

## Boudicca & Co.

JANE HOLLAND is an English poet, novelist, editor and former professional snooker player, born in Essex in 1966. She won an Eric Gregory Award for her poetry in 1996. Her first collection, *The Brief History of a Disreputable Woman*, was published by Bloodaxe in 1997. A first novel, *Kissing the Pink*, followed from Sceptre in 1999. One of the top poetry performers in the Midlands, she currently lives in Warwickshire with her husband and five children.

Also by Jane Holland

POETRY

*The Brief History of a Disreputable Woman* (Bloodaxe, 1997)

FICTION

*Kissing the Pink* (Sceptre, 1999)

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JANE HOLLAND



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*For Steve Haynes*



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'The structure of all poetry is the movement that an active individuality makes in expressing itself. Poetic rhythm, of which we have all spoken so much, is the chart of a temperament.'

MINA LOY, from 'MODERN POETRY',  
an essay in *Lost Lunar Baedaker* (1996/97)

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# Part I



## Oyster

I cruised the coast roads alone  
that summer; metallic sea  
was all I knew, sirocco  
blowing hot and southerly.  
One afternoon, sweltering  
through the low gears,  
I stopped the car, stared out  
from my carapace  
and the sirocco blew, wedging  
a pearl-like piece of grit  
under one stubborn eyelid,  
blurring the horizon  
to an accumulation of light,  
a working within, to you  
coming to me, triumphantly  
prising open the oyster.

## In Response to a Nude Photograph of Mina Loy, 1905

Women poets are not supposed to look like that,  
did nobody tell you? The one  
with the cigarette is bullish enough  
but this, taken naked, face  
against the wall with one arse cheek  
suggestively raised  
is the portrait of a muse, my dear.  
In later years, your beauty was eclipsed by age.  
Here your skin's like frost, that white back  
and hourglass waist  
crying out to be marked, to be photographed.  
Did it feel safer like this, turned away  
in your nakedness,  
to be stared at, lusted after?  
'Leave off looking to men to find out  
what you are not,' you said.  
Then let me take you to to bed, Mina,  
to the ostrich feather bed  
of our imagination. There we'll smoke  
and make poetry all day, decadent  
in our sticky love,  
looking each other in the eye, drinking  
each other's blood  
like tea from a china dish, steeped  
in what it means to be us, spawning  
our poems like fish.

## Hot Days in the Eighties

On hot days in the eighties, you stopped  
for ices at Taunton Services. Little  
did you know then, twenty-something  
in the white Ford Escort Estate—  
radio on full, heater too, blasting out  
to keep the engine cool—the traffic jams  
from Portishead to Liverpool.

That was the decade of the motorway.  
You chopped your locks in the back  
of the car one day, dyke-short.  
Kept dental dams in the glove box,  
grew the hair under your arms  
to a mousey fuzz. Purchased  
a map of the highways, went native.

You wore a suede jacket and a crucifix  
in the 'V' of your chest, strode  
like a man (and the rest). Drove  
a Lancia Delta into the dirt. Years later  
it was a Mercedes camper van,  
seven berth, and beads, hippy skirts,  
needing to get close to the earth.

These days you don't get out much,  
stuck in with a husband and kids.  
But the road's strong, it hauls on you  
like a blackbird on the worm,  
and you find excuses—friends ill,  
time alone—for the grip  
of the wheel, a licence to roam.

## It was cool inside the chapel

It was cool inside the chapel.  
Blue torpor had hung over us  
for months, cyanosing  
the pale edge of morning.  
Here, even the kids marvelled  
at Matisse, adored him.

If you thought anything  
of that astonishing patina  
cast over white walls  
by stained glass in sunlight,  
you never communicated it,  
turned away, smoking  
your ubiquitous cigarette.

Later, we sat contemplating  
the blue mosaic of fish  
in one of Braque's ceramics.  
Nothing had happened.  
One person had simply severed  
from the other, side by side  
in the brilliant aftermath.

# Elementals

## I

### WEST KENNETT LONG BARROW

Stone womb under an earth belly  
too ancient for light.

Rain condenses its euphoric mass  
to a single blessing

filtering through  
the intestinal silence of rock.

Flies cling  
to the mossed edge of a crevice.

She devours their small bodies like offerings.

Once, she could hold her face  
up to the moon, watch it

screw a thin silver bolt  
through the heavens.

Now she eats beetles  
and hunts with the night-train

passing the lit windows of women  
anxious for conception.

II

ALMOST ICELAND

The house was a standing stone  
on the edge of annihilation.

It sat there uncomplaining  
while acres of wind

pummelled and rattled windows  
and floorboards.

The sea birds shunned it. The bees  
rarely came so far north.

The sheep called out to it to move  
but it didn't.

It just sat there.

Its single chimney grinned up at the sky  
like a maniac.

For miles around, whole islands lay down  
and withered. Stones

stunted themselves in its shadow.  
And always the wind

hammering for the house  
to be absent.

Finally, its inhabitants packed up  
and left.

The house remained,  
folding its arms and gritting black teeth.

It had no intention of surrender.

The wind blew on  
battering its ram's head repeatedly

against lintels and uprights

its high battle-cry  
prising tiles from the roof

imploding  
the senseless resistance of doorways.

III

HOLY ISLAND

Pausing  
after the genuflection of causeway

salt water puckers a scar  
the width of her belly

creased abdomen  
folding a damp cloth into sand dunes.

Whatever she gave birth to  
dragged itself beyond these coarse grasses

then sloped into wind-blear

turning its back  
irascibly on civilisation.

Yet the marks remain. Twice a day  
they etch themselves out

along the chevroned gold  
of a mackerel stomach.

The sea staggers across here on stilts

ridiculous headdress bouncing  
and swaying

exhausted by cold  
yet making the pilgrimage.

After it kneels to kiss the earth  
sacred light flattens sand

to a blind haze  
magnetised by the crawling bodies of cars.

Bare steel hulks  
dredging the sun-dust

hump-hump-hump themselves

over her consecrated skein  
of striations.

IV

STONE HENGE

A perfect ice-rimmed crucible  
tilts itself

against the first geometry of stars.

Vast scalded pockets of fire  
empty themselves

through miraculous peepholes.

Obsidian heaven  
volcanised light to this glittering sacrament

that drilled ancient fires  
through the eye

suggesting bears and archers

the twin shafts  
of a ceaseless plough.

Now a wind-blackened cauldron  
pitches its song

through these wide openings  
to weather

each isolated furnace  
linked