

## Words from the Water

**Polly:** Okay, well everybody to 'Words From The Water'. In this event we're going to have three swimming writers discussing the currents flowing between swimming, life-writing and poetry. And I'd just like to start by thanking our funders – so this event is funded by Great Place Lakes and Dales, who funded an event series in Grasmere last year called 'Little Unsuspected Paradise', and we've been very generously allowed to host this event in Aerial Festival, so thank you to Aerial for having us as well.

So today we have for you Jessica J. Lee, Nina Mingya Powles and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, who are all going to talk a little bit about their writing and read a bit of their writing. So first off we're going to have some readings, but I'll just introduce everybody, and give you a little bio for everyone as well. I've tried to make sure these are up-to-date because there's lots of exciting new publications happening and forthcoming from all of our amazing writers.

So, **Jessica J. Lee** is a British-Canadian-Taiwanese author and environmental historian, and winner of the 2019 RBC Taylor Prize Emerging Writer Award. Her first book, *Turning: A Swimming Memoir*, was published by Virago in 2017 and named amongst the best books of the year by both Canadian newspaper The National Post and German newspaper Die Zeit [Polly mispronounces] Die Zeet? Zeit?

**Jessica:** Zeit

**Polly:** My German's not very good, as you can tell, there. It was named a Notable Book by the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Awards in the USA and longlisted for the Frank Hegyi Award for Emerging Authors in Canada. It's also the first swimming memoir I read that I really felt connected with, which was really important for me. She's got a PhD in Environmental History and Aesthetics and was Writer-in-Residence at the Leibniz Institute for Freshwater Ecology in Berlin from 2017–2018. She's also the founding editor of [\*The Willowherb Review\*](#). Her second book, *Two Trees Make a Forest: On Memory, Migration, and Taiwan* was published in 2019 and has just been shortlisted for the 2020 Boardman Tasker prize for Mountain Literature. And she's currently in the process of moving from Berlin to the UK.

**Nina Mingya Powles** is a poet and zinemaker from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently living in London. She is the author of a food memoir, *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* (The Emma Press, 2020), and is a really beautiful little book, and several poetry pamphlet collections including *Luminescent*, from Seraph Press in 2017, and *Girls of the Drift*, also from Seraph in 2014.

[Jessica's doorbell rings, her dog barks and she gets up to answer]

In 2018 she was one of three winners of the inaugural Women Poets' Prize, and in 2019 won the Nan Shepherd Prize for Nature Writing, and her book she has developed through the Nan Shepherd Nature Writing Prize is going to be coming out next summer. She is also the founding editor of Bitter Melon Press, 苦瓜, a risograph press that publishes limited-edition poetry pamphlets by Asian writers. And her poetry collection *Magnolia*, 木蘭, came out with Nine Arches this year as well, so Nina's had a busy year for publishing.

Then Thirdly we have **Elizabeth-Jane Burnett**, who is a writer of English and Kenyan heritage, born in Devon and her work is inspired by the landscape in which she was raised. Her creative and critical work explores environmental themes. Publications include poetry collection *Swims*, which is from Penned in the Margins in 2017, and was a Sunday Times Poetry Book of the Year, and *Of Sea* which is forthcoming from Penned

in the Margins in 2021). She's also published an academic monograph *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager and Poethics*, which was from Palgrave in 2017, and the geologic memoir *The Grassling* (Penguin, 2019) which explores her family home in Devon. She is Associate Professor in Creative Writing at Northumbria University.

So that's our three amazing writers.

**Polly:** Is everything okay Jessica?

**Jessica:** Yeah, it was the post man ... [he] likes to think he can leave all the packages for the entire flat, like all the building, with me, and ...

**Polly:** That's quite exciting, it means you get lots of unexpected gifts?

**Jessica:** I mean it means he knows that I'm home all the time.

**Polly:** [laughing] It's better than our post man just opens our door and leaves things in the hallway whether we're here or not ...\*

**Jessica:** I mean that would be easier actually!

**Polly:** I probably shouldn't have said that out-loud should I? People will just be coming in our house and leaving things. Only nice things, please, thank you!

(\* I am actually super grateful for this postie so I don't always have to run down stairs or worse – go to troutbeck to fetch post back, you are wonderful thankyou. Polly)

So each of our writers is going to read a little bit now, so Jessica if we start with you?

**Jessica:**

I thought I would read a little bit from some waterfall swims in *Two Trees Make A Forest* so we're going to travel to the central mountain range in Taiwan.

From the Peaks the water flows sweetly. The day we hiked towards Qilai on the Nenggao Trail, the sun had hung wanly amidst the cloud. There remained a trace of warmth, so a group of us had stopped at a three-tiered cascade of white water, where a pool glinted at the base. We'd reached it by clambering down a small mound of rocks into a sheltered crevice of the mountain, which swallowed us with the sound of the Nenggao Waterfall. The tumble barely patterned the edge of the ice-green pool, and, elated at the thought of cold on my limbs after carrying my heavy pack up the mountain, I stripped down to my underwear and slipped in, shuffling my way across the rocky floor. It was deep, and I swam freely in the clean cold of it, some three thousand metres above sea level.

On the Hengchun peninsula, far South, at Qikong Waterfall – 'seven holes' – a flow descends a small, jungle-covered peak at the beginning of a mountainous break between the peninsula and the central mountain range. The first pools in its lower reaches drain into a small creek, and then into channels tunnelling underground, rocky and unremarkable to look at, until flowing out to sea. The fourth 'hole' of Qikong sits on a rocky ledge that drops sheerly to the pools below.

I remember swimming in that upper pool once on a visit with my mother and sister, as rain fell onto the canopy trees. We settled by a milky blue-green pool, where an airy stream of water spilled from a ledge far above and spun down to the pool below. We plunged in together, a family bobbing in the barrel-shaped depths, the pool no wider than eight feet in diameter. The rock had been smoothed by an eternity of falling water, and a placid swimmer could rest on the polished stone and look out over the green valley below. Its wide and open sky was framed by hills, and the occasional

bird caught wing in the white cloud. The autumn migration was near its close; we'd ventured south late in the season.

Swimming there, I saw joy on my mother's face: how much she must have missed in the years after she and my father divorced and my sister and I grew up, in the careful life she lived alone in Canada, going to work, running in the park, cooking simple meals for herself. I'd spent recent years collecting and examining old photographs of her ...

[looks up as dog growls] I'm very sorry. Brisket! [to dog] Stop – that's enough.

**Polly:** [Laughing] He was very moved by that passage.

**Jessica:** [Resumes reading] As a small child the resemblance had been there: my eyes were darker, my hair straight and long and black, my arms skinny like hers. I looked Chinese. In time, though, my shoulders grew broad, my cheeks red, my eyes light. I took the height of my Welsh relatives and now stand many inches taller than my mother. But beaming in that mountain pool, I shared her happiness, and I saw in her face something of my own.

**Polly:** Thankyou, and thankyou Brisket for those critical comments on the piece. He's just, he's just um thinking about, er ... how important sharing is.

**Jessica:** Yeah, I'll get him to be quiet.

**Polly:** [Laughs] Okay, Nina, do you want to do yours next?

**Nina:** Thank you, this is really fun. I wish we could be in the same room together, but at some point we will I'm sure.

**Polly:** One day, one day ...

**Nina:** I think I'll read the poem I've actually written for Aerial Festival website first, one of them. So I've been swimming a lot this summer, as much as I can, to kind of stay feeling like myself and some of these poems have come out of that. This one is called 'Tidemarks'.

I have never swum this far north before. This sea tastes different to the South Pacific, which is salt-bitter, so strong you can't taste anything afterwards. The sea burns your tongue. Here the taste is softer, doesn't make you spit and gag. The tide pulls gently on your hips, draws your body along the line without you noticing.

I have never swum this far north before. A dip in the sand – down under the crest, arms heavy into the wind, white turbines spinning like ghosts on the horizon as if in a bright dream of air travel, looking down on the pearlescent surface from above. Out there, mist floats down to touch imaginary borders.

I have never swum this far north before, where people who live by the sea draw thick lines on maps, fold the maps in half then half again and tuck the maps under their pillows at night. At night they dream of borders.

I'll read a really short excerpt now from the opening of my book of essays coming out next year, *Small Bodies of Water*. I printed it out so that I wouldn't have to read off my phone, and it printed off like this [holds up paper with tiny printed columns of writing in centre] it should be okay but [laughs] So this is from the opening of that.

'When we moved back to New Zealand I taught myself not to be afraid of open water. There's no sand here at the edge of Wellington Harbour on the beach by my parents' house, only pebbles and driftwood and shells. Everything scrapes against me; it leaves a mark on my skin. Rocks, wind, salt. To swim in Wellington Harbour is to swim in the deep seam between two tilted pieces of land that have been pulled apart over time. Repeated movement along the Wellington Fault caused cliff formations to rise up above the harbour's western shore. Little islets – M karo, Matiu and Mokopuna – which punctuate the narrow neck of the harbour – are actually tips of a submerged ridge that runs parallel to the taniwha-shaped peninsula.

Near Oriental Bay the harbour carries debris from a summer storm – shattered driftwood, seaweed blooms, plastic milk bottle caps, the occasional earlobe jellyfish. The further out I swim, there is a layer of clear, molten blue. It's January, the height of summer, and I've flown home from Shanghai where I've been living for a year. My friend Kerry and I dive below the rolling waves. Right now neither of us know where home is exactly, but underwater, the question doesn't seem to matter. Emerging from nowhere a black shape draws close to my body and I lurch, reaching for Kerry, but then I see the outline of wings. The black shag is mid-dive, eyes open, wings outstretched and soaring down into the deep. Kawau p, the native New Zealand black shag. They perch on rocky beaches all over the Wellington coastline holding their wings open to dry in the wind and sun. Another wave rises over us and we turn our bodies towards it, opening.

Home is not a place but a collection of things that have fallen, or been left behind – dried agapanthus pods, the exoskeleton of cicadas, discarded shells of quail eggs on Po Po's plate, cherry pips in the grass, the drowned chrysanthemum bud in the bottom of the tea pot. Some things are harder to hold in my arms – the smell of salt and sunscreen, mint green blooms of lichen on rock, wind bent pohutukawa trees above valleys of driftwood.

Thanks.

**Polly:** That was so beautiful thank you! So, *Small Bodies of Water* grew out of the essay that you had in *Ponds* as well didn't it?

**Nina:** Well it was first published by Jessica [in the *Willowherb Review*] which I forgot to mention ...

**Polly:** Yes, I'd forgotten that I'd read it there first.

**Nina:** *At the Pond*.

**Polly:** So this wonderful book *At The Pond* about the Hampstead women's pond, which is really lovely if anyone listening isn't aware of that as a swimming book. It's a really lovely swimming book with lots of essays by different women about their

experience of the ponds. It's really wonderful. Okay, Elizabeth-Jane, let's hear from you ...

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yes, I'm just going to read a few from the forthcoming poetry collection that you mentioned, called *Of Sea*.

This came about from a survey that I saw that had 39 invertebrates registered in the stretch of coast that I would swim a lot in in Devon, and so these, each poem relates to one of those invertebrates, and encounters through swimming. So I'll start with a fly, and then we'll go through some worms, and see where we end up. But this is Murky-Legged Legionnaire Fly.

### **Murky-legged legionnaire fly**

Muscles

move

the murk

of sea-dirt

blurt of sun

off-wing or throat

floats for a blink

then dark flickerless mud

along the mouth

darkness in the teeth

a suck of salt too steep

for breath to follow

only seconds from

defeat the water

darkling deep.

### **Millipede**

Maw.

Lick, mulch, moss.

Find a way in by skin.

I tear! I burst! Cut off

the fruit of my teeth,

a drum, a bone.

Find a way out of skin.

Bite. Wear away at.

Nag, gnat, gnaw,

flow, earth nymph,

soil swimmer, flow,

polish, the clear part

of any stone.

### **Green Leaf Worm**

Turn, curve, slink

through sheet

of water.

I sting.

I pierce men.

A constellation

of shark's teeth.

Strapless.

Wingless.

An unforgettable pop

song. A wind

flows through me.

Limbless.

All I do is echo.

## **Bootlace Worm**

Body within body, whirl-  
igig.

Flighty.  
If 180 ft long,  
you have to have a system.

You must know

a helicopter  
or a tuning peg.

Or, if washed ashore,  
how to be  
a sea shell.

But these get lost  
in the twirling muscle  
of the present  
& the scream of being  
one thing.

## **Sand Flea**

A hop, a skip, a dancer.

A leap, a lindy, an aviator.

Originating in Harlem,  
in Dawlish, in the early rap  
lyrics of the high-tide mark.

A beat, a whip of sand, a throb  
of heart, a track made by breathing.

Appearing in darkness, night-jigger  
or jar. Moth, mite, specked,  
missed. The size of the space  
between words is

## **Ruddy Darter**

To throw  
yourself against an arrow  
or tide  
to startle or stitter  
sharpen, glitter  
as mackerel  
leap sudden  
stutter water  
breath dug  
as a root  
from body ripped  
up like a fish-  
ed wing  
tip.

## **Hoverfly**

Things pass  
over: nerve, wing, a broad  
beating sky that never fills  
entirely like the sea

in the midst of low  
colour, a twist of sky  
peels a lemon

causing you to rise  
from thick seaweed, pop  
through sparkled water

where waves blossom  
sun foams  
your eyes lift up from  
their bones

a whole sky clearing your throat:  
such hope.

## **Brimstone**

A simmering  
sky, I tuck myself  
under.

Nothing can catch  
a brink, a bank, an edge,  
even if it does flow  
over.

I take my body  
to the margins.

Hold. Hover.

## **Goldswift**

Outglimmer, outshimmer, outgleam,  
rush, bright gull. Whether bird or  
plane or butterfly. Whether dancing girl  
or alien. Whether plant or a belonging  
to another country. Here is what you are.

Was it air, was it sea, was it land,  
was it words, was it paper, was it rot,  
was it danger, was it promise, was it done or  
was it thrown, was it foretold, was it meant,  
was it a scent similar to pineapple  
that brought you here is where you are.

Was it bracken. Was it an impediment  
to motion. Was it fern or foreign. Was it  
rust or was it rush. Is it a game we can all play.

A name? Or instruction.

Okay, um, this is Gatekeeper, and then I'll end with Meadowbrown. So these are just a couple of butterflies I think to end with.

## **Gatekeeper**

When nothing is full or dirtless.

Not to be eaten or confessed.

When the unwhole, unmooned  
surface is left. There will be no  
swimming in no sea there will be  
no swimming & no sea there will be  
no swimming & no clean.

### **Meadowbrown**

I don't know much of abundance  
(air-tight, tight-stretched, tight-lipped,  
tight-laced, water-tight, close knit,  
sleep- skin- sit-)

so when you come in your hundreds,  
there is nothing to compare you to.

An excess of blowing? An outrage of wing?

A departure of reason, fluttered fling  
beyond the subject. Out of reach of.

Before. Sea-shorn.

**Polly:** Thank you so much. All of those readings were so amazing and so beautiful. Everything's making me really emotional at the moment – we were just talking before we began recording about the idea of this six month stage that we're at through this peculiar pandemic here, and I think I am definitely at the stage where basically- anything-makes-me-cry of it now – it's getting really emotional listening to that. Really beautiful. What amazing ?? it's going to be next year when these books come out as well.

So there was lots of sea going on there, as well as those beautiful waterfalls Jessica as well, and it really made me long for places that aren't the local actually for me, which is really interesting. So I thought we'd start with a really general question about what swimming means to each of you – why it's important to you – and then start to think

about how it made its way into your writing. So I don't know who wants to jump in on that first – what does swimming mean to you?

**Jessica:** I can lead on that. I think for me it's the best vehicle really for getting into my body, and getting into a landscape, because I think one of the great benefits of swimming, and particularly swimming in bodies of freshwater – I'm a big fan of lakes – you know when you get out into the middle of the water, there is that sensation of being really *in* the place where you are, literally submerged in it, and there's something about that activation of the skin – activation of sensation that you get with water all around you, that I think is like nothing else, and that is ... I mean that's the bit that I crave, right? That sensation. That's why I go. Not really anything else, it's just to have that fleeting moment of sensation I think.

**Polly:** That's really interesting, because I think a lot of swimming literature talks about how the sense of risk maybe that you get from being in the water puts you specifically into your body, in a way that, for me swimming is very much about that sense of leaching into the landscape, instead. I kind of swim in some ways to get away from my body, or away from my body as I experience it most of the time on land, I suppose, that's the important point, but being in the water allows me to feel like I'm part of something else, and yeah, that's really interesting. Nina, what about you?

**Nina:** I think I feel just most at home in my body actually when I'm in water, and also because I very often have trouble feeling at home in a kind of ... on a particular piece of land – there's not many places where I've spent a long, long time putting down roots, and so I'll automatically kind of be drawn to wherever I can swim in a place where I live. And it's been that way my whole life. I've always loved to swim, but it's really only very recently I started to write about swimming, and yeah, it was Jessica's memoir *Turning* which really like made me think that I could write about swimming, and also an essay by Patricia Lockwood actually, in her book *Priest Daddy*, which is not about swimming but there's the most beautiful piece in there, about swimming, yeah, and I thought wow, this thing that is such a big part of me, I'd not actually written about before until a couple of years ago, so.

**Polly:** That's really interesting – we'll come back to that in a second – Elizabeth-Jane, what does swimming mean to you?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah, well I relate to most of those things that everyone's saying really, and that sense of the body, perhaps, Polly particularly what you were saying about that I appreciate. And in yoga, there's that term when you do twists, they call it ringing the body out – I don't know if there are any yogis amongst us – but I get that from swimming – that sense of the water just unravelling you. And you know it's a real, obviously, a stress reliever and tension releaser, and that cold water obviously has a lot of health benefits that we know about now. But I think you know, as well as being in the water, there's that sense of leaving the water. I always feel really exhilarated when I've left the water, so I do it as much for that as for the pleasure of being in the water as well. But certainly also there's that sense of immersion that Jessica was talking about, and also you know all the company that you keep, that you don't on land, so I love being amongst the micro-organisms in the water, and the invertebrates, and the birds overhead. You know there's something really wonderful about keeping new company I think in the water.

**Polly:** I was really struck by that actually, with all the pieces that you read, were about sharing, and about community, and being with other creatures, whether human or nonhuman creatures, in the water, and I thought that was really lovely. Because I think a lot of the time again, with the kind of writing that we get about swimming, it can be very ... a kind of wet version of the lone-enraptured male [laughs] which is

not very interesting to me, really, because I think you do get that sense of sharing that happens with the water.

I guess with your poetry you really did deliberately set out to think about those other bodies in there?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yes, absolutely I did. So, I saw this survey with the 39 invertebrates, some of which, you know I was very aware of – they make themselves known – and you do come into close contact with them – but others I hadn't thought of before seeing that survey, and then it was a sort of conscious act of looking to try and meet these organisms or creatures, and yeah, that was part of it. So it can be the more than human, but also the human as well. I liked hearing about the friends you know, in Nina and Jessica's work, that you've gone swimming with others, and I think, you know, as you're saying Polly, that sense of community, it's with the more than human, but it is with others as well, and often other women.

**Polly:** Yeah, and that sense of swimming as something that's shared and passed on as well, because I know in the essay version of 'Small bodies of Water' there is that reflection on beginning swimming and swimming in childhood, and that sense of how you begin and pass something on, which is there with talking about your mum there as well Jessica. And I wondered what you thought – again, had you deliberately set out to think about those relationships in the water?

**Jessica:** I think in my case at least – and I wrote something about this recently actually, I was thinking about it – I don't really feel a distinct separation between the thought of swimming, and the thought of closeness with my mother, and that's because we took lessons together when I was growing up. I learned with my mother, she didn't know how to swim when I was a kid. So we both took lesson together at the YMCA. So I think for me the idea of getting into the water has always been really intimately connected with this idea of a mother-daughter relationship, of my girlhood, at least, and that sort of period of time we spent together. So it's always kind of there in the back of my mind, as much as I go swimming alone now, it's – you know I haven't been swimming with my mom in ages right, but it's those few moments when we do it, really – I don't know, there's something about it that almost feels like almost mile-markers to me, in way.

**Polly:** What about you Nina?

**Nina:** That's really interesting ... I have just realised now that swimming is something that I used to do with my dad when I was little, and it's like, kind of ... well my dad and I have spent a lot of time together, but not really sort of just us two alone, and now I think about it, it would be swimming, and maybe walking, and occasionally cycling, when I was really little. And that's nice to think about actually because my mum doesn't like swimming at all, and so I think when I think of swimming, when I was little, I associate it with my dad. And also swimming alone, which I've been really comfortable doing kind of since I was little – although when I was little it means it was me kind of alone in a pool and my parents nearby, you know – but now swimming is so much a solitary activity for me. Not just during lockdown, but quite generally – like here, I go ... I live nearby the pond, and I swim there alone. And a lot of women go there in groups, and it's a place of community. I really love going there alone, and yeah, I know reading *Turning* made me think so much about swimming alone, and being alone in a landscape, and so that's something I'm always thinking about now. And swimming has made me more brave and comfortable being alone in a landscape like that.

**Polly:** That's really interesting – I hadn't thought of that relationship between being alone swimming and being alone more generally in a landscape, and I think there is a

really interesting connection between those two things. I think I owe a lot of my swimability to the fact that my mum was a later learner as well, at swimming, and because of that, and because she never really conquered her fear of putting her head in the water – so she still – she loves to swim, but she swims like [mimes swimming with head very upright] people laugh at her, you know, she laughs at herself, because she's incredibly upright, like this. When we were kids we were never allowed to splash her, we can never get her hair wet or anything – and that's partly because she didn't learn to swim until she moved to the Midlands in her 20s, and my dad actually encouraged her to learn then because she was going sailing with him. And so she was very keen that we all learned to swim as children. But for me, that meant I learned to swim at the local swimming baths in Nottingham, which is now an evangelical church and a climbing wall – it's been split in two – which is really interesting – and I had this amazing swimming teacher who I absolutely adored, and she's the only reason I ever learned to put my face in the water, because I was terrified of it – like really deeply bodily terrified of putting my head in the water. At the end of every lesson she'd make me dunk my head, and then one day I just kind of took off underwater, and that was it, and I was kind of gone. It's like my transformation into an amphibian was complete, and then I went into a different zone.

But I swim alone a lot, and I ... you know, I have friends I swim with and I love to swim with friends, it's always really fun, but for me there's nothing better than that feeling of just shedding everything. It makes me feel really anti-social to say that, but that kind of solitary communion with things other than human is [a] really important part of the process to me. But a bit like you said Nina, I didn't really think about writing about swimming for a long time, and even though it's always been a really big part of my life, I don't think I saw a way to connect those things in. There wasn't really a model for how I saw to do that until more recently. So where did you – obviously Nina you said you came into writing about swimming after reading those other things – what about Jessica and Elizabeth-Jane? How did you get to writing about swimming?

Jessica your first book is a swimming book – how did that happen?

**Jessica:** Alright ... I just muted myself briefly because apparently this is very noisy here today – there's a helicopter overhead ...

**Polly:** It's just because we're recording things; it's a unique law of recording stuff that as soon as you try and do it there's all sorts of weird noises going on ...

**Jessica:** Yeah, I mean I think I feel like I came to the idea of writing about my swims not in, not in really in a literary way at first, I think. It was part of my PhD initially. I was doing field work – participant observation field work with winter swimmers at the pond, where Nina also swims – and that for me meant I had to be swimming and writing about it. And at first I didn't really know how to go about it, because it didn't make sense to me to write about such a visceral thing in a cold academic tone, like that was not something I wanted to do, and so I feel like it sort of became quite slippery. And then I ended up spending probably years writing about nothing but swimming, and drifting towards the kind of writing I'm doing now, which is probably more literary, more ... more Nature Writing ... but at the time, yeah it was one of those things that was just sort of happenstance. I chose this research topic, and I was working on it, and there it was. And I did not realise it would preoccupy me for so many years.

**Polly:** So it took you over, really?

**Jessica:** Yeah.

**Polly:** How about you Elizabeth-Jane? Because obviously your first book is a book of swims as well – it's literally called *Swims* ...

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah, so it was a sort of conscious thing, and it was with ... it coincided with my move to Birmingham. So going to the Midlands, and not having that open water that – or easy access to rivers – and so on that I had grown up with, just made me think much more consciously about 'where is my next swim', you know, where is my next fix. And so I had to plot out these swims, across the country, and then similarly my writing was very squeezed at that time – it was a very busy work time – and I was thinking well, while I'm taking this time out to swim, I can also take time out to write, and the two came together in that way. So that's how it started really, in just a sort of sense of desperation at wanting to be near the water, and wanting to write, and to the two jelled, you know, together.

**Polly:** And what about the kind of logistical and structural challenges about trying to write about swimming ... because I often find, like, I swim, and I think 'oh I have to write about this' and then I get out of the water, I'm like I just ... how? How do I even approach that? There's no way – I can't get that ... I can't get the lake onto the page. How does it happen?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** I think – Polly and I, I think we've talked about the kind of logistics of how cold it is before haven't we? – that even just the act of holding a pen once you've come out of water, cold water, is really difficult, and in those first moments out of the water you – you're really sort of needing to warm up – yet the act of writing will slow you down and keep you stationary. So there's that very bodily restriction that I find with swimming, but for me it's important to note things down even in all that uncomfortableness, as soon as they've occurred, and sort of things that will have come to me as I've been swimming, and then I'll flesh them out later. But I do have that on the spot note-taking, that's really important for me.

**Polly:** Earlier in the year way back in that strange other land where you still met people in person and you know there were literary events and people were still doing in real-life residencies and stuff, there was a poet, Anna Selby, in residence here in Grasmere, and she, she swims a lot, and she writes underwater with like a space pen – she writes in the water – which I thought a really amazing idea I'd never ... she has like a waterproof pad and a space pen. I think anything that I wrote would probably just ... like it would be scribbles because I'd be too cold to make shapes that make sense ...

Jessica: I always get out and make audio, like I make voice memos to myself on my phone, or I use the notes app, and then it's not ... like there's nothing complete about that – it'll be like a list of nouns, you know, it'll be a list of adjectives, or just like three words that came into my mind while I was swimming, just so that I can have those little traces later so I can rebuild that experience – but I sometimes think that the best way to get into writing about a swim is to sit down and first try to write it from Point A to Point B. Every single moment. And then figure out how to sculpt that into something, but otherwise you'd lose the details right? I feel like I would lose every small thing, because – I don't know – there's something about that sensation, it's so fleeting, but it's so vivid, and I'm always wanting to hold it.

Nina: I tend to use my notes app as well. Like, when I'm kind of walking back home, and kind of going over the details in my head on my walk, which really helps, because walking is a good way of kind of going over things I might want to write. But I think I like ... at first I found it really challenging trying to capture the fleetingness of a swim, and also I love the challenge of not using the same words but to describe the same body of water that might look very similar from day to day, but it's actually,

it's changing really slowly, and I think it encourages me to be more flexible with language and form. So from writing prose, it will inevitably be a bit kind of poem-like, because I can't really separate the two from myself anyway, and so I like to embrace the slipperiness of it.

**Polly:** I think that's something that I really love about all of your writing, all three of you – that there is this slipperiness to the ... to the form ... this kind of shiftingness, this wateriness of the form which to me really makes sense with writing about swimming but also seems to directly come out of the experience of it as well. But I wonder whether that just happens? Does that happen organically, because you're writing about swimming, or does it ... is it partly deliberate as well, to think about the lyric in a different kind of way?

[Nina and Elizabeth-Jane both speak at once]

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Sorry. It's heightened for me, but I would say all my writing is slippery [everyone laughs] just the act of Being is slippery for me, but something about the water does heighten it I think, yeah.

**Nina:** I agree.

**Jessica:** There's a sort of call to think a lot more I think about rhythm and about the sort of movement of language when you're writing about water, I mean – obviously it should be there all the time when writing but, I think when I start to write about water, 'slippery' is really the right word that you need, it really starts to just get a bit, like, fluid. And it happens, and it becomes so much about that rhythm, and how I hear it – how the words run together – yeah, it's really – that's a huge component of it for me I think.

**Nina:** I think also being in water lets me be in my body very fully, and I think that helps me be a better writer – to think of poems or bits of prose as physical – physical things – and the extensions of the experience of being physically –

**Polly:** like *in* body ... that embodied experience and the kind of sensory experience does I think make you think differently and then make you write differently, but there is that double thing that we were talking about before of both being differently aware of your own body, but also differently aware of your body's relationship to other bodies I think, that you get in bodies of water – that you're aware of these other bodies, and water itself as a body, and there's something that thinking about that idea of home and belonging that you were talking about Nina, that the water being a bit like the moon – that's it's like something that's both very specific to where you are every time you see it, or experience it, but also something that's also everywhere, and is – is like a kind of big macro organism as well in some way.

Nina: Mm. I like it can be a shared space, like if I kind of think of swimming in the ocean and the ocean as a kind of connective force, but then lakes and ponds being so specific to the locality that they're in. Yeah. I'm still figuring out what I mean to say about home and water, but ... yeah.

**Jessica:** I think when you're getting into a lake there is that – how do I put it – it never feels for me at least like it's distinct, though, right, because there is that sensation of fresh water, and that knowledge I think of fresh water, as being part of a watershed, and being part of this community that's both on land and in the water, and that, that always really – I mean you can't *not* think about it when you're getting into a lake or river, because you're going to get mucky, right? Like there is that very visceral squelching through, which I think is so different from what you get on a beach, when you step into the sea. There's something about sand that feels ... I don't want to say less connected, but you know, you don't get that sensation of squelching in and sinking down, and

connecting with the soil as much as you are with the water. Does that make sense?

**Polly:** Yeah, that's really interesting actually – thinking about soil and mud rather than sand or stone is very different. I really love that bit at the very beginning of *Swims* Elizabeth-Jane, where this ... I don't have it in front of me and I can't quote it directly because my memory is like a very leaky colander [laughs] ... but where you talk about the relationship between the body and the water, and the different bodies of water – and again, when I read that I thought 'yes, that's exactly how it is'.

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah again, it's that sense of interrelation isn't it, and I think in the beginning part of *Swims* there's that sort of expanding of the human body, so that limbs start to become, you know, watercress or whatever else you're encountering, and so that the sense of the human body gets extended and entwined with what's around it, so yeah, certainly that sense.

**Polly:** And how does that vary between different bodies of water as well? You know, it's ... because it is very different swimming in a river to swimming in a lake to swimming in the sea, and each bit of sea, each time you go to the same bit of sea it's different as well isn't it?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah I think it is different every time, with each swim, you know, dependent on who else is there, or you know, what else is happening in that space, so the ecosystem is different each time, and so you respond to it.

**Nina:** At the moment there's lots of acorns and red and yellow leaves and it's been lovely kind of being able to more viscerally sense the autumn, the arrival of autumn, in the water than out of the water. The weather's been very strange – the temperatures have you know not been consistent – I really like that. I also really like to write about swimming pools, which some would be like 'oh that's not real swimming' but for me it's all connected, and it was the writer Leanne Shapton's book *Swimming Studies* which really got me thinking about girlhood and swimming pools, because I grew up mostly in cities, and so I learned to swim in swimming pools like most of us, and so to me that's really interesting too.

**Polly:** Swimming pools are such strange places aren't they? They're kind of a bit like airports in that kind of non-place ...

**Nina:** Yeah

**Polly:** they could be on the moon, and yeah, I'm really fascinated by how peculiar they are, and how alike and unlike each other again they are. These kind of weird sensations, like over-stimulation that you get with a swimming pool, with the echoey noises and the scent of the chemicals and things, really interesting ...

**Jessica:** That's the best smell in the world, I will still maintain – it's the most evocative smell, at a swimming pool, any swimming pool, in some sense could be the same as another, because of the smell. In fact when I go into these, like, these non-chlorinated swimming pools, which I realise are better, but when I go into them ... the smell ... I'm like, it's not there, right, so I need ... I don't know, when you go to hotel, and there's an indoor pool, that to me is like the most exciting smell of my childhood.

**Polly:** There's quite a cognitive dissonance isn't there when you go to a man-made pool and there isn't that smell, but I wonder if in the future people will still have that, as well, if people shift away from chlorinated pools more widely ...

**Jessica:** I means it's a strange thing to be nostalgic about isn't it? The smell of chemical sunscreen and chlorinated pools are like my favourite two smells.

**Polly:** But I think it's probably because they're so, they're so strong, and if they're linked to things in childhood there's almost a kind of Proustian thing about them isn't there, like when you smell chlorine in your hair even several days after you've swum in a pool it continually takes you back to that pool, doesn't it. It is a really interesting relationship. But then that does bring up that question about ecosystems, and environmental responsibility, and what's happening when we swim. And I have to admit I only became aware a few years ago about the importance of biosecurity, especially here in the Lake District where we have some lakes that are – and I struggle with this term – but some lakes which are 'pristine' and many which aren't and have 'invasive species' in them, which are all very loaded terms in their own ways, but there's been a lot of problems with people doing triathalons and spreading micro-organisms from one lake to another within the same day on all of their kit, and I've only learnt about that more recently, and I'm more aware of that now when I'm swimming, but it makes me think more of other wider environmental effects of what we're doing as well, and I don't know what, whether you're all conscious of these things when you're swimming, how much that effects your process of both writing and swimming itself as well.

Jessica: I feel like it's one of the things that's like ... how do I put it? You have to be acutely aware of it when you're going to a body of water, and what you just mentioned, about like moving micro-organisms from one to another, I also think it's a problem also of a kind of swimming right? Like, kit-intensive swimming, wetsuit-intensive? I have a real beef with wetsuits, a second, as you know, but I do think there is a writer, also that channel through which the writing and the act of swimming and sort of bringing that to the page is such an awareness generating thing. I think you know a lot of people don't give bodies of freshwater in particular any thought, and particularly the sort of risk currently facing freshwater biodiversity in the world. I mean I think it's just not on a lot of people's radar. When people speak about biodiversity loss they think it's, you know, sort of the very charismatic megafauna, and all of the most threatened species are actually freshwater species, and most people aren't aware of that. And so I think for me even calling attention to water, calling attention to these species as Elizabeth-Jane has done so lovely – so wonderfully – in the poems she read earlier, I think being able to call attention to species in the ocean and in fresh-water it's really – that's one of the gifts of taking the time to write about it, so it's always really a sort of counterbalanced thing in a way.

Elizabeth-Jane: Yeah, I think just to add, I think there is a sense of sadness sometimes in my swimming and in my writing, there's also that there's almost a kind of elegy of sort of how long actually can I swim safely in these waters. And I've seen you know, the years that I've been swimming I've seen a growth in the amount of pollution in there, and I'm more, much more wary, and there are bodies of water I used to swim in that I don't now. So you know there is a sense of sort of sadness, and a need to draw attention to the plight of these organisms we're sharing the space with, but also, you know, not to abandon that sense of pleasure and hope and everything that is fantastic, and still there, and still recoverable, so it's a counterbalance, yeah.

**Polly:** Yeah to me that sense of keeping pleasure and hope is so important because I think if you don't have that, what do we care about? You have to ... you have to have a joy and a pleasure in those things too. Do you think about that much with your swimming Nina .... or is that... ?

**Nina:** I think about it a lot in trying to write about swimming and trying to do just what you said Polly and Elizabeth-Jane about holding both at the same time, in the same moment, the pleasure and the wonderful sensation of swimming, and the strength that it gives us, and then also at the same time confronting fear of loss, which is like ... it's an incredibly difficult thing to convey, incredibly difficult thing to feel at once. So I think

writing helps me work through this, and it's inevitable to sometimes feel that sense of loss, when you go to a body of water. I think I'm a very – I'm a naturally very anxious person though – and swimming really helps me with that, and to just feel more deeply connected to the land where I am, which I think you know will help all of us kind of heal our relationship with nature in some way.

**Polly:** It's difficult isn't it, because you have to have this connection I think, that relationship with nature is so important, and that's what we've all been talking about getting through swimming isn't it? But then you ... I always have these like then guilty doubtful questions about whether I'm part of the problem if I'm there. Because I do wear a wetsuit in the winter – I can't swim in the winter without one, and increasingly I have all the kit which I used to be very derisive of, as well you know, I used to very much think the whole point of swimming is that you just go to water and get in it, but then I realised I didn't want to go to a chlorinated pool in the winter anymore. And for me a lot of that is to do with my relationship with my own body, and with disability as well, and I've got increasingly sensitive to those chemicals over the years as well so I find it harder and harder to be around them, but the same conditions that make it difficult for me to be in a chlorinated pool also make it difficult for me to put my body in cold water, so it becomes this kind of strange double bind, so I'm ... and I'm aware of how environmentally loaded that is but also how socially and politically loaded that is in different ways as well. And something we've touched on through this conversation but haven't really got into yet is thinking about the particularity of your own bodies, and how you feel about that relationship between the water and your body as gendered or racialised, or politicised in different ways, and what you think that gives to your writing as well.

**Nina:** I've been thinking a lot lately about the accessibility of bodies of water and just, this whole time being at home so much, and just being so grateful that I'm able to, you know, access somewhere where I can swim, and which is now you know ticketed, and double the price that it used to be which has been a huge issue you know, and just the strangeness of a space like that being monetized, one the one hand it's like 'how can it not be in this day and age' and on the other hand, it's just you know, so it really shouldn't be, and I think about that with swimming pools as well – how they're kind of these strange nostalgic utopian spaces, which are again, you know, ticketed ...

**Polly:** and increasingly privatised as well, increasingly expensive, so ... the public baths that I learned to swim in then were sold off by the council and have become private use and you can't learn to swim there now, and you maybe have to go to a leisure centre instead, and you have to pay to go in a different way – there are these kind of massive access issues around getting to water, as well as kind of cultural issues I think, about whether you even get to learn to swim in the first place.

**Jessica:** Yeah I think I mean I've been thinking a lot about it lately because I'm leaving Germany, where things are very freely accessible, and you can swim in pretty much any body of water you come across, and where I live at least in this, you know, this state surrounding Berlin, they're all clean enough to swim in, and pretty much all freely accessible. There are very few privatised lakes, and now that I'm moving back to the UK, and I'll be living in London ... I've been following the situation at the ponds very closely, because it's also – that was the subject of my PhD research – public access to the heath and to the ponds. It really scares me I think and it really feels like a very particular to Britain kind of energy of wanting to say 'okay, wild swimming, open water swimming, all these things are growing – let's create spaces for them, but let's create spaces where you have to book an appointment, where you have to pay for a ticket'... You have to wear a wetsuit in a lot of cases; you're forced to wear kit. It caters to a very specific kind of market and commercialisation, and you know really I think it glosses over this issue of access, and of what a swimmer might be turning up to do, and a swimmer's skill level, and all of these little things that just get missed by that very

blanket approach to it, which ... I don't know maybe they're concerned about insurance or whatever it is, but you know I've spent the past six years getting on my bike, and basically getting into any body of water I see, and that is completely legal here, that's allowed and that's been a great gift and a great freedom, and I'm pretty devastated to be leaving it if I'm honest.

**Polly:** Well, it's kind of a strange thing where something so normal and simple as going for a swim becomes a subversive political act, purely because of where you're swimming,

**Jessica:** yeah, and something that you have to put in the schedule. You know the idea that it's like ... I need to book my swim and have this appointment and get on an online booking system, and battle through the other people to get, you know, my appointment to swim ...

**Polly:** and knowing you could do it that day as well, because for me there's a lot of uncertainty about whether ... whether I would be able to swim on a particular ... I don't know until I wake up in the morning, or even maybe halfway through the day whether that would be possible for me. It's like ... no, it's gone.

In *Swims* Elizabeth-Jane, you kind of deal with some of that as you go through as well, with kind of access, and who gets to go to places, and what they mean as well I guess. Do you think about that a lot in terms of those places in Devon as well?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah, I think you know it's a very real issue, and I think in *Swims*, there's the Lake District obviously, your neck of the woods, Polly, but there were quite a few places there that were inaccessible when I was looking to swim there, and so it features Grasmere, which of course we can swim in, but there were plenty that fishing rights had the monopoly on, which is a real factor in a lot of rivers as well, so yeah, you do have to you know, put it into your planning, and you know, as we're saying, it was something that we want to be a quite spontaneous perhaps act really is less and less so. For me also just you know checking the water pollution level on the day, and you know all those sorts of things are added into my swimming planning and diary, which wouldn't have been there before.

**Polly:** It's increasingly complicated in different ways. I'm very aware of the fact that we are running up to our time, so I thought maybe we could end on ... I don't know if you want to share another little bit of writing before we finish, or if you just want to tell us about a favourite swim of yours?

**Nina:** I've got a poem that's about a favourite swim ...

**Polly:** Excellent!

**Nina:** I can read it first if you like. It's actually a swim that I also just, that featured in 'Small Bodies of Water', and I read a bit about it, when a huge shag was underwater with me, which was terrifying at first, and then like quite amazing, because it wasn't like a whale or a shark or something. This is about Wellington Harbour, which is where I've – probably the sea where I've swum the most.

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 formed  
a newly formed freckle on the surface of  
us and the islands crumbling apart softly  
over sea caves somewhere opening  
my mouth into the waves to say *you are*  
*you are you are*

**Polly:** So beautiful, thank you!

**Nina:** hanks.

**Jessica:** I have a little excerpt I can read, a tiny excerpt from a piece that I'm working on which is about the Chinese sea goddess Matsu.

In the spring of 960AD on the island of Meizhou, off the Chinese coast of Fujian, a girl is born. An ordinary girl, perhaps. As a baby she does not cry. They name her Lin Moniang. Moniang meaning silent girl. This much is rarely debated. The legends of the girl Moniang diverge from here. She's either born to a family of fisherman, or to a prominent local official. She is either a devout father follower of Guanyin the Buddhist guardian goddess of mercy, or is trained from a young age in Taoist teachings. Or perhaps, and this is the story I prefer, she spends her childhood in the sea, swimming. In every story Lin Moniang is a swimmer. A young girl swimmer, venerated as a god.

**Polly:** I love that.

**Jessica:** We're doing an event in October at the Barbican Centre about goddesses and that will be for that.

**Polly:** I love the idea of a girl who's a goddess because she's in the water, wonderful. Elizabeth-Jane?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah, I've got another short poem from *Of Sea*. This is 'Mud Shrimp':

she swam  
only at night  
on the spring tides

in the silk light of water  
slipping her over

the mud flats

when they studied why she did it  
drifted far beyond her limits  
though it made her vulnerable  
to prey

several theories came  
but none swam  
at night in a spring tide  
in the silk light unsure  
of itself  
becoming only what is left  
after breaking

**Polly:** So wonderful. Thank you so much. Just to finish, do you have a favourite swim, that you want to share obviously ... Nina, yours has been in a poem ... do you want to tell us a bit more about that?

**Nina:** Only that it's that stretch of beach, which is kind of the beach that is really in central Wellington, so ... I love Wellington because the sea is there, and then the hills are right behind it. It's just a beautiful spot, and I always get ice-cream and sit on the beach, yeah.

**Polly:** That sounds amazing, right now, I wish we could do that.

**Nina:** It's usually very cold or windy but it doesn't matter it's lovely.

**Polly:** It feels cruel to try, and I don't know why I've even asked this because I have a complete inability to choose favourite of anything, and then to ask you to do it ... and obviously Jessica you know *Turning* is about ... I had no idea before I read it that Berlin was surrounded by lakes and there were so many of them as well ... it's like picking your favourite child.

**Jessica:** Yeah it's just ... people are always like 'what's your favourite lake' or 'tell me your five favourite lakes' and I feel like every time I give that list it's different. It's so mood dependent, on every swim. I mean, I could say my last swim was the best swim in a way. It was really good, the one I had last week, I had a two swim day. But I think you know the swim that I think about a lot that really was just a standout swim for me was that one I read about at the beginning of my reading, in Taiwan, in the Nenggao waterfall. And that is, you know, I think that's just the sort of incredible location that really does it, because I had hiked up that mountain, and I was exhausted, and my legs

were aching, and it was at 3000 metres, so the water was super icy, but in Taiwan you don't really get cold water, and being a cold water swimming I was desperate for some cold, so to be able to get in a waterfall that high up, and just feel that sort of cut, and that pain and the bliss that I think comes with it, it's really magical.

**Polly:** It sounds really magical, and hearing the extract, it's yeah, you're there in the magic as well I think. Elizabeth-Jane, what about you?

**Elizabeth-Jane:** Yeah, I mean, it is a cruel question. And I mean, I have a favourite river, which is the Dart, in Devon, and I write a lot about the Dart swims, but hearing Jessica speak about that one it's making me think about a Welsh swim in Cadair Idris, which again, so you have the hike up, and then you reach that sort of cool plateau of the mountain water, and that was a real standout one for me, because it's like you have this huge bath to yourself, when you swim out in to the middle of the lake and then you look down, and it's like the water is just falling off the ends of the earth, you know, into the mountain valley, it's a really sort of a dramatic scene, and really cool and you know, as you expect from that kind of mountain location. It's a lovely one.

**Polly:** We all want to be there now. I obviously can't pick a favourite, but an amazing experience I did have swimming around this time last year actually was in the Dart, as Still Pool, where I swam with a kingfisher for the first time, and that was really magical. That was really beautiful, because I was crazy about kingfishers as a child and to swim with one alongside, it was really lovely.

**Jessica:** Every swimmer remembers their first kingfisher swim

**Polly:** Yeah

**Jessica:** It's a magic thing.

**Polly:** Because they're just so bright aren't they? On that trip I saw a kingfisher in a different river in Devon as well, so that whole trip to me is like a kingfisher trip. It's you know ... you think 'Oh will I notice if I see the kingfisher' and then you see one, and you're like, well obviously!

**Nina:** This Summer I saw my first kingfisher

**Polly:** amazing

**Jessica:** I've only ever had one once, while swimming, and it was actually in Taiwan, and never in Britain, which I find bizarre.

**Polly:** So I know there are kingfishers around here as well, but I never see them, I think because more often I'm in lakes rather than rivers, so it's a different ... something massive splashed up in the lake when I was swimming the other day, and I don't know what it is, but now I'm terrified of it. I've been joking for years about a massive pike that lives in the bottom. I think it actually was Grasnessie, some kind of awful, ancient pike... and you get a lot of water birds, but not kingfishers on the lake, sadly. But on that happy note, maybe we ought to close this up, and I'll just say thank you to all of you – this has been amazing – and to the audience do check out their books, available from all good stores of course, and do look out for these forthcoming books next year as well. It looks like 2021 is going to be a good year for swim books as well. Thank you all so much.