

Near and far

Creative Writing

Anthology 2021 —

Youth Collective Online

Camden Art Centre
Arkwright Road
London NW3

EDITORIAL NOTE

Gemma Wright
Head of Learning,
Camden Art Centre

This anthology of creative writing presents the work and voices of Camden Art Centre's Youth Collective Online community; a group of artists, writers and creatives aged 15-25 that have connected with Camden Art Centre, and each other, from their homes across the UK and Internationally during the past year.

At a time when many have felt unheard and unseen, unconnected and uncertain, we wanted to provide a platform to hear what our community had to say. The opportunity invited submissions of new, short-form, creative writing pieces with a simple prompt: Do you have something you would like to say? We want to hear it.

Here 11 artists share texts that give voice to their thoughts, ideas and emotions, written across different contexts and places, from London to Leeds to Lagos.

As the submissions for the opportunity came in, the recurring phrase in the accompanying emails was this, 'Thank you for the opportunity to be heard.'

Our reply, 'Thank you for the opportunity to listen.'

Youth Collective Online is a space for young people aged 15 – 25 to meet regularly and encounter the arts in an open and welcoming environment, to critically engage, feel empowered and stay connected. Our community of Youth Collective artists have access to a programme of free, online, artist-led workshops and resources, a dedicated online social space for discussion and the opportunity to learn new skills and engage in matters surrounding contemporary art.

As a charity rooted in our North West London community, Camden Art Centre fosters a sense of belonging in our spaces. Working closely with local schools, community groups and specialist partners we nurture the next generation of artists, from early years to adulthood, enabling everyone to get up close to art, to meet artists and to make work themselves. Our targeted programmes and sector leadership increase our impact, bringing the arts to those most in need.

camdenartcentre.org

INTRODUCTION

Edward Ball
Curator and Writer

Often, we write from what is at hand. And what could be closer to us – at times, further – than the self? This anthology considers proximity as an emotive force: the distances, great and small, between our internal worlds and embodied reality. Each writer reaches out a hand, in search of something – an inner truth, an obscured detail, an unfamiliar sensation, a lapsed moment.

This volume is shaped into three chapters, each collected around an approach, a spirit, as much as a theme. Incantation, our first chapter, brims with magical thinking, poetic refrains, and laments to an unequal

world. Evocation is alive with technicolour detail, conjuring rich realms of experience and perception. Intuition, the final chapter, returns us to a more interior landscape, unfolding the complexity of selfhood.

I am struck by the open heartedness of each contribution, and I thank each writer for placing themselves so openly and fully into the pages that follow. One writer per section receives a commendation, as chosen by the Camden Art Centre Learning Team and myself. These are marked in the contents with an underline. We approached selection with no set criteria in mind, instead we were guided by instinct.

The commended writers, if there is a quality that unites them, each give voice to a powerful and authentic truth of experience, not easily forgotten.

Most importantly, I congratulate all of our writers. We celebrate each of you. To our readers, I only hope you enjoy this volume as much as we relished putting it together.

Chapter 1 : Incantation

Kemi Awoyemi 06
RELIGION AND
TRANSCENDENCE:
WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Oliver Getley 07
THE MISSING CHIP

Kerrica Kendall 08
ONE

Lucie MacGregor 09
LAND-ING

Madina Masimova 10
CREATION

Chapter 2 : Evocation

Freddie Churchill 12
JUBILANT

Lucie MacGregor 13
A CIRCUMFERENCE OF METAL

Nina Newbold 14
BATH TIME

Nina Newbold 15
ONE MOMENT

Toby Upson 16
1 BLUEBERRY LEAF

Chapter 3 : Intuition

Rosalita Baldassin 18
WHAT IS THIS FEELING?

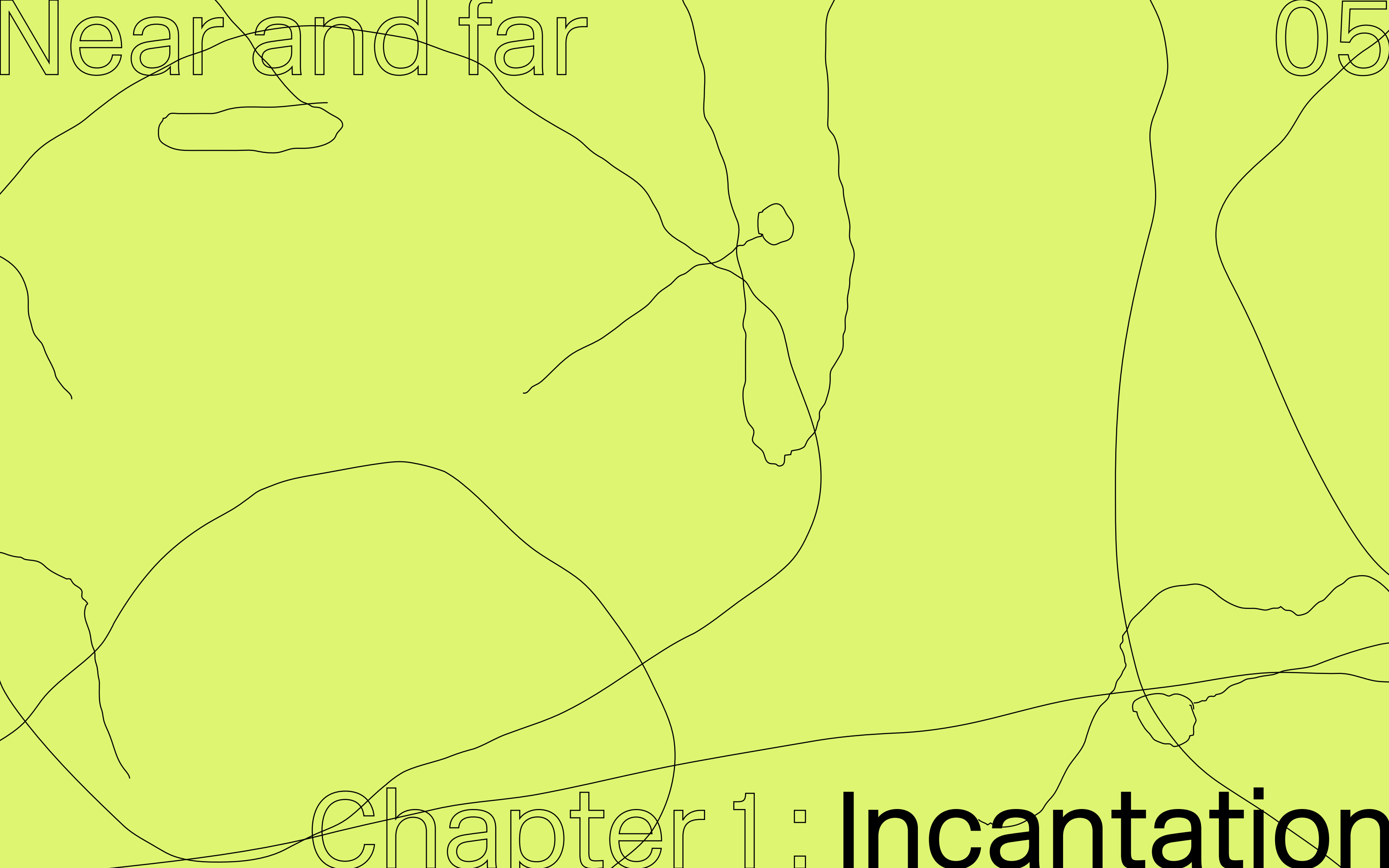
Inés Cardó 19
CONFESSIONS

Tabby Gammer 20
NOTHING TO DO

Kerrica Kendall 21
WHAT DO I HOLD?

Near and far

05



Chapter 1: Incantation

Kemi Awoyemi

RELIGION AND TRANSCENDENCE:
WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Oluwa wa pelu wa!

We are in a state of utmost chaos
and nothing makes sense.
For a moment, one good thing
comes and the
next minute another disaster happens.
Maybe it's a colour thing or a collective
problem?

Oluwa wa pelu wa!

Over here we say there are three
major disadvantages in life:
First is being dark skinned,
Second is having breasts,
Third is being in this family.
Oluwa wa pelu wa?

I understand this better now because
Our life choices over here and
representation
to the world has made us unworthy
of exhibition,

To the point that we have to go the
extra mile to prove our originality.
We may not directly feel racism
being within,
But you see tribalism and religious
fanatism,
It's the demon within.
Oluwa wa pelu wa!

The average siblings definition
of achievement
Is being an indigene across borders.
We have a place we call home;
But only from a foreign land.
Sipping hot cocoa in the snow,
As the words, "Oluwa ese o!" roll off
the tongue
In rhythm with every inch of the body.

I don't see how we say we are a family
naturally blessed by God
yet we cheat and rubbish each other
to the best of our abilities.

It's painful that we have to work many
times as hard to prove our worth;
Sadly, some people in their lifetime
never get to reap
The benefits of their hard work.
I refuse to be one.

Imagine belonging to a home that
frustrates your every move,
You have the talent and the drive,
But the opportunities aren't there.
The ones which come require a
financial push,
That simply leaves no room for
those without,
Just God's Grace!
Let it fall let it come...
Oluwa wa pelu wa!
(God is with us!)

Oliver Getley

THE MISSING CHIP

They wrestled with the weight of the thick steel sign that read 'Gallery Closed', catching it on the edge of the doorway. A large chip fell to the floor. One side rough and the other rougher still. The chip shaped hole left in the wall revealed much of the same. But in it we could see clearly that these walls were not quite the walls we knew. They had been growing. Growing out into the gallery. A powdery white orange peel filling the space between the walls. Layers of paint built up over time; exhibition to exhibition, install by install. They weren't just walls anymore. The next day the hole

had been filled and painted, the chip binned and all evidence of the walls' encroachment lost with it.

Over the years the walls continued to grow as they had, silently. Bit by bit they became more and more and the space between the walls less and less. As they grew so slightly they swelled. Rooms and corridors became narrow but no-one could recall them any different. With the walls swollen and the doorways all but sealed, the artworks became trapped inside. The exhibition was cancelled. And the one after that.

ONE

Kerrica Kendall



A thousand suns on my skin
Nestled like gems
Look closer,
a thousand more
what secrets do you hold?
Heat my soul
My suns my stars

(magma churning beneath)
then shift and swim inside
Pour out
from my eyes my folds my pores
slow to stone my tomb
Although I, I?
I am weighed down, inside

inside
There is a home for the stars, the suns
Midnight and day in one
Galaxies and more for none
a home, a home
Inside, inside...

Lucie MacGregor

Am I the only one that's worried that we are going to run out of shapes? I just mistook a miscellaneous train track spool of cable for a vinyl record. A twig flies into it from a gust of wind and a casual Stevie Nicks shrill begins to play, stirring in a husk of engine smoke.

Does no one panic knowing we've used up all the shades and names of all the colours, each categorised in absolute with no room to budge? What if we have no more colours to find? How do we invent new things when there are no colours left to originally muster up? Is a duck egg

actually that variant of blue or do we just believe it because its stagnant in typed text?

What about numbers? Are they really infinite? Can they actually go on and on and even when they do it's of the same nine digits so is that even true?

And how about words? Are they really enough? Because I've had feelings stuck inside my body, pulsating around and I'm still searching to explain them by a word. Perhaps by a colour, I'm unsure of the number, but maybe I could draw that very feeling into some sort of shape.



LAND-ING

Near and far

10

CREATION

Madina
Masimova

If I were a colour,
I would be one everyday
I would explore all shades
I would live in a wonder
If I can find myself there.
I would experience their character
I would investigate their soul.
If I were a colour,
I would not be one colour
I would find beautiful meeting of the tones
As I look for a soulmate.

Chapter 1: Incantation

Near and far

11



Chapter 2 : Evocation

JUBILANT

Freddie Churchill

Jubilant is an old woman,
well into her 80's.
Her white hair falling out in patches
and teeth like a broken piano.

She wasn't the dame she was in
her youth oooh no.

She doesn't move from her wheelchair,
she sits there patiently, listening to the
soft crash of waves.
Twilight sets across the ocean
illuminating Jubilant in brilliant orange.
The deep creases on her face seem
to melt away, her hair now a shock of
ginger in the sun.

The metal chair gleams as the water
washes around its black rubber wheels.
An old ska beat comes to her and she
begins to tap away with her two fingers
on the joystick.

She softly hums the song - Lion Man
of Jamaica.

Her clouded eyes, not reacting to
the light, close, and her face fills
with memories of a world ago.

She smiles as the last drop of sun
crosses the horizon.

A CIRCUMFERENCE OF METAL

Lucie MacGregor

A circumference of metal,
its internal core spans metallic
refraction into radiance,
a caverned seat for a tiny insect
harboured in a honeycombed curve.

From birds-eye view, I lose it on my desk.

Sinking into the blurred surface with
other circle shapes, I find it again
between a roll of tape and a keyring.
It fits my wrist still,
even though the wrists body is many
years older than when she first
received the gift.

The bangle punctuated by clouds
reminds her to breathe.

Outlined by a golden border and
rivetted by arrowheads,
its history is shorter than those you'd
find at an archaeological dig
(well not for a few years or so anyway
I'd hope).

I hold it up to the window and look
through it at the masses of water
vapour outside
that now sit inside the bangle's eye.
It's diameter a frame to clasp the far
away into view.

Stagnantly sat,
re-enacted on my arm,
the clouds here on my wrist are
heavier than the ones resting above it.

Smaller in stature but it feels
lighter in weight as a memory.

With its magnetic clasp shut,
it binds my body to childhood
and to friendship.
It's chilled touch tinkers against
the beginning of my hand,
ebbing like a tide,
encompassing me in a time from
before from a holiday I never took.

Was it from Italy or did it come
from Spain?

BATH TIME

Nina Newbold

Lunging back into the bathroom,
I reach the tap just as the water
threatens the edge of the tub. As I
wipe the mirror, sweaty and clouded
with condensation, I notice how long
my hair is getting; a few more months
and it will tickle my ribcage. I try to
recall the last time I had it cut but my
head is all steam and sheabutter.
I'm already on my way.

With a vice-tight grip, I begin the
circus act of lowering myself into in
the too-hot water. One toe down and
I stiffen with shock but don't dare
recede. I take the plunge and the rest
of my body steadily follows. It hurts.

Burns burns burns, until it doesn't.
Suddenly soothing, I let myself
collapse into the bubble embrace
and, submerged from the chin down,
I arrive cosy and safe.

I've felt heavier lately, it's harder
to breathe. Thoughts are muddled,
sleep is interrupted, mornings are
unwelcome. But here, I am weightless.
Pleasantly lost in a lemon scented
sea. I make a home beneath the thick
foam that fizzes gently in my ear until
it starts to dissipate. I couldn't tell you
how much time passes. I sense my
skin wrinkling, feel the water growing
tepid and notice the shades of night

deepen through the window.

I think about running a bath so hot
that I evaporate. Is that possible?
Maybe I could melt instead. I imagine
coalescing with the glittery remains
of a bath bomb, whirling round and
round until that silver mouth slurped
me down.

It's time to leave. I rise out of the water
fast and all at once, leaving the day
rippling behind. Emerging cleansed
and new, I am citrus fresh. Bang and
the dirt is gone.

Nina Newbold

You feel a familiar hand fumbling along your arm and welcome its grip, knotting together. Guided through the crowd, you move seamlessly. You know where it's taking you.

As you squat-hover, you rest your head against the solid iron door and centre in on that welcome shot of coolness. Next to you, she is chattering away. Unconsciously swaying as though the music was coming from within this whole time, you pull up your knickers and yank down your skirt. Time to swap places, it's her turn to piss.

From another cubicle you hear the slur of someone's innermost feelings, pouring out. They are met only with warm words of affirmation and encouragement in return.

You are, of course, in the girls' toilets. You've lost count of how many drinks you've had, but only recently. Your head floats as if held up by hot air. Your heart does backflips and laughter spills, uncontainable.

Looking in the mirror: you feel good. Better than the last time you were here, maybe an hour ago. You smack your lips together to smudge the freshly applied colour and taste a hint of salty perspiration.

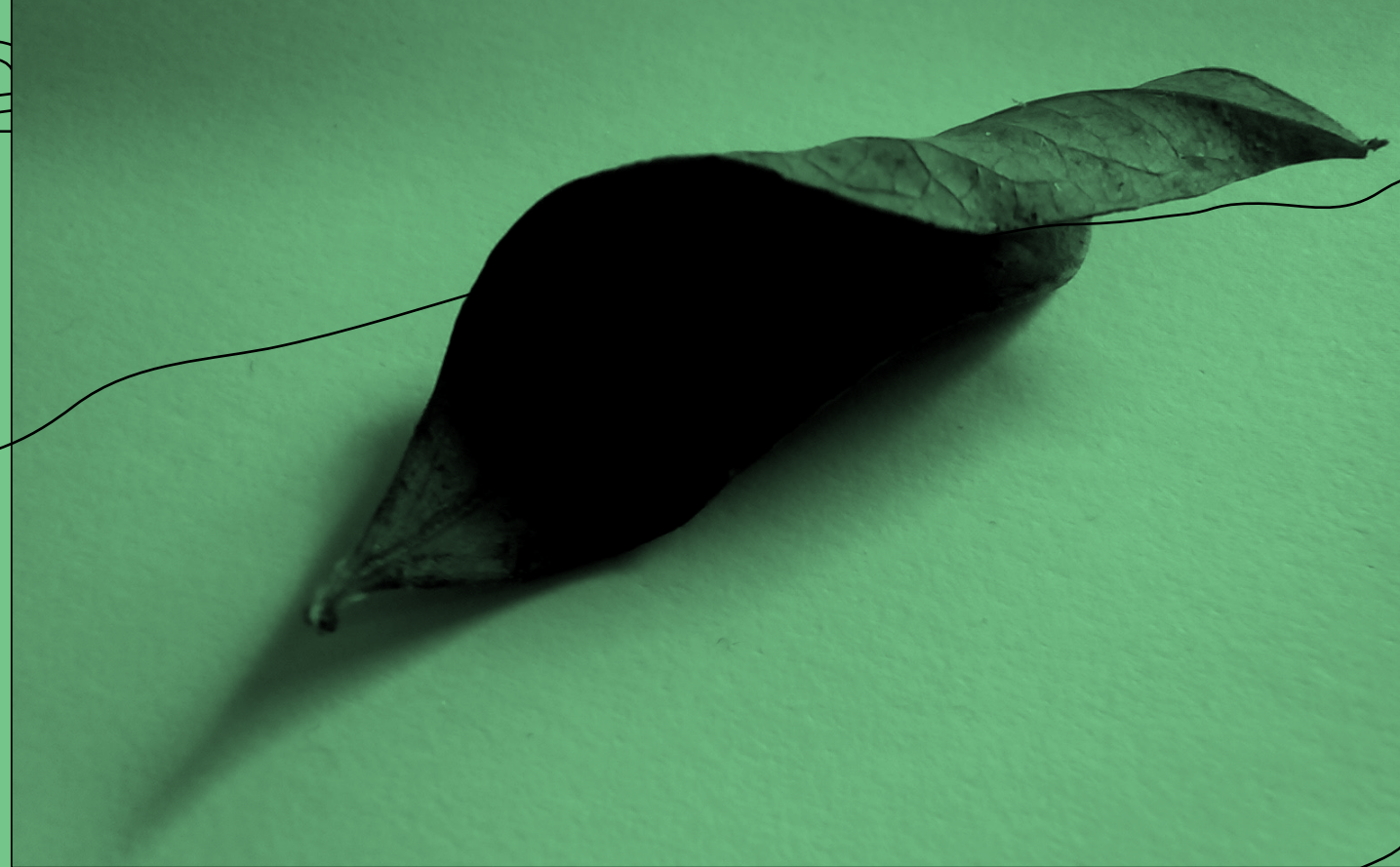
In the reflection she's there, arms around the waist of a freshly made friend and you notice her eyes, newly alive, darting around. They are deep brown planets orbiting a blue glitter galaxy. It's your favourite place to freefall.

Gently, with the secrets of the universe in her fingertips, she strokes your hair. "Tonight is so beautiful," she breathes, and makes it so. You cling to this feeling as the booming bass vibrates through you, from your spine going up, up, up. Sweat and skin and the sweetness of a thousand hypnotised strangers welcomes you back. You close your eyes and the two of you begin to move. Tonight is so beautiful.

ONE MOMENT

1 BLUEBERRY LEAF

Toby Upson



There is a blueberry leaf in my punnet. An added extra
in my 2, 4, 1.

One little leaf. Not pearlescent but luminous in a rather
more earthly way. It's from a more homely part of the ocean.
Regal sludge green, its surface, like a pond on a winter's
morning - not a bright one in February, think grey January.
Refracted in undulating waves, purple shimmers mar the
stillness that caresses the twist of my little blueberry leaf.
Not pearlescent but a wash of dazzling colour.

There is a blueberry leaf in my punnet. An added extra
in my 2, 4, 1.

One little leaf. I placed it on a post-it pedestal as I prepped
my porridge. And again, the next day.
From here it watched: watched zany blue bubbles whirling
around, and again, in my oaty pool(s). Dibbles of sourness,
pops, perforating the earthly wholeness of home on a cold
winter's morning. Speckles of sweat satisfaction.
As I perch, I wonder: what to do with my one little
blueberry leaf.

Near and far

17

Chapter 3: Intuition

WHAT IS THIS FEELING?

Rosalita Baldassin

As I walk through the woods, the snow carpet makes my steps quiet and soft. How did I get here? Alone and surrounded by nothing but silence.

I am far from the concrete jungle and the madding crowd that inhabits it. Yet there are voices rambling inside my head, ready to slip out of my lips. Would anyone hear me if I screamed?

I feel the urge to break the silence, to make the snow fall off the trees. I want to shout at the top of my lungs, let my voice out and see where it goes.

I scream.

I am not alone anymore. The echo multiplies my voice and turns it into a choir. The crowd inside of me has freed themselves from my lungs and paraded through the squeaky branches.

All of a sudden, silence is protagonist again. I take a deep breath and exhale in a cloud of steam.

My breath is trapped by the cold. Fused with the atmosphere and suspended in the air.

I start running and I shout again. I stumble, fall, laugh loudly and resign to the snow. I feel everything the ground and the woods have to offer. I am secure, sustained by the Earth. The Earth opens and swallows me. I let it be. I sense warmth and peace. Just as I walked into the woods, I re-emerge unnoticed and quiet.

My scream, breath, and body are still there. Flying around trees, caressing their barks. My body is safe and protected, cuddled by Nature.

I have left it all behind. I will fill my now empty throat with new voice, take new air in through my nose. I will mould a new body to replace the old one.

What is this feeling? Is it anger? Melancholy? Joy? Or is it liberation?

CONFESSIONS

Inés Cardó

When I was a child I lived on the 12th of a 19-floor building surrounded by other tall buildings. At night I liked to spy on my neighbours through the window because the darkness of the night provides the perfect contrast for the domestic bulb-lit households and makes them look like a television set. And there were women cooking and laying the table and also families and Christmas trees. There is a saying in Spanish that goes 'Mi casa es tu casa' which translates to 'My house is your house'. With time I have grown to think empathy is more like a collectively constructed lie and we

cannot truly feel things as they are felt by those who feel them just by looking at them or hearing them or occupying the same space. And I could never own your house and you could never inhabit my body.

Now I am 21 and I live on a 3rd floor but I am still spying on my neighbours. And one of them owns led lights that switch colours every now and then and I have always thought I would like to be invited to their house. Anyways I have recently started to close my own blinds.

She stood in the kitchen shaving off mouthfuls of mango with her bottom teeth. She used to have a fear of foods not traditionally grown in Britain so eating the foamy chunks felt strange and exotic. It was in moments like these, with no direction, that she contemplated her freedom. She could go out into the street and kiss the first man she saw; run away; tear up her entire body of work. It kept her going; we have more options than we think.

She planned to be *away* for at least seven years after graduating, a number she'd plucked mostly from thin air but partly from the duration of the time jump in Riverdale. She'd gone on enough about the environment to risk being classed a hypocrite next time she flew, but oh well. Apparently, you need one of three things for a life of wandering – a religious, artistic, or psychic temperament. She had two so assumed she was destined to travel. Neat little base in Reading with a flatmate – someone to welcome her home at Christmas.

Her main aim was to avoid that feeling. It had been rife recently, she was sure, in others too. They'd visited her cousin in Newcastle at the start of September and she could barely manage a smile so much did she want not to exist. It wasn't a suicidal feeling, more that her imagination had run flat from lack of use and now every time she tried to start the ignition to ponder a world beyond Tyneside and first homes, she couldn't. The cognitive dissonance between knowing you can't live without the possibility of mental escape and knowing that your body will carry on living regardless is unbearable. As she stood looking out the kitchen window, the feeling came back. There was nothing to do but withstand it.

WHAT DO I HOLD?

Kerrica Kendall

Picture this,
a vase can hold two flowers
a beach can hold three shells
my bowl can carry four fruits
and on my nose, I smell
some lime,
some brine,
I know the sea,
all the friends together under a shiny shell,
the sand, the rocks, the swimmers,
the clams, the stars, the coral,
the slugs, the sun
and light bursting through the waves,
dancing in the waves...

Further a forest,
canopies and ants and bats and rats
and snakes and eagles and jasmine
and caves and rivers and trumpets
and song and flight and monkeys
and deer...

Closer,
wrapped around me my blanket's
threads gardens of
pink!
wrapped over and under streams of
green!
tunnelled over and under currents of
blue!
wrapped over and under threads of
white, of gold, of purple, of black,
of silver, of yellow, of red, of grey,
of orange, and dust.

Inside,
I am light, I am bright, I cry, I smile, I
burn, I'm still, I'm fiery, I'm wrong, I'm
right, I learn, I'm slow, I'm thunder, I
shout, I listen, I'm still, I bruise, I heal, I
laugh and laugh, I dream, I fear, I worry,
I walk, I run, I stay, I draw, I write, I play,
I carry, I weigh, I share, I keep, I feel, I
love, I listen, I sparkle, I listen, I dance,
I listen, I cry, I listen, I spill, I listen, I
stutter and sing and sleep, I listen, I'm
British, I'm Pinoy, I am, I am, I be, I be,
I be, I see, I see, I see, I see the sea,
the forest, the meadow, the bowl, my
blanket, my hands, my heart, I am what
I hold and all of what of that of more and
more of which I am and I hold.

Near and far

22

Camden Art Centre
Arkwright Road
London NW3

CONTRIBUTORS

Kemi Awoyemi, Lagos, Nigeria
Rosalita Baldassin, Kingston, UK
Inés Cardó, London, UK
Freddie Churchill, Wycombe, UK
Tabby Gammer, Oxfordshire, UK
Oliver Getley, Leeds, UK
Kerrica Kendall, London UK
Lucie MacGregor, London, UK
Madina Masimova, Baku, Azerbaijan
Nina Newbold, Liverpool, UK
Toby Upson, London, UK

EDITORS

Edward Ball, Curator and Writer
Becca Thomas, Learning Assistant,
Camden Art Centre
Gemma Wright, Head of Learning,
Camden Art Centre

DESIGNER

Mariana do Vale

THANK YOU

The artists, writers and creatives in our Youth Collective Online community; the artists invited to lead the online sessions this year, including Jessica Ashman, Beverley Bennett, Shaun C. Badham, Phoebe Collings-James, Deborah Findlater, Lucy Joyce, Shepherd Manyika, Emily Mulenga, Adam Moore.

Our Youth Programme is generously supported by The Black Heart Foundation, City Bridge Trust, Freelands Foundation and The London Community Response Fund. Our Learning Programme is generously supported by The Atkin Foundation, The Cecil and Hilda Lewis Trust, Clore Duffield Foundation, John Lyons Charity and The John S Cohen Foundation.