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Myth Gatherers

Steve Nash



*Calder Valley
Poetry*

Published 2019 by Calder Valley Poetry

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Dedication

For
you, the angel,
the demon, the
rogue fairy, the
immortal canary, for
having more faith
than I could
own, for dragging
me clawing
and cawing
from
be-
neath
my
stone,
for
the
ad-
vice you've spared
and the
seeds you've sown,
with love
always, from a crow

Desire Path

Unpick your native words.
Let them fall over the moor.
Angle a square of vellum
against the landscape
and trace your language.

Pick up your plot and go
out into the valley.
Walk your path,
keeping close to the
tumble of your words.

Listen for the shadowpulse
of animal, wildflower,
happenstance.
Gather their metaphors
and alien rhymes.

Take not a map but a metre
and let the drummer's
arms ride loose.
Walk without knowing. Leave
your old words to seed.

Forklands' and Flying Penguins

We don't speak.
I colour the silences in pencil.
You tend flowers and vegetables.
We don't speak.

But here, at an event you never mentioned,
I'm in a gallery of my history.
Walls of letters and pictures planted
and nurtured by a class of seven year olds:

"To Steven ...
Love from
Dad."

Staff Sergeant Nash is "well sad"
that a battle for some islands, too small
to spell correctly, has taken him away
from my first manoeuvres in this world.

Tales, new to me, detail near misses;
a bomb clatters onto deck,
bounces overboard intact.
The "Argentibians" are voiding their loads
too low. They'll soon grow wise,
but too late to catch you.

A picture illustrates, with dispatch
precision, the one tale you've told:
a protective mother penguin, with bloody beak, and chick,
bestowing upon you your battle scar from this conflict.

You can't wait to get home,
away from the rocks and cold,
to your garden, your daughters, and to your new son.

“What do you reckon then?”
Suddenly, you’re at my side.
I’m taller than you now,
though somehow you still dwarf me.

But we don’t speak.
You garden, and I sketch my thoughts
with a pencil at night.
So shallowly I mumble,
“They got your moustache right.”

Salt on the Lips

Your saga scuffed a trail down the moorside
to its foot, where twin tracks tunnelled into darkness.
The darkness didn't see you. Darkness didn't know you.

You'll taste salt on the lips of anyone bent
hard enough. "Where is home now?" the crow asks
as you try on a new name like a polka dot dress.

Trace too many coordinates on a map
and every journey ever made occurs at once;
each line of flight veining the world like a leaf.

With a single laugh like a thunderclap
you shape your mouth to a hollow, howl your new name,
and a crow flies out, skittering into the wind.

Last Ditch

Call us ditch. You wouldn't be wrong:
a coincidence of latitude and climate
away from the quilted track;
a city-shunned fissure, nest space
filled with hungry ghosts.

We are moon not sun, pale
and fatigued under a tear in the sky,
a composition of echoes
and fractal silhouettes,
a gritstone labyrinth.

Call us a forlorn hope and you've missed it:
how the valley flaunts its edges,
how the mist evanesces and new
tufts appear, the swirling haze
birthing new horizons
among great stones and glass.

We are an epoch's worth of graveyards,
an ephemeral litany of griffs
and hags, promontories and shale
exposures. We are the fallen field
walls, bog wood, and breach.
We are a haunted geography.

Call us the valley that could swallow anything.
We are lapse. We are leaves.
We are half in the grass. We are not
the preening leaves of the inner city.
We are wild, practical, phantom,
an intoxicating uncertainty.

Myth Gatherers

"We live in the epoch of competing ends." China Miéville

Storytime in Class 1B, the big bad villain has met his end,
and Poppy, too young to ask anything less than earth-shaking,
asks: "Where are our monsters and miracles these days?"
Four years of training, I'm unqualified to answer.

Maisy rescues me: "We're probably just collecting stories."
Satisfied, they turn to their next urgency:
a tractor shuffling past, a bird twitching hello.
I feel like I've just found religion.

Perhaps we do live in a tide of stories,
with a time to gather and a time to tell.
Here we drift in the lull of an age
yet to grow its fingerprints.

My carpet of savants' grandchildren may sit,
look back and talk of our miracles and magic:
of the wolves in wool suits hoarding our gold,
of ogres in cassocks devouring our children,

of warring hoards casting lethal metal spells,
of saints in chains, disappearing planes,
of how we shrank the world to an apple with a click,
and they'll wonder how on earth we missed it.

Screaming Skull

I dreamed through hollows from a dome
filled with the sound of ravens. Love me.

The colourful spread of years mapped
across the gutters and gullies
of my once-face. Love me to pieces.

I dreamed dragons, epics, and elegies,
and now carry emptiness, grinning
against midnight. Love me to pieces,
and then jigsaw me a Picasso.

A Dear John for the Leeds Ring Road

Why do you always do this,
when mere hours past
we lit up your inner chambers?

There we quivered bright,
drunk on our compliments
to each other, and the casio

soundtrack of rain on tyres.
Promises palmed in handshakes,
Sinatra with a white rose.

The bouncer who wouldn't budge
for any of those young, feline things wept
stars from his tear tattoos at the sight of us.

Velvet ropes swooned at our touch.
In the predictability of a Yorkshire June
we weaved our chronicle of surprise.

Our money no good here,
no queuing for us there,
ours, the golden ratio – the key to this city.

But at a certain moment every night
the DJ reaches for the crossfade.
You sensed it, blue eyes quickened to mercury.

And now, as I try to unknot our hands,
your silk fingers claw reptilian
and words grow ugly and grasping.

“Never sleep on an argument,”
they say. But we're getting nowhere.

We've been circling for hours.

I promise I'll always return to you;
you and your gastric band ring road.
Leeds! If you love me, let me go.

The Miller's Grave (for Miller Lee)

Don't love me then. Love your pearl fingertips,
cracked and brittle from unravelling loom ends.
Love the way you coil spare strips in spirals
and stitch them into place: rag rugs, cloth squares,
or rope. Oh, I know how to use a rope.
I'll prove that at Mayroyd Mill over the road.

Don't bury me right then. Bury your heads
with me at the crossroads unmarked, unblest.
Bury your fears too because I won't rest
quiet, heretic, a skull full of regret.
Exhume me until your shovels are wrecked.
I'll lie with God before you sleep again.

There were nights I thought they'd never bring me
here, unnamed, to the shadow of your hymns.

Critical Reading

When you breathe “Lead me into the woods”
I trace a breadcrumb trail down the flood
of your back, dropping two coin kisses
in the shallow hollows at the base.

When you purr “What’s the time Mr Wolf?”
I unravel a Woodsman scar, rolling
a claw from clavicle to navel,
following the fault line with pointed tongue.

When you beg “Show me the lands in the sky”
I spread beanstalk tendrils from the curve
of your calves – grazing ever upwards
to the gentle hum of fee – fi – fo – fum.

When you call out “Mirror, show me the future”
I press a promise from my lips to yours:
no matter the visions your emerald eyes see,
the reflections in mine are all that you need.

But when you scream “Shuck me like an oyster!”
I wish you came with appendices.

Nothing to Do with Neptune

Let's just say
she was a temperamental soul,
like a whisper from a conch
that erupted into a promise
so loud you glimpsed the future.
She was the kind you didn't let dance
near an open flame.

Nothing to do with Neptune,
an arbitrary name
for a nuclear native
with a silver kiss.
Name something, and you claim it;
misname it, and it possesses you.
She had me at "hybrid".

The pyrophoric flame of loose-curved hair
hid a beauty tarnished when exposed to air.
The radio – active – crackled
something about a burned bar,
charred bodies, Downtown in ashes.
I should have known she was trouble
the minute she walked in.

The Wild Hunt

When I became a beast
that first night, the moon
whispered to me,
the stars blurred
for a blink,

and the moorland swooned,
like a tremor through the
cheekbone of a giant.
The air turned to coal
on my tongue.

The sky bloomed purple
and heavy with the faces
of stolen children
howling for freedom
from the clouds.

Kindred as The Creation:
an abandonment
of orphans unfurling
their cries to a widening
of black dogs.

If we had wings we'd still run.
You'll never find us
clagged in amber
but, hell, the chimaera
we could create;

our howling, bestial
wraith-kids whomping
the wilderness, squat,
half-made, covered
in glitter.

Inside, the Angels

Inside, the angels thrilling their wings
to a price tag, twisting – a flag on the wind.
Outside, Vikings clapping their piqued iron
beneath a kaleidoscope canopy.

Inside, a man drags his shadow across
the stone; hoax-suit buttoned up harsh.

Outside, a half-made cot of leaves
quarrels with a desperate breeze.

Inside, a worm roots a fresh hole through
brickwork, un-whispering a knot of wishes.

Outside, ghosts etch names into bark,
singing hymns to un-name the dark.

Finding the Words

It's life's easiest mysteries that can pickle your eggs
the strongest. Like finding the words Hemmick
Beach scrawled in your notebook - the letters
seething and vinegary amidst the clutter
of half poems, dates and times, broken
figures, orphaned plans, each an
illuminated arrow, a clue to a
riddle, an invitation to join
the slipstream.
And into the
current
you
go

Writing Your Leeds Poem

Pay no heed to golden owls.
The road from the station should snake
the city mound like a whip.

In the event of sun, chill
your palette to rain – nothing too
torrential – this is only for colour.

You will warn your readers
that the lion on their left will be a lie,
but that doesn't mean it won't charge.

You won't let your readers worry
that they can perceive only one building
against your gently dripping canvas.

Leeds is a nesting city:
with each step your readers take, one building
with birth another.

You won't need to tell them
to wait at the lights, since even in their dreams
they stop at the reds.

But on a slip of breeze
they will notice one of their hopes
curdling up into the eaves.

And before you can write
the necessary quicksand, they scrawl
their way, half-daft and whipped

full of freedom, to a road
you don't remember. They swirl past

your ghosts – too subtle to catch them;

past the students performing
feats impossible when sober; past parents
crabbing children into baskets;

past the owl that cries
“You think too much!” to a door in the mountain
at the root of the world’s tongue.

A bald old lady will offer
safe passage for a name. Before you can grasp them
your readers will be gone.

You will turn back to the owl
and ask: “How are you talking?” It will roll
its eyes and take flight.

The Art of Straying

Look at you, flat-capped Kandahar,
with your telecoms concealed
under an eczema of moss,
all trussed up like a sleazy
museum exhibit.

You, a gabbling of negative space and
sprawl, fragments of paradox over
cratered ground, your moors
cradling their darkness – black
beneath the pale grass.

Brambles part skin, painting crooked
smileys on flesh, stiff
as a heart-knot of bracken.

This is where hashtag
movements retire.

An imaginative reconstruction
but the echoscript of Lowry's chimney
shimmers over your haphazard
chronology. Thin wires drift,
redrawn, renewed.

You, invisible or hypervisible – nothing
in between, the winds photo-shopping
your edges over an age. Between
shadow and cityscape, bit-tripping
the cosmos, echoing audio
logs of the past.

Bed 06

The funny thing about the pale man
with the crack that spreads like a faultline

across his face, from one rough cheek
to the other, opening like black lips

at the bridge of his faultless nose –
an equator severing brain and sight

from scent, taste, and language –
is that this, he sings softly over

the treble of his drip, is not the first
time this has happened, that he belongs

in the ‘night lands’ and his sheet recedes
like a tide, revealing an atlas

of scars drawn deeply like breath
over the great canvas of his flesh.

Apus

They call
 you ‘inconspicuous’, Little Wonder Bird,

but you
 are bones lifted from sound, scattered into sky.

We trace
 a map of beak and claw enciphered

in your
 points of departure – each orb a line of flight.

Quartet
 of dust-song and fire allied with our stitching:

a thread
 of lace trailing your joints into a blade.

Perched there
 on the promontory, waiting to take wing.

No dumb
 wren, all paradise, silvering in the ache.

Singing the Stone

That winter came late, stayed long.
Darkness dropped like a benediction
on the curved necks of your hills.

At the apex of cross-counties,
in the lesions of your valleys
we traced a granite chill.

Somewhere through the mystery
of smoke on the rise stand your pots
in a paralysis of nostalgia.

The gastric band of the turnpike
shouldn't be clear of earshot
but yours is an annealing silence;

a stillness only broken
by the histrionics of a grouse.
“One for a willow, two for a bird...”

We sang as did the ancients,
as if we could sing the stone,
but winter only whispers its words.

Run of the Mill

In nineteen-eighty-two you kerplunked
from your mama, as a midwife finally
plucked out the right/wrong stick.

In nineteen eighty-five you learned
why the stair gate was usually locked.
The resulting scar became a shark bite.

In nineteen ninety you learned football
was the most important thing in the world.
By ninety-four you'd swapped studs on your boots

for ones in your face.

You sort of finished school.
You started a band.
Your scar evolved,
through bullet wounds,
and daring rescue attempts.

You found the right girl,
didn't realise it, lost her,
found other things
(some slippery, some salty, some blue,
some with complimentary night-sweats
and shaking).

You buried habits, a dog, a record collection,
a friendship, a cat, and your parents.
You kissed more wrong girls,
and a couple of guys.
You dug for your record collection,
and unearthed your parents' gleaming bones.

You met the right girl. She rekindled
your love of Ker-plunk. You raised
a couple of silver marbles.

And then you stood, naked in the centre
of Quebec Street, looked up at the windows
to check my breath still fogged the glass.

You arched your back. Your eyes rolled
as flares ignited, a flaming mohawk,
from your spine. Your fingers creaked

and shot outwards as your fingernails
dropped like petals on the tarmac.
You spun like a screw churning your feet

through the black border of the street,
screached a high C as smoke rose
from your mind like a wing.

A single wink, and you erupted
into a quarrel of sparrows, spinning
widdershins into the purple horizon

just beyond the beckoning,
coughed-out chimneys
of the crooked old mill.

Familiar Tale

“This might be the last story”
the teller says through webbed
breath and Lidl-yellow teeth.

His story might be his own
or it might be George MacDonald’s,
who might have shoplifted it himself.

This story is unlike all others
as it’s not about finding
your way home. Though it might be.

Tomorrow you’ll remember
this story is about a girl
raised in darkness, whirling in night,

and a boy imprisoned in daylight,
eyes closed to the purblind moon.
Neither knowing the orbit’s seam,

that “the rose’s night black
is true as her day red”,
but *spoilers* they get together

in the end.

Still, you knew that yesterday,
that light and shadow are only
on a break and when they reconcile

things will change so much
we’ll need a new name
for tomorrow.

Good Bones

You lived in *that* house
(every street has one).
Your smile was always
unsettling, like an overheld
stare, a child in makeup,
a clown, a special effect.
Even the best CGI
has the devil in its teeth,
dead eye, and weightless
step.

Your smile our-teched them all –
the update you know will corrupt
your server, but accept anyway.
We decided you were a witch,
a child snatcher, a reptile
with vertical wink.
We didn't know it was sadness,
had no ideas beyond
our storybooks, no idea
that the past was there rotting
away the beams of you,
brittling your skin,
hollowing your bones.

Camo

We were running from the black landrovers.
The camouflaged ones were safe.
We knew this.

Camouflage meant home, meant the gateway
to a barracks, meant football,
and returning fathers.

Camouflage was our flag, and like football
fans we painted the greens, browns, beige
and black across our faces daily.

Camouflage meant you couldn't be found,
meant the world was under *your* eye,
meant an extra five points for stealth,

meant you didn't need to mimic your Dad
and hug the floor to check for suspicious
lights under the car.

We ran from the plain coloured trucks.
Who knew what secrets they
weren't trying to hide.

The Hag of Eagle Crag

Near the base of an eagle clawed out of stone,
yet never the same hollow twice, you can god-
mode destiny for the skin of a secret.

One milk eye flickers behind a hanging moss
of hair, unblinking, unseeing but unpatterning
the occluded night sky.

She draws cards from a deck crystallised with sand,
lays them like sweet meats. You'd call it tarot
but that's one thing it's not.

"It's a game," she tells you without moving
her lips. "A game in which you stake everything."
Talk about boiling the frog.

The phrase makes her prickle, though you don't say it
aloud. Culturally insensitive when dealing
with a witch? But then,

that's not what she is.

Smudge

(i)

It's time to unfurl yourself into a bridge,
a viaduct crossing the whirling smoke plain;
the tracks over your back thrumming low into the fog
as the great weight of you clatters toward the otherworld;

your bright beams dulled and half lidded,
the over-stoked engine room crazy with flame
and shattered gauges, the heaving chug
a thumping tock vibrating beyond the veil,

and as you pierce the gypsum smog surface
your tremors echo back to meet you
scattering your bass into soprano,
launching you weightless into the stars,

careening upwards on selenite wings,
smoke rising from your spine
as you hurl fire at the warped wood
and iron vein ligatures that bound you.

(ii)

Then you light it
and the fire always
loosens your lips,

the clump of sticks
scoring moons in air
ashing to seed,

your harvest mind
weaving a rosebush
lid for your bed,

as you undream
sketch shadows of hands,
cloud, and the dusk.

(iii)

The last time I held
smoke, it grew heavy
at the touch of me.

I only wanted
to let it snake through
my fingers, bind me.

But no, it became
a monument to my
half-finished gestures;

there, drifting, the blue
shadow of something
slowly taking shape.

(iv)

The painted dancer, skin
a fresco of being,
choreographs a direct
line to the otherworld.

A judder in the wound
between worlds, a cateract
framed in palo santo, tells
her someone has answered.

She twirls and spins, cuts
a language through air,
and past the limit a pulse says
her movements are returned.

She whirls to a fever
until the border tears
and through the fissure her
own tattooed hands emerge.

Breathe Again

Some days I pray you'll forget my name.
We both search for cracks, at night, in stones,
but this pen sketches platitudes
while yours moon-fishes in Feng Du.

Disaster along your edges: the storm-
spirit, in a stillness of poets
all drinking at the wrong nine o'clock,
our fingers tracing the borders of things.

Your broken fingernails push inside
leaking trails of blood, salt, brine and air.
Seeing us your fingers retreat into fists
and mimic our hollow twists and turns.

Remember the girl we gave a wide berth?
When frogs filled the pond with what we daren't touch,
she pushed herself deep below the green
and gathered up handfuls of slime for us,

how she vanished,
the bubbles stopped,
before she emerged,
to breathe again.

Navigation

The meaning
 of my wet coils
 has been hide-
 and-seeking
 with you for
 many failed
revolutions now.
 Do you truly
 puzzle me
 so elusive?
 My secrets
 so sealed
and skirted?
 Some years
 I wonder
 if you even
 hunted me
 or if you're
there, static,
 face to a tree,
 still counting.

Incoendo

I once sang a story
to a child, milk-eyed,
about a woman and man
made to dance in flame.

All night lightning had stunned
his eyes wild awake,
so I sang a song of fire
to stem the fear's tide.

He laughed until he drifted
into the currents' swim
his breath unknowable against
the contractures of my skin.

No More Water to Walk On

Finding no more water to walk on,
dropped by a pagan constellation,
you straddle the cerulean pond,
divided,

between yellow and blue. Eyes of jade
and grass, each a room filled with rain,
seek sounds to feed to the wind, words
that shatter.

Language follows landscapes, recedes
in rearviews as away moves further away.
A tongue of slips, and pearls, stitching of selves,
of voices.

Hair, a cascade of lifetimes, scatters like stars
to a thigh thrilled to fire by a fingernail,
a hip teased to dance by teeth, beneath
a long-held breath.

But a wing's not always a hopeful thing.
Stealing doubt from devils, clutching it close.
"This art's all by accident!" you caw
to the chorus.

So is a cut, and your words are blood,
anything but dull, anything but numb.

Could You?

Pick a view,
any you can find.
It will always mean something
to the willing;
the grand panoptic from the Wainhouse crown,
sink and hump of the Calder Valley splayed on all sides,
or the unview of brick from a clagged hotel half-glaze,
so obscured you can barely make out the sick in the alley below.

They all mean
when the light's right.
They beg you to step out,
enter their shape.
Falling, flying, it's how the light hits your wings.
Could you do it though? Get everything prepared just so?
All the feathers and adhesive lined up, numbered, A'd and B'd
on the ledge. Maybe it's perspective, a need for a new lens.

Maybe that's why you chose that
view, that space,
that chair opposite the window,
to look at everything
sideways, a nosebleed from the ceiling. Maybe that's why
you stretched your great span
and stepped out.

Ghost Stations

Moon, your ghost stations
are not locked in London's
underbelly. They are here,
isolated along dour edges
of peaks and mounds,
the hum and rumble
of their phantom hulks
echoing back across time.

A Bottle of Mythos

(for Sleeping Dragon Island)

The sleeping serpent owns the horizon.
His great rock back breaches the affiliation
of sky and sea,

frozen on a whim by the god of poor decisions.
The plum pit of a stone, on whose kiss he waits,
chafing ever closer.

Soon, the tideless sea will stir. His warped-wood tail
will tunnel blue into black - heritage to honour -
in the crack of his wing.

But for now, the stiff-kneed cicadas croak lustful breaths,
olives grow heavy on miscalculated branches,
mottled tourists count down final hours,

and Mythos flows more freely than myth.
There is no rush.

The dragon sleeps.

I'm Sworn in as President

It is the Novemberest of afternoons.
The sun is dropping a pale flat glare in the west.
We just finished my attempt at San Choy Bow,
and you're snoring your approval on the couch.

The sudden shatter of a Blackhawk helicopter
and the screech of four unmarked SUVs
make it all but impossible to focus on Countryfile.
In seconds plain-suited men and women fill the room.

"We have the package" one says, cuff to her mouth.
"Do I need to sign for it?" Weapons are holstered.
She removes her shades to reveal eyes that reveal even less.
"Sir, you need to come with us."

We clatter over the Pennines, unsettling the grouse
and somewhere near Nether Bottom we land
and I'm bundled, with surprising care,
into a Boeing VC-25 (or so I'm told).

As we scud the Atlantic I'm (sort of) filled in;
something about protocols, DNA evidence,
a distant uncle and a fumble in the Roosevelt room.
Upshot being – I'm sworn in as president.

They hand me 'the football'. It's not a football.
I'm given a Stetson and they fix/bleach my teeth.
"It's all about image," they tell me and hand me
what they say is a football. It's still a funny shape.

Hands are kissed, babies shaken vigorously.
It's not an ideal first day, but I do dig the teeth.
I'm told not to worry about the death threats
but best not try to change too much. "Won't be for long sir."

I do Oprah. She asks me about the first lady.
“I think she’s still asleep on the couch,” I say.
I do Ellen. She asks me about religion.
The feed is cut, and it’s back to the White House.

I get busy in the office, which is egg-shaped
like their balls. I line up some wrestling figures on the desk.
I paint over all the gold, get rid of the ugly rug
replace the paintings with work by Emily Garcés.

I plug in Alexa but am told I can’t use it.
“Walls have ears sir.” I don’t think they get how it works.
I make the Hoary Puffleg the national bird,
and pickled onion Monster Munch the national dish.

I build a foot-high wall along the border
so anyone coming at night will trip and graze their knees.
I grow fat on power, cheesy puffs, and comfy chairs.
I pardon all the fucking turkeys.

Endings Are Easy

*"Truly all men are cheats,
especially publishers." (Hesba Stretton)*

Endings are easy, when you know your words'
worth. From spectral Shropshire to Paternoster's
sneer, you hawked your manuscripts, dragged your skirts,

took po-faced prophecies and thrilled them with dirt.
Songs of benediction, prayers of rebirth
mean nothing to a waif kicked from the church,

their fingers chapeled around worm-eaten earth,
and less to a woman married out of her purse;
kneeling may be foul but falling's even worse.

Up on the Wrekin in your shadow step
a mantra drifts beyond your century's end.
In a world where "there will never be enough

done", ours is to resist, to bear
witness, and to live by the pen.

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Below are details of the first publications of other poems.

Forklands and Flying Penguins – 'Live from Work Town: Anthology 2014', The Bolton Literature Festival Anthology.

Salt on the Lips – 'Ink in Thirds', Issue 2, May 2016.

Myth Gatherers – 'How Am I Doing for Time?' (Poems, Prose, & Pints), 2014.

Dear John & Writing your Leeds Poem – 'Leeds to Leeds', an online project organised by Helen Mort.

Critical Reading – 'Mildly Erotic Verse', The Emma Press, 2016.

Nothing to do with Neptune – 'My Dear Watson: The Very Elements of Poetry', Beautiful Dragons Press, 2014.

Apus – 'Heavenly Bodies: A Constellation of Poetry', Beautiful Dragons Press, 2014.

The Hag of Eagle Crag – 'See into the Dark, Pankhearst, 2016.

Breathe Again – 'Indigo Rising UK', Issue 4, 2013.

Bottle of Mythos – 'Inspiration: A Space for Words', Indigo Dreams, 2015.

Endings are Easy – 'Noble Dissent: A Demonstration of Poetry That Toes No Lines', Beautiful Dragons Press, 2017.

