

artesmundi¹⁰

#6

Rebecca Jagoe
Clinging Love

Verses of Filth: I came to damage evil!

You live in the city. The speed of the city is not determined by the seasons, by the growth of trees, by rainwater levels, by the levels of light and intensity of the sun's heat. The speed of the city is determined by capital, and the hoarding of resources, and the transformation of resource, most notably property, into commodity.

Anywhere you stand still, you must pay for it. People perpetually rush around you: in order to avoid standing still, in order to avoid paying, in order to reach a place to make the money they need to be able to stand still.

You cannot speak their language. No, you can speak their language, you just cannot keep up with their speed. By the time you have processed one sentence they have spoken, they have said five more sentences, which you have entirely missed and must ask them to repeat. You feel totally alone.

The ecosystem of the city bears no relationship with the soil, with the soft earth, and below that the bedrock. Floating on a raft of concrete and tarmac, the ecosystem of the city is a self-contained terrarium of human infrastructure and scavengers. The city must be here because of the bedrock, because the specificity of the ecosystem allowed it to be born. But the city has moved past it, or chooses to ignore it; the city drifts gently across the land, rootless, because the city believes itself to be beyond natural limitations.

One night you are followed home by a fox, belly fat with unborn babies. She runs to catch up with you, as your panicked mind attempts to remember if wild animals are carriers of rabies in this country. You are alternately jogging towards your home, stopping to scream at her, stopping to make yourself larger to intimidate her (arms out, waving scarf, it does nothing), and trying to locate your house keys in the multitude of pockets across all of your different garments. The fox jogs to catch up. Still unclear on the rabies question, you throw your takeaway chicken wings at her, and she pounces on them, snarling as she tears the paper bag open. This is hunting.

Thin walls, the results of cheap and quick building methods, a greater return on investment. Thin floors, no insulation. The hundreds of people whose lives you brush against on the tube, on the bus, walking from your house to the Co-Op to buy a frozen pizza and four apples. You are perpetually infected with the routines of everyone. Your neighbours, the people on the street, the cars rushing by, the circus school in the yard behind your house, the bar and music venue two doors down from your house, the cafe directly below your house, the person upstairs who works in the city and leaves the house every morning at 5.30am to go running, the neighbour in the flat to the right who has just had his benefits cut, again, and who cannot afford to pay for adequate care, struggling again to get up the stairs, the flat to the left populated by BA students who drink Glen's and play Cluedo all night. You have to leave the city.

You are surrounded by the jagged hills of limestone, now. Thick stone walls of your home surround you, too, wadding you from the world. You recently started walking to the standing stones in the village, in order to sing to them. It is not that you are not impacted by the routines and schedules of others anymore, it's that these others are now the stones that surround you, not your neighbour Deborah, who works in in-house marketing for Barclays and listens to violent true crime podcasts on her morning jog. Silence and solitude, a sense of belonging in this place, this specific place. You see a wild boar running across the road and you understand for the first time in many years how cold and open and expansive and harsh the world can be. It is then you fall in love with the world and it is then you fall in love with a person.

Empedocles: Behold the sun, everywhere bright and warm, and all immortal things that are bathed in heat and bright radiance. Behold the rain, everywhere dark and cold; and from the earth issue forth things close-pressed and solid. When they are in strife all these are different in form and separated; but they come together in love, and are desired by one another.

The world moves by Love and Strife. Two opposing forces by which beings are drawn to each other, then repulsed by each other. The limestone cliffs surrounding you are formed from the microscopic exoskeletons of marine life, who bonded together so tightly it could

almost be for eternity. This is formed through Love, this is a form of Love: lives of countless trillions of marine organisms compounded into rock. A gentle drift ever downwards onto the seabed, almost silent, gently covered in a blanket of other marine skeletons, a comforting weight that starts to press harder, and harder, and harder, until. Life does not end, you realise, it only transforms. It is love that draws you towards stone.

At your most acutely ill, told that you could die in your sleep at any point, you felt a somnolent relief in the idea of drifting into an endless slumber, of being broken down and reconstituted as other lives. You wanted to die in the sea, to be absorbed by the ocean, to slowly, through the lives of countless fish and marine vertebrates, drift towards the floor, a fine dust of life, falling, settling, waiting to become stone.

Empedocles: For I have been ere now a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird and a dumb fish in the sea.

In *Verses of Filth*, the city is a looming presence, that sits in the background, all events of the film taking place on a hilltop overlooking it. In this place outside the ever-present city, the stone beings caress each other, run their hands along chests, erotically charged stone to stone contact. They are human-shaped, but made of stone [fabric, card, foam, paint]. Forgotten, the deities transformed into stone. They were not carved from the rock as representation: these statues are the calcified Gods themselves. Once remembered, they become flesh again. It is sensual and devotional, erotic and sacred.

It is only in the Western Christian imagination that the sacred must be chaste, and the violent imposition of this belief system across the globe has stolen pleasure, joy, community with fellow humans, community with other-than-humans, a deep sense of belonging. The knowledge practices that have been lost, and the violence of their erasure, are specific to place, and the particular ambitions of imperialism for that place, and they are not reducible to one another. Imperialism would tell you that knowledge is not produced in the land, that knowledge is singular, universal, metaphysical, and conveniently aligned with Western European colonial ambitions.

Imperialism does not seek to learn from the damp, cold earth, or the persistence of stones.

Verses of Filth:

Tonacacihuatl
Cipactli
Mayahuel
Mictecacihuatl
Tzitzimime
Tlazoteotl
Itzpapalotl
Tlaltechcutli
Chalchiuhtlicue
Chicomecoatl

Tonacacihuatl
Cipactli
Mayahuel
Mictecacihuatl

Tonacacihuatl
Cipactli
Mayahuel
Mictecacihuatl

Coyolxauhqui
Ometeotl
Cihuacoatl

Coatlicue
Coatlicue
Coatlicue
Coatlicue

Flesh can become stone can become flesh: all are living, it is simply a question of speed.

Whitehead: In fact life itself is comparatively deficient in survival value. The art of persistence is to be dead. Only inorganic things persist for great lengths of time. A rock survives for eight hundred

million years; whereas the limit for a tree is about a thousand years, for a man [sic] or an elephant about fifty or one hundred years, for a dog about twelve years, for an insect about one year.

The calcium supplements you take are produced from quarried limestone. Concerned about your osteoporosis, they occasionally ask if you have taken this pill, and if not, why not take them now. One in the morning and one in the evening, thick chalky slabs derived from rocks. You had misunderstood this care and concern as a desire to protect your future together. Sometimes emotions feel so deep you think they exist outside yourself as living entities, and it is isolating to realise you feel something alone, that the feeling is bound within your skin. You are just flesh, a bag of fleshy feelings, meat on a mineral scaffold, and you will become stone, and this stone will become flesh, an endless cycle of hard and soft, slow and quick. Flesh can become stone can become flesh.

Empedocles: Thus do all things draw breath and breathe it out again.

The Western colonial project told you that the earth is dead. Not even dead, it was never alive. Capitalism told you that the world exists to serve humans. Western Christian culture told you that being human is almost the highest form of existence, second only to the angels. At the bottom, the minerals, the inert matter, nonsentient, dumb. The earth cannot feel pain if it does not live. Living beings transformed into resources, resources transformed into commodities. The stones are alive, and they are speaking to you, if you would only stop to listen.

She told you that the key is to stop trying to rush it. One hour, she said, is I don't know, 10,000 years in limestone's lifespan. A second lasts – uff, I can't do the maths, you get it. The communication that exists between you and the cliff is not going to look like human language. But language is everywhere, you just need to figure out how to hear it, or read it, or perceive it somehow – it might not be through sight or sound. She had only successfully talked with trees, had never attempted to be in conversation with rocks, she did not know how to talk to them, but she knew how to listen: she had heard bitter words spoken and anger articulated by stone when the earth was plundered, at the sites of mining and quarrying near

where she lived. And they have their own personhood, their own mood, you have to allow them that, she continued. A flash of anger for a rock is going to last longer than your entire life, which is pretty wild. Trees can be pretty rude, too, she said, pointing to an ash. That one's a little bitch.

Sitting by the cliff, you are embedded in a region where Western geology as a science began. The international geological timescale, a language imposed globally by an imperialism of ideas, is named after south Wales geology: the Cambrian (the Latin name for Wales); the Ordovician and Silurian periods (named after Welsh tribes); numerous other sub-divisions named after Welsh places: Arenig, Llanvirn, Llandeilo, Llandovery, Hirnant and Tremadoc. Not all terms are oriented to this place, and since the Devonian period (after Devon, south west England) the naming of geological formations pulled from locations across the globe. But you are in an area where stones began to be perceived as a rich text to be read, an archive of deep time, even if this attempt to read them is embedded within industrial capitalist extractivism. Is reading the past from geology engaging in a language of the stones, or is this turning beings into artefacts?

Robin Wall Kimmerer: Not everyone will get it, though; the language of stone is difficult. Rock mumbles.

You run your hands along the surface of the cliff, gently, so gently it is just the whisper of a fingertip, stroking the cold stone with warm flesh. Your fingers pause at a small protrusion, a tiny dome erupting out like a rocky growth. Your fingers pause, and then begin to trace around the mound in a circular motion, first one way, then the other, then softly, ever so softly, grazing the tip once, then again, before moving back to the long strokes across the face of the cliff. It's an invitation to talk, softly teasing the limestone surface, communicating through touch, *I am here*.

Audre Lorde: When released from its intense and constrained pellet, [the erotic] flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

In Western antiquity, there was much debate as to whether stones had sex, requiring, as it does, the reification of sex into specific acts, the siloing of eroticism into only certain activities, and the supposed intrinsic connection between desire, love, procreation, and life force itself. Theophrastus writes of ‘stones that give birth to young.’ In Physiologus, fire rocks, or pirobili, are binary gendered stones who are inert when separate, but who ignite and burn when the male approaches the female.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: The Book of John Mandeville takes lithic sexual difference, fecundity, and creaturely possibility to their limit, describing diamonds that mate, reproduce, live [...] Diamonds, we are told, come in two forms, male and female. Erotic inclination brings the gems into union, but not necessarily as couples, and without the incendiary and moralised results constraining firestones. Promiscuous in their commingling, diamonds undertake a slow lithic coitus that within its own geologic time creates ever more glistening and libidinous rocks, a slow-motion petric orgy:

“They groweth togodres [together], the maule and the femaule. And they beth noryshed [are nourished] with the dew of hevене, and they engendreth comunely [in common] and bryngeth forth other smale dymaundes, that multiplieth and groweth all yeres.”

Though gendered, these amatory rocks are not exactly heteronormative.

In the elision of desire with reproduction, in the assumption that reproduction is necessary to prove life, it becomes easy for Western science to argue that stones are not alive, and that stones do not desire. They are not moved by Love or Strife, they feel nothing. You are caressing the limestone cliffs, pleasing your fingertips, seducing the rock. You were wrong to say that you are just flesh, and that your emotions are isolated, cut off from anyone else. Love and Strife move the world, binding every being together, feelings are always already shared, even if not mirrored.

James Baldwin: You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.

Your concentration starts to wane as thoughts begin to pour in, first in a steady drip until your defences burst and you are flooded with concerns. You are trying to make yourself less available, you are trying to shut out the background anxiety of not checking your phone. Stay present, stay with the present desire. The limestone cliffs do not speak back, do not indicate if they are moved by Love or Strife, do not express their desire or repulsion, only their seeming indifference. You want to argue with the clinical reductionism of the scientific method, but you can't hear what the cliffs are saying. They were brutally exposed to the air through industrial quarrying over centuries, they should be buried under layers of topsoil, they should be held in an embrace with more limestone, a smooth and unbroken sheet across the hill: instead they have been cleaved open, fragments dotted across the grass. Why would they want to talk to me, you think, what would they have to say. Learn how to listen, your friend's voice speaks to you from your past conversation, understand how they are speaking to you, before you try to understand what they are saying. The stone is cold to the touch, and rough against your fingertips. This is full of meaning, even if you do not know what it means.

The coldness of stone, its seeming immovability, its alleged lifelessness, its presumed permanence, and unchangeability: all have made stone a fertile site for Western metaphor. A heart of stone. Stone faced. To be set in stone. 'God knows I can't contradict you Cary; I'm as ignorant as a stone.' (Bronte, Shirley). How strange, to see stone as inactive, inert, unfeeling matter. How strange, to see stone as lacking in feeling. A building material, a surface to be carved, cold and heartless, a dead substance, not a being who can and does act in the world. You think of softness as yielding and hardness as rejection because your touch language, your erotic grammar, is tied to human flesh, to softening and opening and dilation and wet and. You want to try and read below the obvious metaphors, you want to give the cliff a chance to reply.

Mel Y Chen: Let me say more about a particular object—a stone—as it has been encoded and applied to human sexualities. Within butch or femme lesbian culture, being “stone” or “stone butch” is a particular erotic and sexual formation. It does not suggest an outright lack of agency or power—as an animacy

hierarchy might predict—but a particular sexual economy of affect in which the butch's sexual pleasure can emerge from the touch instigated by her, whereas she prefers not to be touched by her lover. The stoneness of butch can also refer to the masculinities of expressive life for butches: feelings held in, the appearance of unfeeling. "Being stone" is thus not merely a queer affect; it also tugs at and traverses the animacy hierarchy's affective economy with regard to both feeling and touch.

For some time things have been difficult with them. In large part this is because you occupy entirely different temporalities: they move too quickly, you move too slowly. You don't need to walk so slowly, they say impatiently. You need space and time to think and they need immediate answers. They live in the city and you live with the stones, and so your external worlds run on different temporalities, too. And they exist solely in the present, whereas you attempt to occupy and predict the future, rendering the unknowable tame and somehow manageable. You are back in the city, though, here to attempt to reconcile, a project that requires slowness and thought but feels urgent and frantic. Alone, you walk down the street to their house. You are looking for small stones. High rise apartment blocks are growing faster than weeds, here. Where is the earth, you mutter. Concrete slabs, broken up by small patches of soil from which a young tree grows awkwardly. Tarmac, more tarmac, more concrete, a small patch of yellowing grass. The only stone you can see is on the gleaming entrances to newly built blocks of flats. The small fossils splattered across polished slabs of limestone are a prized asset, an expensive ornament. They died, billions of years ago, so that this block of flats, this housing as bullion, could be built.

Luce Irigaray: Fencing in our natures, turning our bodies into private properties or ready-made homes.

You take out a small chisel and a hammer, and begin to chip away around the outline of one of the fossils. It is tough work, small chips fly at you, it does not want to be severed. Eventually it falls into your hand, though, rough hewn with one impossibly flat surface. You have rescued it. But you keep chiselling, until a small crack appears across the slab, and you keep chiselling, and the crack becomes larger. You walk away, putting the lump of building, the living creature, in your pocket. Some time later the building softly

collapses, crumbling to its foundations, cloud of dust blooming outwards. Sometimes you must operate faster than stone.

@pisshets: If you add two pounds of sugar to literally one ton of concrete it will ruin the concrete and make it unable to set properly which is good to know if you wanna resist something being built, French anarchists used this to resist prison construction in the 80s

As you watch *Verses of Filth*, the deity Coatlicue claws beneath broken paving slabs and rubble to reveal another goddess buried beneath, fleshy and viscerally pulpy skin suit, septum piercing. She has been buried beneath the detritus of the city, *for enduring pressure my flesh turned to stone*, like the limestone cliffs, a downward force that rendered her lithic, though this process was not a gentle, slow drift, sleepily pressing layer upon layer onto each other. This pressure was a violent crush. When there is nowhere to turn, turning to stone is a way to survive.

Verses of Filth:

They buried me face up with my tongue sticking out.
Colonized, horizontal, feminized, open.
For enduring pressure my flesh turned to stone.
If I move and twerk I open cracks in the ground!
I stiffened my chest, refusing to become dust.

She is visceral and divine, running her hands along her body, talking of pissing and shitting and birthing. Her fleshy eroticism is tied up with her power. She writhes on the ground a bit more.

It is crushing that the love of your life may not feel the same urgent tug towards you. It is crushing that you are not the love of their life. You lie in bed and tell yourself they are singular to you, you are one of a series to them. It can't be helped, it's no one's fault. This is why you left, probably, even though you feel pulled towards them. Desire moves you, towards people, towards beings, towards things, towards goals, towards tasks, towards places. This is the Love Empedocles describes: not a desire for reproduction, but a desire simply for touch, and pleasure, and being together, and understanding each other so deeply, in close contact.

Audre Lorde: In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

You saw Love as an act of belonging and they saw Love as an act of escape. You move between Love and Strife, between intense desire and deep hatred. Misunderstanding, hurt pride, the compulsion to rush what can't be rushed. You have sought out love as an act of rooting yourself, of embedding yourself within the world. Whether that love is between you and them, between you and the rocks, between you and the neighbour's cat who visited you daily, between you and your friends who are your soulmates and your family. Love is a way of saying I matter, and I am matter, I am in community, I belong. For them, love has offered a line of flight from the oppressiveness of the world. Matter pressing in on them from all sides, an unbearable weight, they have sought to evaporate.

Your body goals are a limestone cliff, their body goals are diaphanous wisps of nimbus clouds.

In Middle English, a cliff is a clud of ston, a cloud of stone. The same beings, different temporalities.

It is only when you are so close that you cannot see someone as a separate whole, that you cannot attempt to form a cohesive idea of them, that you can begin to understand each other. It is only when you are so close that you can see every pore and their smell is your air, in the space of not knowing, you understand. Years ago, apropos of nothing, you wrote a note to yourself: touch is the original language. This note floats to the surface of your mind again. Touch is the original language.

There are arms everywhere in Verses of Filth. arms drifting up from flattened corn, arms holding books to read, arms painting, arms

reaching, arms beckoning, arms stroking and being stroked. These arms are catalysts for action, and beings in themselves.

There are approximately 135 billion neurons across one human body. An octopus has on average 500 million neurons across its body, but two thirds of these are in its limbs. The arms of an octopus have their own sensors, can control themselves without relaying information to the brain. An octopus nervous system is a hybrid of central and localised knowledge. What would a body of different localised knowledges look like. Arms seeking food, seeking sensation, seeking pleasure, independent of a centrally organised, singular I.

You do not understand if pleasure is located at the site of touch, or in the brain. Sensory information is sent there; processing takes place; instructions, both conscious and unconscious, issue forth. Everything is mediated and moderated by your head, you have been told. In Western metaphors for the body as social group, the head is always the boss (of the family, the company, the nation-state) – it serves colonial powers to believe that power must be organised centrally. The head is all powerful, and crucially, the head is right at the centre, a structure based on a core fed by a periphery. The brain has the highest concentration of neurons in the body: 86 billion on average.

Verses of Filth:
dripping upwards
spiraling drifting chunks.
Residual uprising
of decapitated fists,
and brutalized nerves,
without center nor hierarchy.

Disembodied arms have no eyes to see. They cannot sense other beings at a distance, there is only touch. Their pleasure is not fed back to a higher being, they are beings in themselves. Your arm, caressing the limestone. What if your arm does not perceive this interaction as running your skin along limestone, a type of rock to be taxonomically organised, but instead a singular encounter between two beings, who are both unique and unable to be

quantified. You begin to lose yourself in the rough bumps and patches of lichen that populate the surface, in the persistent coldness, the occasional jagged edge. A woodlouse, or some other invertebrate, is crawling across your index finger, you can feel it. You don't mind, sometimes it's nice to have a third. The woodlouse falls off, or steps off, your hand, and it is just you and the rock, you and the countless billions of marine invertebrates who came together to make this encounter. You are not alone. Remind yourself: you are not alone.

Empedocles: Love.

Clinging Love.

Rebecca Jagoe uses text, performance, and sculpture to examine how Western-imperialist conceptions of the 'human' inform experiences of illness, madness, and gender. A former recipient of Wales in Venice 10 (2022-3) and Freelands (2021-2) fellowships, Jagoe recently presented work at g39, Site Gallery, Mostyn and Wysing Arts Centre, and in Tallinn, London and Riga. With Sharon Kivland, they edited *ON VIOLENCE* (2018) and *ON CARE* (2020), published by Ma Bibliothèque. rebeccajagoe.com

Rebecca Jagoe's 'Clinging Love' is the sixth in [a series of eight newly-commissioned texts](#) which have been developed alongside [Artes Mundi 10](#), which is showing in Cardiff, Swansea, Newtown and Llandudno between October 2023 and February 2024.

Defnyddia **Rebecca Jagoe** ffurfiau ysgrifenedig, perfformiadol a cherfluniol i archwilio sut caiff dealltwriaethau ymerodraethol o'r 'dynol' eu lliwio gan brofiadau o wallgofrwydd a rhywedd. Maen nhw'n gyn gymrawd gyda Cymru yn Fenis a Freelands, ac wedi cyflwyno gwaith gyda g39, Site Gallery, Mostyn a Wysing Arts Centre, ac hefyd yn Llundain, Talinn a Riga. Cyd-olygodd Rebecca *ON VIOLENCE* (2018) ac *ON CARE* (2020) gyda Sharon Kivland i'r wasg Ma Bibliothèque. rebeccajagoe.com

'**Clinging Love**' gan **Rebecca Jagoe** yw'r chweched yn [ein cyfres o wyth comisiwn sgwennu](#) wedi'u datblygu yn rhan o [Artes Mundi 10](#), sydd ar ddangos yn Abertawe, Caerdydd, Drenwydd a Llandudno rhwng Hydref 2023 a Chwefror 2024.