

SWIMS

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett is a poet and academic with a focus on innovative poetics. She holds a BA in English from Oxford, an MA and PhD in Contemporary Poetics from Royal Holloway, University of London, and studied performance at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York and Naropa. Creative publications include *oh-zones*, *Her Body: The City*, *Exotic Birds* and *M* (a poem-film about John Clare with artist Brian Shields). Her work has been anthologised in *Dear World and Everyone In It: New Poetry in the UK* (Bloodaxe, 2013) and *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK* (Reality Street, 2015). She curates eco-poetics exhibitions and is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Newman University in Birmingham.

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Elizabeth-Jane Burnett

Penned in the Margins

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Swims is a long poem documenting twelve wild swims across England and Wales, beginning and ending in Devon, my home county, and moving through Somerset, Surrey, the Lake District, London, Snowdonia, Sussex and Cornwall. Each swim is conceived as an environmental action, testing the ways in which individuals might effect environmental change. They are interrupted by a sequence for my father, whose health deteriorated during the writing of the poem; part of this sequence features swimming in the Aegean Sea.

Parts of *Swims* have been displayed in *The Trembling Grass*, an exhibition I curated with the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW) in 2014 at the Innovation Centre, University of Exeter. This also showcased work from poets such as Allen Fisher, Maggie O'Sullivan and Harriet Tarlo. Excerpts have been performed at the Flow and Fracture conference, ULB, Brussels (2014); Warwick Thursdays (2015), run by Jonathan Skinner at Warwick University; and at the Language, Landscape and the Sublime symposium at Dartington Hall (2016) — where I also curated a group swim in the Dart — and *The Barrel House*, Totnes (2016). 'Swim XI, The English Channel' was performed at the Sussex Poetry Festival, June 6, 2015, and engages with *Swallows and Amazons*.

'Swim XIII, King's Cross Pond' was published in *Lighthouse* (II: Winter

2016 – an ecopoetics edition guest-edited by Anna Reckin); ‘Swim I, The Teign’ has been published in *The Learned Pig* (2016) and ‘Preface’ and ‘Swim III, The Ouse’ have been published in *The Clearing* (2016). *Swims* is the subject of my article ‘Swims: Body, Ritual, Erasure as Environmental Activism,’ in *Jacket 2* (Fall 2015). The Poetry Society published a section of ‘Preface’ in a feature by Jen Hadfield on nature poetry, ‘Ways to be Wilder’ (2016).

For my father, who taught me to swim.

Swims

'A dictionary would start from the point at which it would no longer give the meanings but the tasks of words.' — BATAILLE

§

To Swim To give
 up.
 To disappear.
 To appear
 in *Vanity Fair* before breakfast.
 To afterwards destroy economy of Greece.¹
 To float.
 To pierce film lid between air and water.
 To explode outwards.
 To be an assemblage.
 To flower
 in the wrong place to be in the wrong
 place.
 To drift.
 To not advance capitalism.
 To grow in a hedge.
 To be lichen.
 To be at once
 in the body
 and under
 and over it.
 To sink
 and to get back up.
 To spread tail feather

in display of bone
to be closer to skeleton and totally fine
what's the worst that could happen

already fallen
already wet
already missing

from the earth but recoverable always
there is something left

to be dug up
to be eaten
to be stolen

there is something left always when words are at
their fullest stretch
something left that cannot be taken.
To not being taken.

¹ Christine Lagard, Director of the International Monetary Fund, explains how she starts the day with swimming in 'Christine Lagard: Et si c'était elle?' — *Vanity Fair France*, December 2014.

PREFACE

Swimming is continuous. Only the rivers are intermittent.

The river is something that happens
like exercise or illness to the body
on any given day I am rivering.

Not that *the river is like* the body
or *the river is* the body
but both have gone
and what is left is something else.

To not end where you thought you did
not with skin but water
not with arms but meadow
of watercress, dropwort, floating pennywort
against all odds to be buoyant.

To feel there is an upward force
greater than the weight of the heart
the knuckles the head to feel as in to feel
it physically push up the ribs which are bones now

everything remembering what it is
becoming is remembering
sinking in the silt is the sand
of the shell of the bone singing

in the reeds in the rushes
hordes of heartbeats not my own:

mollusc onto stone
milfoil onto moss
mayfly onto trout

metal onto clay
acid onto wire
electrified chicken wire to keep the salmon in
the summer we'll make a day of it
fill the car up, make a day of it
fill the river, make like mayflies

in the summer, swim
in traffic, swim in the car
in the river in the summer in the city
in the chicken in the acid in the salmon in the rain
in the silt in the sulphur in the algae in the day we'll come
and part as friends

in the day in the river in the moss in the rushes we'll come and part

in the river in the heather in the rushes in the rain we'll stay and the
day and the day
and the days dart over and summer is over
us salmon leap over
us all come apart
in the end

of the day
and the river.