

1608717  
EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

## MOON CYCLES

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

### FIRST LIGHT

splintered light  
rips through the ceiling.  
playground cuts on our knees,  
    chipped nails  
    birds hiding behind leaves  
        sandpit lovers are  
bulldozing every parent's home  
with spades,  
and we cry like toddlers on their first day of school,  
    what do we do with these handshakes  
    when it takes two to make tornados touch.  
under the sheets  
    land and water slip like bed covers  
    unravelling, ribbons of flesh, amiss  
to listen to a seashell  
that sings for an ocean  
with no beach.

something about these first days  
    and first dates  
        makes my boots  
rattle and knees clatter  
    like saucepans.  
this heart doesn't know  
    how to kiss  
        anymore than you  
            know how to use  
            your friend's shower  
            where the knobs feel  
            like puzzles and puzzles  
                become the answer.

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

**CAVE**

Fingers swirling like water to a sinkhole  
Halima touches the swell,  
Whirlpools darkening at her navel,  
She waits  
As her husband  
Takes his fill,  
Syruping her fever,  
Roping her hair into necklaces, knuckled glass, chuckling, a phantom  
pain packing insanity and laughter and windows clear enough to look through.  
Pause that knock.  
Ask if this is okay. If this is true.  
If blood is red.  
If fire can sear skin with no smoke.  
She whispers a prayer into his pillow, sweating, swearing  
Her mother's maiden name, losing to the cave he fills,  
Overturning seasons like leaves spinning in the wind.  
Men, she sighs, have become more  
Fickle than sycamore seeds.

**ECHO**

Consistency like butter on the pan,  
Melting, soft on the tongue, softer on the sheets,  
Teaching Halima how to erase the cross between his lies.  
Her mother checks the stitches, the circumcision, checking incisions, the crimson  
Ebbing, eddying. Her mother grips her thigh but she feels his fingers curling.  
Red has never tasted so steely.  
Halima waters a soil with no seeds  
And he answers with voicemails  
That she listens to like cups pressed to a wall,  
Underwater,  
Bubbling  
Ebbing, eddying.  
She touches her womb  
and feels fingernails knocking.

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry

Portfolio and Commentary

## MORNING GLORY

Insanity clips my eyelids back and I watch the ceiling. His sun comes out at night. Speckled eyelids staring too hard at the sun. I go where the wolves tiptoe into the forest. His sun comes to life. I slip, and slide, sitting down. Settling between his covers. Slipping and sliding and sitting down at the edge. Playground slide of ecstasy, where the ceiling doesn't feel so close, where I can stare as hard as I like. Count the eyelashes. Count the stars. The alarm never goes off. *But, oh, does it ring.* The ceiling touches my nose. His sun open up to wish me good morning and I roll over, pretending to have been asleep this whole time.

**Ghazal: A Prophet's Wife**

Perfume letters under the sun to relieve us,  
Revert your soul inside out to believe us.

I wonder whether you'll truly achieve bliss.  
Men plant echoes in caves to appease us.

Beggars pray to our skirts to thief our truth  
Yet one glance and the moon receives us.

One rose cannot uproot nor heave our past,  
So take your younger wives and leave us.

Khadija was the First, glowing to ease us  
To honeymoon this life, to retrieve us.

**pastor**

my sliced hand knows how to heal  
like satellites know how to keep their distance,  
fidgeting fingers, shaking eyes, wondering  
which slice of sand I'll cut up to meet your ocean tonight.  
what makes my father hate you so much you began to hate me too?  
control the tea cup, smash the handle, throw me around to make the house  
quiet.

a  
shaking, awaiting,  
wondering whether  
your sliced hand  
knew what to heal.

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry

Portfolio and Commentary

### **BY-THE-SEA**

I have my own attic room but Mum chooses to get me a bunk-bed. Secrets fall like stars from our ceiling, passing between pillows. Warmth hugs our wrists, dangling off the bed. In school projects I'd look to you and you'd look to me. Looking back. Grinning teeth. I'd know that you like three sugars. And no milk. Your soft hair cut above your bra strap. Lips bent into a smile. And the crooked white lies to get us out of Friday detentions. I like to imagine that we buy our first house in Dover. Picket-fenced and white-edged. Cows for pets and eggs for tea. You'd glance back at me, knowing this is how it should have been.

1608717  
EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

**SMILE FOR ME**

Your face,  
my tracing paper.  
Dot to dot,  
moles to wrinkles.  
This to that.

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

## NURSERY RHYMES

Tarmac tongues and tampons spoiled,  
With nicotine dusting burnt toast,  
These girls take questions to brunch,  
Pierce their nipples, teething metal,  
Pulling a pain that pleasures,  
Linking, pinkies. Fingers, fucking,  
Promising luck to boys who swear  
These Haribo rings will choke me  
Just as much as the real deal.

I take it.

Like the halos of angels died  
Daffodils die where our feet tread,  
Cracks between our skin like cement  
Slithering between bricks, snake skin  
Shedding another cycle of blood.  
The weeds playing peek-a-boo  
Between the concrete.  
A silver Volvo rumbles outside,  
My hands trembling behind the blinds,  
My hands trembling on your car door  
Like windshield wipers,  
Waving goodbye as you tear  
Down the road to someplace cold.



1608717  
EN238 The Practice of Poetry  
Portfolio and Commentary

### **PHANTOM CARESS**

high spirited, eagle-eyed,  
softened beaks  
missing fingers that fill  
more air than the spaces  
they leave.

my bed is warmer without you  
but i still keep the window open  
to let your cold palms fingerprint  
my thighs with yesterday's kisses.

## SWINGSET

Two windows, still as lonely swings,  
Their curtain shifts when the wind talks,  
Mouth half-open in the summer heat,  
A sleepy yawn sends the curtains into shivers.  
We shudder.  
“I forgot to shut the window, too.”  
“At home?”  
A cat laughs at our joke,  
Stretching its back on the grass below.  
We shudder.  
Cold floorboards, bare-footed,  
Our two windows still swinging at the hinges.

**TRAFFIC LIGHTS**

Splintering, back-breaking,  
Eyes bleached, wax-white shock.  
Moonlight melts the kitchen window  
And war memorials sag like snowmen.  
Gates scuff the ground, raking more slush  
To shake apart, a shivering, shuddering howl.  
Wind-thrown birds like plastic bags. I don't recall  
Wispy memories riding the wings of strangers who fog  
Every car window. But the windscreen wiper works hard to  
Remember ambulances called for the those melting on roads.

### **BUTTERFLY EFFECT**

Red flash and fist bumps, cold caps  
And gold taps in these type of bathrooms,  
I hold every girl's braids as they projectile  
Puke and touch tongue to toilet bowl,  
Reaching for something deeper  
That they can't find in themselves.

### **4 A.M.**

Bar stools screech across the floor  
To take the next order from the next  
Customer who'll need an uber home.  
This staircase takes us sideways,  
belly-flopping, landing,  
fingers speed-dialling,  
Him, her, them,  
Whoever  
Picks up at 4am.

**The Real Dead Sea**

Dead fishes bloat the sink in our bathroom but the sink  
in my grandmother's house is still wet with a passport  
gone soft with water from the Dead Sea where immigrants  
wet their necks to keep their heads above water  
where the Red Sea is kinder to bleached hair and bleached skin.  
I wonder if they know that the real Dead Sea isn't between  
the borders they're trying to protect from bloated corpses.  
I wonder if they know that the real Dead Sea is between  
the borders they built around us.

### **A UNITED KINGDOM**

Cut this hedge at the top  
But leave the key under the mat  
Play knock down ginger  
But don't run away.  
Look them in the eye  
And tell that you're here to stay

This kingdom is united,  
Is divided,  
And is just as much mine  
As it is your lie.

### **CLOCK THIS NEWSPAPER**

Every clock in the world ticks one decision.  
To synchronise these swimmers, to make  
Time sing the same tune in this kitchen.

Let the borders run riot in this edition  
Of history. Next episode? Let us take  
Every clock in the world. Tick a decision!

Where the choiceless have no ambition  
And the option-makers fill acid in their lake.  
Time sings the same tune in this kitchen,

Nation building has become a competition  
Where the ladder breaks, much is at stake.  
Every clock in the world ticks what decision?

Curtains, blood-velvet, puppeteering religion  
The bullets in Gaza take sisters, for their sake  
Let time sing the same tune in their kitchen.

White phosphorous is the smoke of magicians,  
Of course the audience believes this is fake  
Every clock in the world ticks no decision.  
And time sing the same tune in your kitchen.

### **HAUNT THIS HOUSE**

Memories talk to us behind mirrors,  
A wrinkle by the eye, floorboards creaking.

Another breath, nostalgia.  
Two seconds move forward like a train track with no end,  
A train wreck with no fence to hold its home.

We smile because we have to.  
Tongue touching teeth,  
Gum stuck like leaves  
That wish they were trees.  
It only makes sense that  
We laugh when it rains on us.



### POST THIS OFFICE

Nimble fingers dance on  
the edge of my coffee cup  
My hands crumble on,  
After our morning fuck.  
Moving on to  
another July heat  
Where you can  
touch me  
here  
and there,  
but never there.  
Because good girls stay good.

Did another girl find the cave  
I discovered under the stairs  
Where every Columbus moment  
is another person's history stolen.  
Where haloes take turns  
to spotlight the white picket fence,  
Where this ring is just  
another fence around my finger  
Where civilisations knew that ruin  
existed only in the kingdoms  
that made them bury their head in the sand

Like the way you send me  
love letters with no stamps  
Like the way I hate you  
for not coming back.

**NO RETURN ADDRESS**

I read your letter this morning,  
A flower blooming backwards,  
Arching its spine to make a stem  
So bold that bouquets stented  
This vase with traces of sewage.

In new apartments and get well soon cards.  
I thought I'd see you soon enough,  
Calendar torn, fingers unchecked,  
unheld, un-*mine*.

I could blow up time  
For you to come home with flowers  
But never in time  
For you to come home at all.

### **THE BITTERSWEET BERRY SPEAKS**

The bittersweet berry speaks:  
Sweet berries have bitter seeds.  
Cupcake dream these velvet lips.  
This pink starburst feels like lighter fuel.  
I want to trace butterfly wings where your lips have been,  
I want to spiral my fingers along your spine like staircase,  
There must be a chest of memories in the corridor of your veins,  
Open your doors.  
Let my fingers pitter patter on your window pane,  
Let these acrylics leave chemtrails on your balcony  
So when you look for me  
There'll still be phantoms in the sky,

### **SEPIA**

There are dandelions growing where we walked,  
A grey afro, electrocuted, frizz brushed out,  
Treasure trail, waves winding,  
Grass like gelled spikes,  
Licking fire when the dye seeps in.  
To be born again, to be born red,  
Steady as the wrinkles,  
Your garden is still photographed  
In my locket.

### **BLISTERS**

Touching myself to feel warm  
I think of who we were  
Not who we are  
Because staying with you  
Is about looking back.

### **AN OMEN**

Womanhood sits in my mouth, rotten.  
Boys feel around, hands like cups,  
Suctioning, fish-like, leaving half-moon  
Bite marks and blushes that vein out  
To hearts that do not know how to heal.

They wonder why my response comes  
Flatlined, I guess I can't reply when  
girls have to die before they come to life.

### **DEFLOWERING**

Like forgetting your headphones on a long journey,  
    Like the holes between knitwear,  
    Like water dripping between clenched fingers,  
Seeping like white t-shirts and bloodied wounds,  
    This flower of red, blooms.  
    And Memory forgets herself.

**MISS CARRIAGE**

Cluttered on my desk is an orange highlighter,  
    Uncapped, bloated, frayed.  
Something about being untouched tastes  
    Like your tiny feet, kicking, clawing.  
I tell them: "Not long, little fighter."  
    But my lullabies were too late  
    When you curled up to sleep.

## #METOO

Poison me to find your antidote,  
Poison me to find the parts of yourself  
    That you broke inside of me  
When you taught me to heal by hurting.  
Silk words slung by an executioner,  
A throat roped with pearls,  
    Glistening like wet pimple,  
Sharper than the blade that cut it,  
Sharper than the men who slit my lips.  
    Into a Barbie doll's smile.  
Sink your fingers into my spine,  
Let the soil grow flowers around your wrists,  
Take a spoonful of sugar,  
Take a thread and wrap it  
    Around my throat  
Tie a bow and send me to dance  
The same dance my mother learned  
    From the uncles  
Who paid visits at night when their wives  
Slept downstairs in the kitchen,  
    The same kitchen  
    That drums between our thighs,  
    The same stove  
That hums between our sighs,  
How do you uncook meat,  
How do you put seasoning back inside the bottle,  
This is a lesson, this is the lesson  
We did not ask to learn.

**BREAK(FAST)**

Hunger takes wing,  
Batting, battling.  
The phantom's caress  
Becomes a scratch,  
Becomes a tear  
Becomes a stitch  
Backing me to a wall,  
Stacking me back together.  
My fingers break,  
Bones that criss-cross,  
This crisis to lock  
On this loss.

**MINEFIELD**

Where this flower blooms  
Is a field that gargles dirt  
To footprints every morning.



### **AFTERTHOUGHT**

She does not remember who she was  
Before this train arrived.  
Clouds spit spears of water, and we dance  
Till the soil claps and raises dirt to make  
A stage where girls like us laugh forever.

### **GLORY GIRLS**

Glory to the the girls who  
Are becoming, who  
Are coming to be  
The butterfly without  
Being allowed to bleed in  
The blood of their caterpillar.

### MOON CYCLES

Again,  
Back together,  
The womb twitches,  
Tying knots that thread  
The hollow inside of a needle.  
Shooting the stem, collecting rainfall,  
Pooling pinpricks of pain, pooling stains.  
Higher hills have evaded bluer moons  
When the thread knots itself  
To stitch the womb  
Back together  
Again.

## Commentary: Moon Cycles

Poetry comes into fruition during the editing process. Much of this collection was propelled by structure and layout because my prime intention was to render the poem's first impression as a visual experience. Formatting was my decision-maker. I wanted the structure to eclipse the reader's itch to skim a poem before reading it. We are all victims of this instinct, from judging a poem by how it looks to eyeing random words that stand out. We try to decode the poem before it undresses its meaning to us. As a result, I subverted the standardised forms of block verses and equalised stanzas to counteract any presumptions outside of the treasure trail of clues I have intentionally left for the reader. Form became my structure; thus structure became my form.

The opening poem, *First Light*, starts this road of discovery through carefully crafted lineation. Each scripted line controls enjambment like the tide, powering the reader through a tunnel of nostalgia by using lines that juxtapose the natural pause when the poem is read aloud. This cut-and-edit technique removes the warmth of nostalgia from the poem's skeleton despite the emphasis on shared memories like "first day of school" and "playground cuts". The severed form fractures childhood in way that echoes the opening line: "splintered light / rips through the ceiling". As a result of the experimental format, *First Light* has been selected as the opening of the collection because of its deep roots in cyclicity, which is a core theme of the collection's titular nature of "moon cycles".

Cycles take time to make their full turn, and the following two poems present time in a way that builds on the bloodied nostalgia that innocence bears. Thematically, *Cave* and *Echo* build on the tidal shape that *First Light* takes up on the page. However, the beck-and-call nature of the poetic pair presents a new angle to form. This structure repeats itself in the collection through strategic pairings, for example *An Omen* and *Deflowering*. The pairings mirror each other to expose a mirage. In *Cave* and *Echo*, I employed two separate narrators to tell the same event of marital consummation, allowing them to focus on separate catalysts. Reading Warsan Shire's collection, *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth*, made me curious about dual narration outside of prosaic forms. I wondered whether a single poem could be fractured into two separate poems by magnifying the focus on a part of the same scene. Sequentially, a shift in perspective, even as far as a millimetre, changed *Cave* into *Echo*. As I edited *Echo* to become the fraternal version of *Cave*, it transformed into a form of its own. I learned how to make two poems out of one, which is representative of every pairing in this collection. This fits the titular theme of menstrual moon cycles, pregnancies and twinning. Furthermore, on the driving topic of shape and format, *Cave* slots into *Echo* like a puzzle piece, which completes the episodic nature of twinning poems and sets the stage for the others.

The following three poems, *Morning Glory*, *Ghazal: Prophet's Wife* and *pastor*, have been grouped together because they carry the strongest thematic echoes seen in the previous pairing. If an overarching narrative is pieced together about the entire collection—much like connecting stars to draw up a constellation—then these three poems would be the equivalent of Orion's Belt. Despite their brevity, they are pillars for the central theme of transformation that colours each and every poem to some degree.

The weight of transformation takes a turn in *By-The-Sea* which focuses on what could have been as opposed to what has been. The interplay between the past and future is another thread that feeds through the entire collection. *By-The-Sea* and *Morning Glory* are both prose poems that came from the strong narrative voices of a diary entry that I journalled down after a seminar. The four stanzas I started with were truncated into one block, a paragraph. I meddled with the punctuation, removing it entirely before letting it materialise in more natural places. I let the poem do the talking in the same way that prose mimics a more conversational rhythm. The final version still has the same nostalgic sentiments as a diary

entry, and continues the theme of memory that the entire collection orbits around. *Smile for Me* takes a similar approach, this time in the form of a doodle that I found in my journal. This poem was freckled with a wispy and faraway tone that fed into *Sepia* and *Blisters*.

*No Return Address* and *Post This Office* revive the beck-and-call that *Cave* and *Echo* introduced, focusing on the same notion of receiving no reply. This pair were written much later into the portfolio and serve to demonstrate the mundanity of natural cycles, especially the repetitive misery of unrequited love as well as the moon cycle of menstruation.

*An Omen* and *Deflowering*, along with *Afterthought* and *Glory Girls* are the last cluster of short poems that run in pairs. This time the proximity is weak, the connections much weaker. These couplets show more revealing signs of deterioration and miscommunication. They are rippled, watered down reflections that do not speak to each other as directly as the other fraternal poems do. However, the line of communication is maintained by the recurring theme of the metamorphosis from girlhood to womanhood.

In an attempt to experiment further with form, I moved away from the freedom of shape and exercised the control of pre-existing forms like ghazals and villanelles. *Ghazal: A Prophet's Wife* took time to conceive because the form was new to me. The form's requirement to insert my own name was the most testing task however I found a rewarding link between my name and the recurring theme of womanhood—through the revered 'Mother of the Believers' in Islam: Khadījah bint Khuwaylid, the wife of Prophet Muhammad.

Other fixed forms were much easier to write. The villanelle *Clock This Newspaper* had a smoother writing transition because I selected the end words before starting the poem. Thematically, it took a more political and humanitarian turn, which the strict form amplifies through a global plea for change.

Likewise, *A United Kingdom* and *The Real Dead Sea* are also politically charged, a result of the Windrush Scandal and the most recent saga in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I manipulated the mood in each recurring refrain to make the poem more accusatory as it progressed. It is a commentary on zionism and its violence, questioning the media coverage that acts of terrorism in the Middle East get as opposed to terrorism in the West.

Other poems affected deeply by external influences include *Miss Carriage*, *The Bittersweet Berry Speaks*, *Haunt This House*, *4 A.M.*, *Butterfly Effect*, *Swingset*, *pastor* and *Phantom Caress*. These poems capture second-hand experiences, using the narrator as a testimonial witness. *#MeToo* is a prime example. It follows the movement of sexual violence against women which sparked the media in late 2017. The kitchen setting acts a gendered area that allows the reader to navigate discomfort and silence. I focused on natural imagery to demonstrate that sexual harassment is not something new that has only just surfaced. I decided to take a gendered approach because I wanted to highlight that the patriarchy is responsible for erasure of this dialogue.

In terms of editing, *Traffic Lights* has undergone the most drastic transformation. The poem's construction took over five months, starting as a block of free verse. The process was much like a sculptor hacking at a slab of stone, shaving off a huge chunk before nit-picking at details with a toothpick. Once I had the right words penned down, the shape took precedent, carving itself onto the page, curving to become what it looks like today.

In order to stick to the concept of cycles, *Nursery Rhymes* returns to the central theme of nostalgia but flips the carpet over to reveal the dust of failed relationships. It slips on a new dress that differs from previous poems. This time the lullaby of romance is rooted in anxiety: "My hands trembling behind the blinds, / My hands trembling on your car door". The idea stemmed from my extensive research on moon cycles and its archaic nuances with insanity and witchcraft. The original poem was separated into two stanzas, of which the remnants can still be seen, however the interjection of "I take it." serves as the pivot of the poem.

Finally, we reach the full turn in our poetic cycle. The titular piece, *Moon Cycles*, is the epitome of shape and form in this collection. Its shape is likened to an optical illusion, one that promises symmetry with asymmetry. The eye sees a mirrored poem but the repetition of phrases within the disordered arrangement puts the brain into panic. This circles back to the poem's power of 'moon cycles' and its ties to mental health. Without losing its

1608717

EN238 The Practice of Poetry

Portfolio and Commentary

brevity, *Moon Cycles* seals the circle that all the previous poems have struggled to complete. This concludes the loosely connected narrative of womanhood in the same way that the moon cycle of menstruation gears itself up for a similar finale that ends with the promise of renewal.

Word count: 1531