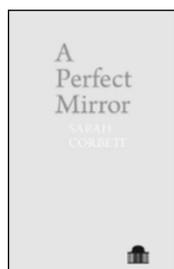


## BREAKING NEW GROUND

Sarah Corbett



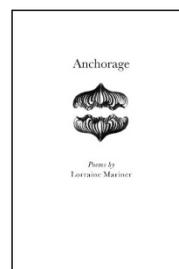
Rebecca Goss



Angela Leighton



Lorraine Mariner



Kay Syrad



We asked a number of poets for their views on ambition / widening the scope / moving forward in their work, inviting their own take on the topic, whether on their own practice or across the board. [eds]

### Sarah Corbett: The Hokusai Wave: Why I Re-invent My Practice

The Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai died in his tenth decade still reaching for perfection; he remained an acolyte all his artistic life, searching, learning. This is how I see my own creative practice (I'm currently 'learning' to be a commercial novelist). From my fourth collection onwards, *And She Was* (Pavilion, 2015), which experimented with the verse-novel form, played with narrative linearity and page layout, I've discovered creative play, exploration and experiment, and the joy in creative practice this brings. I work in film, performance, short and long form fiction, as well as traditional poetic forms.

My recent collection, *A Perfect Mirror* (Pavilion, 2018), employs sonnet and sestina forms alongside prose poems, free verse and an exploded 'found sequence' that draws on Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*. I intend to continue to push my creative practice, with plans for a hybrid memoir/prose poem narrative, a dance adaptation of *And She Was*, and a poetic response to the paintings of Bridget Riley. I'm now working on a new book of poetry, three long sequences which begin with the fall of the Berlin Wall, considers an artist's relationship with a tree during the pandemic, and a series of fragmented 'missives' from the future.

A major influence for me is Anne Carson, whose *Autobiography of Red* I read as a young poet, thinking, *one day I want to do this*. Carson never rests, but pushes at every possible boundary of poetic expression and creative presentation. She follows her own path with less, or little, regard for fashion or the common reader. Her work is difficult and demands serious engagement. I don't think I'm necessarily this kind of poet, but I do put the practice first and see my journey as an artist/poet as something of a private one. Perhaps this is why my work is less well known, being less easy to

categorise, or, I hope, tame. However, there's a deep power in not really giving a shit what people think – or make – of you.

There's a danger in contemporary poetry of new poets following the crowd. Those of us who became poets before the internet age were lucky. We had the chance to find our voices without the clamour we are all now surrounded with. I come back to Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island', and the invective to 'keep at a tangent.':

When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim  
out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency

(Heaney, *Station Island*, Faber & Faber, 1984)

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### Rebecca Goss:

I am not a nature poet. If I had to pick a pigeonhole it might be *narrative poet* instead, or *confessional poet*, happy to live with the equivocal scope that comes with those labels. One certain thing is that I am keener on interior spaces rather than exterior ones. My poems are often set in bedrooms, kitchens, hospital wards and waiting rooms. I don't explore the outdoors much. But then I returned to live in Suffolk in my late thirties, and the ways I found myself inspired began to alter. I grew up in the county, fled its border at 18, going as far North as any UCAS offer could take me. I stayed away for twenty years. Coming back has seen me write about my house, my daughter, my marriage, subjects that appear in all my books, but I found myself wanting to write about the countryside I live in, its rivers, fields, and trees. Except I don't write about rivers, fields, and trees. I write about motherhood and loss and children. I did not know how to access this pastoral richness I was seeing every day. Then I realised when I was in a woodland, my child was in there too. Her scurry between tall and coppiced limbs, her weave in and out of my sight. She was changing, growing alongside nature itself, and as the seasons demand change, so would the coming years require me to let her go. So maybe it was inevitable that my next collection would not stray far from my other books, and nature become the space for me to depict the shifting relationship with my young daughter. These new poems let her live amongst the rooks and wheat and oaks. They let me watch her, nascent on the loam.

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### Angela Leighton:

A new volume, like a new notebook, always seems a new beginning. Remember that feel of a child's new jotter? and the first untouched, paddy page, the thrill and the terror—terror of instantly spoiling its promise with a smudge or misspelling?

Starting a new collection is similar. There's the thrill of an open field, and the terror of its blank. I still write poetry in a spiral-bound notebook with a favourite pen, as if I need a magic wand. Perhaps such rituals are for keeping order and staying sane, in the disorderly, maddening activity of shaping a new poem. Between nothing at the start and the finished object which might speak, there's the long, wasteful, concentrated work of writing and revising which lies between.

So yes, I often start with plans for newness: new forms, new voices, but I wonder how many of them survive the poem's own headstrong determination to become itself? Every poem is a venture into the unknown, but its surprises often come, not from worked-out plans but from that nearly passive listening to each line as it 'forms' (like a verb, not a noun). If I have some kind of developing voice, it comes from an obsessive attention to the tune and rhythm of words before meanings. If a poem works, it usually takes *me* by surprise. Other poets can help, and I read widely, sometimes impatiently; but those I return to, like Alice Oswald and A. E. Stallings, write poems which sing before they tell me anything. It's rhythm, I think, whether in free or strict form, that delivers a poem to

its reader, and makes it more than a message, a confession or self-advertising experiment. For me, the most ‘experimental’ and constantly ‘new’ poet is not Pound or Olson, but that marvellous, ever-inventive Victorian: G. M. Hopkins.

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### **Lorraine Mariner:**

I’m currently working on my third full collection. In 2020 I published a pamphlet *Anchorage* and this was the most strongly-themed collection I’ve published so far, exploring my Greek and Irish family history. This was very different to my first publication in 2005 as a thirty-year-old, a pamphlet *Bye For Now*, which was a collection of the best poems I’d written up to that point.

When I first started writing poems, I remember reading a poem, loving it, and thinking, “I want to write a poem like this”, and then attempting it; trying to capture the feeling it evoked, interrogate an idea in a similar way or replicate the form. This does still happen and propel me on. I’ve recently written a poem in a form called an Ogden after reading Troy Cabida’s *Not Dying for London*. So, reading as much poetry as possible is as important to me as ever.

At the moment I’m looking at how my *Anchorage* poems fit with the other poems I’ve written since my last full collection. I really enjoyed the tight focus of *Anchorage* when I was selecting the poems – family, the sea, cinema, London. I’ve been inspired by collections I’ve read in recent years, like Rachel Long’s *My Darling from the Lions*, where the book is arranged in themed sections, so I’m trying that out. I’m looking at the poems as three separate pamphlets, and when I feel that the poems in each section/pamphlet are working together and equally strong the book will be ready.

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### **Kay Syrad:**

Rejecting the term ‘writer’s block’, Katherine May uses the term ‘wintering’ to describe those fallow periods in our writing lives when we ‘fall through the cracks, feeling cut off, frozen, rejected or hidden from view’<sup>1</sup> I think I must be wintering at the moment – but why now? After I completed my collection of eco-poetry, *what is near*, early in 2021, I worked on a novel for nearly a year, then abandoned it. More recently I have had glimpses of what could be the beginning of a new collection of poems, yet I remain suspended in silence, with only a faint, wordless sensation just below the surface.

I think the problem is this: for about five years, I have put myself forward as an eco-poet, I run eco-poetry courses and workshops and have co-edited several anthologies of eco-poetry. As the eco-crisis deepens even more dramatically (this week a third of Pakistan’s land mass has been flooded, affecting 33 million people and their livestock), and many more poets are creating brilliant work in this genre (the Laurel Prize shortlist has just been announced as I write) as well as some terrible, fatally didactic poetry, I’m feeling less, rather than more, certain of my direction. Who can speak of this catastrophe, which affects the global south so much more than us in the UK? What are we to make of our own Government’s disavowal of the climate emergency we face? How can I reconcile the personal source of my poetry and these political imperatives? Naomi Shihab Nye says that ‘poetry is everything the headline news is not [...it] deepens our confidence in a meaningful world.’<sup>2</sup> Perhaps that is all I need to go forward – a greater confidence that the world is indeed meaningful; all I need is to be quieter, to listen more intently to that wordless sensation.

1. Katherine May, *Wintering*, Penguin Rider (2020, p.9)
2. Nye, quoted by Jacqueline Saphra in ‘Keep Ithaka always in your mind’ in Ian Humphreys (ed), *Why I write poetry*, Nine Arches 2021, p.138