actually, I've never I haven't asked you this, but about swimming - are you a swimmer because I'm I am a swimmer. And it's in water where I can feel yeah, that lightness of no longer thinking about being seen or not being seen, another connection there to the word that you brought us because maybe being held then by the water is enough and that's really beautiful, but then how to write about that without constantly feeling the loss as well, the loss of a river, of these bodies of water is something I really struggle with. But it's poetry I think that gives me the capacity to just to hold enough, but I wondered if there's any other any other forms recently where you felt that you there is this capacity to hold and be held at all in your recent creative practice any forms of art or not, forms of being?

53:09 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, one I'm not a very good swimmer, which is crazy because I grew up, on my reservation the river is like in our backyard, but I was always playing basketball so my brothers and sisters would be at the river and I would be out playing basketball. But our river is also very cold. So it's like 52 ish degrees year round. But I love it and I love being in it and we use it as like also a cleaning ritual but I'm like one of those daring people where I love to jump in it and then I trust my skills enough to get me back out but I don't spend a lot of time in it. But one of the things that I've been really excited

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about in working lately and I'm using this term very loosely because for me it is another way of language but I've been doing a lot of like film work and by film work I mean not even to introduce director producer words in it, but it just like taking some cameras out, I mean we've even used drones which I am still wrestling with the ways I think about that, but just going out on my river and in my desert and in other desert rivers here recently I did some some video work nearby. But yeah, like just using video and silent video. And you know or kind of playing with soundscape like when you can hear the water and when you cannot. And something that's very different about it and you know and I know I it's like I guess I'm I'll make like a side by side kind of comparison but for the very first time I've put myself in the film like in my land or in my water, and that it's such an uncomfortable, like, I can be in a room or like at a podium or reading and I kind of like know how to move my body. And it's a little bit more like basketball. But there's something about being in the film. And like knowing my body is being watched in a way that's going to be held, that I look so completely uncomfortable in it. And so I'm still kind of learning because I'm like, wow, this is a whole new way of being in my desert in ways that I'm super comfortable. But that's been something that has felt just really generative, generative to me and generous. And it's also a way I think I can share my river and the ways that I think about it, or the ways my people think about it, with others, because it really is one of the most beautiful rivers. But yeah, so it's interesting too, because, of course, like being within poetry, of course, it's easy to make analogies or comparisons, but it's so much it's such a easier eye on the page than for me to be an eye in the screen. And then, you know, you would think like, like, people have said to me, like, oh, you move gracefully, but I think it's more like a kind of basketball thing, or that I'm like, long. But when I see myself in these films, it's almost like hearing my voice. I don't like to hear myself read. But so I don't listen to recordings of myself. But when I see myself in this film, I'm just like, do you even know like how to move your body? Because it, you know, it's just so uncomfortable? And but anyway, that's like a space

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I've been in. But how about you like, are there, I mean, I know there are but what are some of the other ways like you're kind of engaging or enacting these languages and these images in places and, and spaces?

56:57 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I've always been interested in in the physicality of a poem, and the poem as an object, I think, you know, the shape and the texture of it on the page. And so I think that's what leads me to constantly want to be making things with my hands, basically. And that's where I first got into zine making, which was really freeing in my creative practice, I think because suddenly that I could make something that didn't exist before out of a sheet of paper. And that's all I need. And no one would need to give me permission. And I think there's something about that act of creation, specifically with your hands that is really particularly nourishing at this time. When in the background, I'll often be thinking about loss, imminent doom. But I can still kind of make something with my hands. And then what I've been turning to, like, my pandemic hobby, basically is sewing and learning to make my own clothes. And this has just really forced me to slow down and also to contend with questions of acquiring things, objects, and the fact of living in a city and seeing things on the various screens that I've got, images of climate destruction. But being in the city that's kind of removed and protected from that and what that means. But yeah, I guess, ideas of weaving, there was the word woven was in your Lake-loop poem. How different textiles and threads have travelled across oceans is something I'm very interested in, again, inseparable from my own colonial history. And I also recently discovered that my grandfather, my gung gung who lives in Malaysia, he when he was a bit younger, he was a quilter. And I had a quilt when I was young. But I always thought that my grandmother had made it which was just completely my own assumption, because in my head, I connected quilting with grandmas. But it yeah, it was my Gung Gung in stage and he's got an old old sewing machine, which is still there in the corner of the

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living room. And so that's a quilt which then was made in my mother's homeland in Malaysia, and carried across the sea to his various grandchildren. So we each I think we each had a quilt. And so that's really brought me such joy and given me a new purpose in my body, which has been really useful in the way that maybe swimming is as well and like for you basketball and being out being, yeah, a new way of being, a quiet way, which has been really lovely. And I'm thinking of ways that it's intersecting with my writing, because it's, it certainly does. But I'm still working out exactly how, but I think, yeah, thinking of colour, colour and materials are always on my mind, I think when I'm reading, both reading and writing poetry. So it's yeah, it's all connected.

1:01:06 Natalie Diaz

Reminds me of the harbour too, right, like, as you're saying, these threads have travelled, you know, and how, yeah, like coloniality, and the harbour, but also how it's such a part of our arrivals, and also that we had arrivals and receivings that occurred long before the colonial harbour needed to be so large and like, you know, built for a ship, for example, and needed to have like, a lot of, of course, I think, in the beginnings, they always say temporary structures that somehow then become the city. But yeah, so that's really, that's really beautiful. And it, it's, as you're talking about weaving and quilting. And we were talking about, like the different modes other than poetry, I'm thinking of the safe zone. And I don't know if you want to talk about that, but it's, uh, you know, I read that with my students, and I thought it was really beautiful. And, and I also marvelled at the, like, the sustainability of that energy, you know, that I think happens in poetry that you're able to keep, you know, pushing and turning in different ways. But in that form, so I, and I don't know, if you want to talk about content also, or just form, but I, I'm compelled by both. So I'll offer that as a possibility for you to.

1:02:36 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I'd love to, the safe zone is an essay. In fact, I think, one

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of the longest pieces of writing I've ever written, because I don't know about you, but I really, I turned to poetry, partly because I have a short attention span. And I'm like, you know, I want a fragment. And I very often think of almost any project that I'm coming to as an assortment of fragments. And it's, I can really only start that way by going, yeah, what's the first fragment? And then how can I just kind of loosely weave them together? And so it's poetry that gave me that, I think, and then that's then how I've started to think about pros. You know, like the shape and texture of an essay, how it can move down the page or down the screen just as much as we would think of that for a poem. And I think it's actually some of your your prose poems that have definitely helped give me that flexibility, that malleability, thinking of the length of a line. And I think, sometimes in writing prose, I'm just feeling like I need to write a longer line. And then that will give me a different momentum, a different energy, like you said, but yeah, that piece in particular, which begins and ends with whales, with Orca. It was a strange one. I didn't know how was going to come together. But I've long been obsessed with killer whales, swince I was a kid. I kind of like, I feel that my alternate career, you know, might be like marine biologist. But I never knew how to channel that energy into my creative work. And I've definitely found ways now, I've got lots of whale poems. But yeah, again, I kept thinking about these strange dreams I was having about beaching whales. And there was a few years ago, there was a mass stranding at the top of the South Island in New Zealand. And I feel like every time this happens, this articles pop up. Like why do whales strand and the various destructive disturbances that are happening in the waters surrounding these areas particularly like shipping lanes, right? And this is not new, though. It's there's also a strange ancientness in the way people talk about whale strandings. But yeah, I became very obsessed with this and obsessed with captivity. And so all these things came together and became a way of me writing about my anxiety. And that extended to climate anxiety, but also just very much bodily, yeah, all my various obsessive patterns of thinking very often

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about the elements actually, and weather, waves, tsunami, which is a risk where I live, which is a very volatile earthquake zone. So, yeah, all these things came together and a lot of nervous energy went into that essay which I think gives it that maybe urgency that you describe, but it's amazing that you been reading that with your class. And yeah, I think, yeah, reading your prose poetry, I think has given me a lot of openings into exploring form.

1:06:44 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, it was lucky. And I remember thinking at the end, one, I think, I didn't realise how long it was. I mean, as I was reading it, because again, of that energy, so I want to ask, well, one, I, after I was done reading it, I was like, I'm not sure if this is like, like something that tourists would make tourists want to go there, or would make them not want to go there just thinking of like, the earthquakes and everything. But I want to know, just like when you swim, do you swim laps, because, you know, as you're talking about swimming, there was just something about it, like you could feel like the length of where you are going. And then suddenly, it was like it was back to this not a beginning but to just kind of an energy that it had built but was able to return back to and then like extend out but so I don't know like I'm because I definitely feel the the basketball in my work, like a kind of momentum. So and I mean, you don't have to spend too much time on this, but I'm just wondering like in your swimming, like, is it laps? Or do you just go out distance or?

1:07:51 Nina Mingya Powles

Wow, yeah, I love this. Um, so not, not really no, not laps, but where I swim here in London, which haven't in like a couple of months, because it's not such a good midwinter swimmer. But there's a woman only swimming pond on Hampstead Heath, which I've written about a lot. And I do swim that in a loop. And it's like, maybe a 10 minute loop. And, yeah, that repetition definitely allows for that kind of meditative thing that you get from kind of that kind of exercise, I guess. But interesting. It's

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not, it's not a perfect circle, you're kind of you're swimming the border or the perimeter of a manmade body of water, which is interesting. And you're swimming amongst the ducks, sometimes swans, sometimes herons, which is really lovely. And, and kind of strangely peaceful in a city like London, but then swimming in Wellington Harbour is really different. I think I'm very often going out and then swimming parallel to the shore, partly for safety, I guess, because there's lots of kind of waves and winds and that way you're kind of yeah, for me anyway, I'm not like getting too far out. Because I'm not a brave swimmer. I just kind of go in without thinking. And then like, paddle a bit, splash around. And then yeah, and then make my way back and it's very cold as well. Always. It's never ever warm. So yeah, so I realised in saying this what I'm describing is kind of a tracing the shape of the shore, very often, following the line or following a loop. Which is really Nice. And I'm going to be thinking now for a while, how does, how do these shapes, and how does swimming strokes come into my poetry? Which I love. So thank you for that. Great.

1:10:15 Natalie Diaz

I'm wondering, I know we were going to end with reading, but I'm actually forgetting if we were going to do questions, so I just wanted to, to do a quick check in and see where we were and how we wanted to.

1:10:31 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, maybe we could, we could see if there's any questions, or if Olivia wanted to ask us anything. And then we could maybe close at the very end with poems.

1:10:43 Natalie Diaz

This is the first time I've been like, you're making me more responsible. This is the first time this is the first time suddenly it's like, oh, let's make sure we stay.

1:11:02 Olivia Aherne

We do have a question. We have a question from Helena,

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which is directed to you, Natalie. Helena asks, You have spoken a little bit little about the physicality of language and also mentioned, you're a basketball player. I'm wondering if or how this may inform your poems or the process of writing?

1:11:25 Natalie Diaz

Yeah, I mean, it goes perfectly with what we were, we were kind of talking about, right now, like, even as Nina was describing, like, tracing the pond and what that means in language, in some ways, maybe poetry is only ever, language is only ever tracing the body, perhaps. I mean, I would probably argue about that tomorrow. But that feels like something to think about. But I definitely think that the reasons that I play basketball, and the things that made me good at basketball, are also the things that like drive me in poetry. So it is about physicality. And it is about touch, you know. And as much as it's about touch, as like a kind of resistance, you know, like you, you know, your, the way that I move because I grew up in a big family is, I know myself by what I'm pressing up against. And sometimes that's frustrating to have a conversation with me, because I'm always pressing against it first. And it doesn't mean I don't agree, I just want to kind of know, like, what the shape is, so I kind of know where my body is. And it's also very much about spacing, you know, and so there's something I think that poetry holds that is about tension, but I'm not only writing and I, at least I want to make sure, I'm not only writing against some things, especially like, as a native as a queer person as a Latinx person. I don't, and then because my work does hold the politic in it, I don't only want to write against that thing, right. And I also want to be joyous in it and celebratory in it, which is what is lovely about, yeah, I can hold the fact that my river is disappearing. And I can also talk about the luck of being able to dunk down in it four times, and to come up new. And so I think there's that and something I was sharing, I talked with a group of Native basketball players yesterday. But there's also something very, about the physicality I think, there's something very futuristic about basketball in that you,

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you're always thinking ahead. And not with knowledge, but with a what if, you know, like, what if so, like, you know, you would never go directly to the ball. Like, if you're ever guarding the ball, like you're going to get beat. So you're always like ready to move two steps ahead of where your defender might go. Or if the ball passes, you already know, like, how you're going to move on the court, which, you know, we could make a kind of generic court page, but I think it's bigger than that. And so I think in that way, what it offers you about future is that the future is not something very long, far off. It's the momentum that's happening now. And that will shift and become whoever and whatever you are next and whatever your relationship will be next. And so I think even with conversations like this, like, you know, like this whole configuration and energy that is being built and the way it's allowing people to kind of have this autonomy of presence and energy, but that is also in the moment shifted by the other energies and happenings around them. So even now, like, in this conversation, like I have so many notes, because I think I know what I think about something, but then being alongside Nina, and then also hearing your work, Nina, yeah, so I think basketball is to me one of the closest things to poetry and it, and I think the way that I tend to write is still, maybe the way I tend to do everything, because I was built by basketball in a way is like physical. So when I write I'm like, what's that word? Or like, often I have to, like, catch myself, because when I hear people read, I'm like, tap, like, I kind of am looking for that physicality. But yeah, and so and I think too Nina, you were talking a little bit about that about trying to like, find the questions and the relationships to that, that physicality, that being in the water. Yeah, but I appreciate that question. And it's something I think about a lot, and I might never have an answer. But I think it's such an important thing for me to always return to, because I think in the end, the way that I move in the world is very much shaped by basketball. And something that feels important to me is that the the attention and intention I have on the page is something I would like to have more of in my life off the page, you know, with people I know, or with strangers, or with every

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interaction, which is difficult, you know, it's not always easy. And then, you know, and then people also think you're strange when you do that. So that's.

1:16:48 Olivia Aherne

Thank you, Natalie, I wanted to ask you both a question and to see if you could both speak a bit about the presence, or entanglement of truth, myth or fiction in your work and what those terms mean to each of you.

1:17:09 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, I do think about how I'm telling the various stories that make me, make my family and I'm very, very often writing memories. And I guess, I started out writing kind of started out thinking of myself as a writer in a creative nonfiction workshop. So very early on, there was this kind of delineation of writing that is true and writing that is not. But for me, I don't know if in my creative practice, I don't know if that's so useful for me in the way that I'm always like, resisting anyone kind of categorising not just my work. But of course, me and myself. I am reading at the moment a novel by novelist and nonfiction writer, Alexander Qi. And he's got a line which, and yeah, which I underlined I underlined a lot of his writing, but his character is multiracial like me. And there was a line about looking at me takes longer than looking at other people. So the character is noticing people seeing him and watching him longer than they watch other people. And so, and that, for me was so true. So deeply, deeply true, and not something I'd ever articulated before. And I think yeah, I'm really losing myself here. But I think I'm Yeah, seeing myself, I don't easily fit into this category that someone's looking to place me in when they look at me very often. That's what I mean when I yeah, that's that's what I was getting at. And so I think in the same way, I am quite often not discarding truth but looking at maybe getting at the feeling or the texture of a memory rather than necessarily the truth of it. Because very often, I think what things I do remember might be, might actually be that I'm remembering a photograph and that kind of thing. So I'm

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really interested in that. And how we we end up telling these stories about ourselves. For me, yeah, I don't know if truth is such a useful thing for me to be holding myself against when I'm writing. Yeah, what about you, Natalie?

1:20:28 Natalie Diaz

Yeah I appreciate that question. I think it's so important as well, right. I guess I think that that language itself is not responsible for truth. I think maybe right now, as you're asking Olivia, like, I wonder if language is capable of truth. And I think poetry certainly cannot tell the truth. Like, many people will argue with this, and I welcome because I just, this will be the beginning of a wonder, I really appreciate the question. But I think poetry is not capable of it. And I don't think it needs to be like, I don't think that's why it happened. I don't think that's, you know, like, why, why we're drawn to it, and why we're drawn to one another's works. But I think the responsibility is, is ours as humans, right? Because I don't think for example, that there are animals out there wondering about truth, right? Like it is, it's our responsibility and, and not in language, but in our practices, in our actions. And I realise of course, like I believe language is one of our practices of emotionality. relationality. And maybe this is where I'll bring myth in, like, why I think myth is so important, you know, like, I have a line and in my work, and I'm sure that this is a line that many other people have used in different variations, but I say America is my myth. And to me, there's such power in that because it comes with an impossibility of truth. As soon as we frame it with myth, it's like everyone knows it's not true, it's going to be imaginative or magical realism. But I think that what myth offers us, like, you know, which can be dangerous, in many ways, it can be dangerous to certain power structures, but it can also be dangerous and that we get inculcated into power structures, or we're not, you know, it causes us to, to maybe have negative actions or to to move, to be moved or to not be moved toward inaction. But I guess like, that's the thing for me, that I'm thinking, at least right now, with you and with that question is that, you know, like a little bit of what you

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were saying, Nina, is like that you know, truth is maybe not a place that you're necessarily like holding as you write and I think for me, yeah, I think, you know, and not that all language is metaphor or anything like that, but I do think like, maybe I'm only ever writing the myth. And that that is actually where the importance is, you know, because the fact like to say America is my myth. You know, it in one way I feel like it can possibly enact, like a denial of what, of the way America functions or the way it believes. But it also offers like this field of possibility that says, well, I can still imagine into it, and beyond it in through it. But yeah, that's a very generous question that I will be thinking about for a while. I know I left fiction out. But yeah, that's, that's like the start of four or five essays. I think that, that everyone out here should. I think that'll be the next anthology is built on these questions. But that's a beautiful question. Thank you.

1:24:04 Olivia Aherne

Yeah. Thank you both for your answers. And I'm conscious of time and I know you both wanted to share or read something just before we close the event. Nina, shall we move back to you to share first and then we'll move on to Natalie.

1:24:24 Nina Mingya Powles

Yeah, thank you, Olivia, for your question as well. This has been a really lovely space this evening to be held in actually and I'm gonna bring it back to the harbour because this poem, which is called the first wave is about that same harbour. Where there, in 2013, there was an earthquake, thankfully, not a very serious one, but it did trigger a tsunami evacuation warning across a large part of the lower North Island and northern South Island. But I wasn't there at the time, I was in Shanghai in my dorm room listening to the radio for updates, which was a very strange, disembodied experience. And so, this is a kind of found poem of the radio announcements that I was hearing. The first wave 14 November 2016. They request that we inform you immediately you are standing on soft ground, the ceiling lights are swinging in the background. The

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waves crash then dissipate. The first wave may not be the largest. This is a flow on event, so do not go near, do not stay and watch the land slipping. It has triggered other faults like a network of nerves, and the seabed has risen out of the sea. There are visible ruptures running along the landscape. This is a flow on event, but the moon does not cause earthquakes. The ceiling lights are a typical pattern of aftershocks and they request that we inform you you are a visible rupture running along the landscape. Do not stay and watch your nerves slipping. There will be strong currents in the background. The moon has risen out of the sea. The first wave crashes then dissipates you are standing on such soft ground. Thank you

1:27:07 Natalie Diaz

Gracias Nina and I will finish, we've talked a little bit about grief and like how to hold both. I'll finish with this poem, Grief works. Why not now go toward the things I love? I have walked slow in the garden of her, gazed the black flower, dilating her animal eye. I give up my sorrows the way a bull gives its horns, astonished and wishing there is rest in the body's softest parts. Like Jacob's angel, I touched the garnet of her hip and she knew my name and I knew hers. It was Auxochromo, it was Cromóforo, it was Eliza. When the eyes and lips are brushed with honey, what is seen and said will never be the same. So why not take the apple in your mouth in flames and pieces straight from the knife's sharp edge. Achilles chased Hektor around the walls of Ilium three times. How long must I circle the high gate between her hip and knee to solve the red gold geometry of her thigh. Again the gods put their large hands in me, move me, break my heart like a clay jug of wine. Loosen a beast from some dark long depth. My melancholy is hoofed. I the terrible beautiful lampon, a shining devour-horse tethered at the bronze manger of her collarbones. I do my grief work with her body. Labour to make the emerald tigers in her throat leap, leave them burning green to drink from the deep violet jetting her breast. We go where there is love to the river on our knees beneath the sweet water. I pull her under four times until we are rivered, we are rearranged. I wash the

