



[These poems are extracts from *The Lost Boko of Berecingum*, a book-length sequence exploring the 900-year history of Barking Abbey from the perspective of the women that lived there.]

### The girl abbess – the choir & Ælfgyva

The island has had enough of peace    So much snow that it crushes the forest    Folk and cattle caught between quakes and wildfire    babes trampled at Dover    Spearhafoc loses the bishopric, makes a run for it    bags stuffed with stolen gaudy    His statues of Liudhard and Bertha carried into fields to plead for rain    The king hurls the queen to a nunnery    Ships in the Thames, the king relents    Storms dash the churches, tear up trees    At the abbey, Ælfgyva kind and full of milk, honey    The bishop comes upon her in passing    ravished by her grace, he makes her abbess

*Choir:*

Small child of great sweetness, curiosity, wants Cook, wants psalms, wants scrape away at vellum. The Earl says give her everything. Also rigour. Red doves and bricks, one on another. This child's house for birds that they must bring bricks for. Small child of sweetness wants to sleep amid the cooing, bird shit, straw. Wants Cook, wants rigour. Red doves returning, the rain falling soft. Six geese in veils chase the little anchorite out of the storm. You'll catch a chill, that many windowed tower. Wants psalms, wants Cook, wants the story of queen Dido building her walls.

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*Choir:*

This girl now a little older, milk, the blush of apples. The fullness of her, lengthened into lean. Still runs about, wanting. Lies on the floor with books around her. All ears, questions. Pan of milk bubbling with cloves, the dance of letters heady in her. Singing is passable, psalms easy on her tongue. But she *will* sway with the force of them, lifting up, up onto her toes. Still goes to Cook for sweetness. Pears, raisins. Reads too quickly. The Earl says let her, anything for sweet Ælfgyva. She is hungry. Forgets to eat. Is hungry. Forgets.

•

*Ælfgyva:*

O long-leggéd spar hawk  
    mantled over plunder, you dart away  
                    barrelling through the  
                    undergrowth and are gone  
You leave me without

guidance. Now! when the fat new  
pigeon of the bishopric  
has consecrated me to the task  
of Mother

*Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, stretch  
her wings toward the south?*

Oh help me, come  
to your blackbird.  
I dreamt you were fashioning  
feathers out of gold. My bones, strung  
on a necklace. But no  
the foundations  
of my heart are sound

## Cusp and corbel – the choir & Ælfgyva

Comet in April and the Confessor dead    armies crisscross the island    The Bastard crosses  
the narrow sea    a ship built for him by his bride, Matilda    On the Mora's greenwood prow, a  
gilded child    pointing *further*    lips to a horn of ivory    The long boat tips William into  
England    a little stumble then righted    With fists of sand, he claims the shore    and with  
battle, the realm    Eadyth, gentle swan, combs the battlefield    Voices raised at the crowning  
the welter of language    fires in Westminster and the congregation scattered    The new king  
decamps to Barking    the Normans land like swans with heavy wings    they drop and skim,  
full of their own arrival

*Choir:*

Sweet Ælfgyva, mother of grace, scuffed knuckles. Still dreams of a citadel on  
the river. Wants spires, wants windows. Taller by a hand, she welcomes the  
conqueror. A gruff man of few graces. Engages him on aspect, masonry, good  
quarries. He and his queen have an abbey apiece, another planned as penance for  
all the bloodshed. In broken French and signing, the abbess and the king talk  
holy ribs and arches. While he receives the surrender of the earls, she conceives  
a greater abbey. The pale stone of Caen against the rag stone of Kent.

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*Ælfgyva:*

Willelm Williame Guillaume, fresh from the coronation.  
Not much bother  
but good Lord he can eat.  
Off to Hainault for days of hunting.  
Returns hungry. He does not read.  
He loves to hear the sisters sing,  
*Stay me with flagons*, he hiccups  
*comfort me with apples*.  
The cook is at her wit's end.  
Three months of him, as he rebuilds the Tower  
climbs the English sky in stone.  
Three months. My hospitality secures  
protection in return. He grants me  
peace and love, and all the rights...  
*à l'intérieur et l'extérieur*  
O watch me build!

•

*Choir:*

Years of battles, but by Ælfgyva's clever hand our new cloister rises. *Where wast  
thou when I laid the foundation?* From afar you can see the great abbey buttress  
the sky, hear the toil as men work the walls. *Enlarge the place of your tent  
stretch your tent curtains wide*. But now, long days of sighing – our impatient  
mistress. Building stalled, and short of promised height. Her works stay upon the  
church fathers. Tired of their must-not-overstep, tired of their must-not-move-

the-church, sweet Ælfgyva says, If I have to lay the stones myself.. Æthelburh has come to me this night and said *Put my bones to work.*

•

*Ælfgyva:*

This Sabbath night, we approach the high  
white tomb. Our lanterns  
bob in the fog, the river, the chilly stone.  
We crack the marble lids  
with iron. The offering of a pearl.  
The carved awning  
dances in devout procession. As light in the willows  
when the river stirs.  
And here are caskets that brim  
with milk-white bones and  
books! O what foresight to tell  
of whom and where placed  
so long ago.  
We raise them from their beds of  
clay and sand, remove  
the relics to a temporary hall, singing  
*thou hast set my feet in a large room.*

•

Choir:

Seven years while our Dido builds. Then one night, prostrate in prayer and holy dust, by Æthelburh's tomb, the very slabs of the crypt begin to shift. Sweet Ælfgyva pinned against the wall. Short of breath she gasps, *My Lady please...*

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*Ælfgyva:*

My Lady please, the force of you. I can hardly breathe.  
But what is this?  
From out the cold lodging  
of the crypt, a whirl  
of dust and flame, and my bright lady rising  
saying, *Delay no more*  
*re-house me somewhere fit.*  
O forgive, these slow bricks  
for I have built, oh breath, a little house  
for you, a crib.  
At this she smiles, releases me.  
Oh breath.  
Steps free and is  
transformed. A little girl  
she stretches out her arms. Pleads  
*Hold me,*  
*in your bosom let me rest.*  
I feel the sweet milk prick

in my breast, gather her to me  
Devour me, I say, my milk  
upon your chin.  
I will be your fortress.

•

Choir:

So lullabies the ecstatic nurse, surrounded by the dead, their eerie psalms.

*Sing O thou that didst not bear break forth  
aloud thou that didst not travail with child*

## Settle down muddy beds – the washerwomen

At London, le couvre-feu lights out at the sound of the evening peals cold raked over hot, to stop the city burning with conspiracies Coals of rebellion grumble till morn Edith Forne, mistress of the king, dreams of magpies builds an abbey at Osney A dove nests for days in Beatrix's sleeve and at Salisbury, the roof is blown clean off the new cathedral Houses demolished, sky wracked with seizures a convulsive child Strength sufficient to hurl a cart, the great bridge of the conqueror

### THE GREAT WASH

At Winterfylleð we go down to the river. Bright day, a week on from the feast of Æthelburh. Feast that covers the cook in goose fat and gravy. Scrub, scrub her. Moon tonight will be good for bleaching, will conspire with the white crisp of the night. But first we gather. Take the baskets of soiled and stale, the baskets of holy. Here comes the sexton with her pot of saintly piss. We elbow each other, bite our saucy lips.

Slip and slide on the reedy beds, settle down muddy  
bed we're not done yet.

Out to the river to full the clothes, to fling them and tread them. Here where the stream elbows. Easy slip of the bed, sward into gravel. Straight in is Thora with her joints crab apple. Mean-fisted, swollen, blown by the river. Tough little hands. Don't cross her, would work you like a dishcloth. Now, would you look at the tits on the new girl! Thinks she's all that, well the pike will have those. Holy Veronica, who does she think? Gregory, set us a fire for when it gets too chilly.

Slip and slide on the reedy beds, settle down muddy  
bed we're not done yet.

In the tub of linen, with a whisk of twigs. In the nostrils – chamber lye, dissolved grease. The gall of a stubborn ox, beaten into piss, rub with a fist of chicken feathers, squeeze without twist. Gentle with the new veil. Saffron fringe, stiff with gold floss acanthus. These good girls and their dirty necks. Couldn't do their own. Imagine! Them out here up to their dugs in wet. We walk through their underthings.

Slip and slide on the reedy beds, settle down muddy  
bed we're not done yet.

Hours in the water, the mystery of our fingers. How they swell, grow maze with it. Woe betide the girl that lets the river. A wrapper, lifted like a reed, then a fat elver. Better to be swept after than tell the Missus. Learn quick to hold your grip. White knuckles coaxing the river through a feast-day shift. Bugger off, to the nose-bleeders.

Slip and slide on the reedy beds, settle down muddy  
bed we're not done yet.

Cold hours crouched on the bank. Keep moving is the trick, don't  
settle to it. Soapwort, neck grease and soupy bibs. Sleeves trailed in  
ink. Their monthly tatters are a lost cause but we freshen them  
nonetheless.

Slip and slide on the reedy beds, settle down muddy  
bed we're not done yet.

### THE DRYING

Away to the green, we wrap rocks in linen. Place them to hold the  
wash. Dance with our nuns, each takes one. Unfold in a reel across  
the bleaching field. Snap our partners in the sun, shake out the river  
and bed them down. All the robes laid out without their bodies. The  
cellarasse a puzzle of old feast days, breakfast.

Away to the green, wrap rocks in linen. Come frost,  
come breeze, la lune.

Bring the children to run about, scare away the ducks, the doves –  
their elderberry muck. The thieving crows. We watch the weather,  
don't much like the look. Set a girl to watch the fancy veils. Us,  
with our feet up.

Away to the green, wrap rocks in linen. Come frost,  
come breeze, la lune.

### THE STORM

We sit and watch the empty robes, the night watch over the bleach  
field. To call for help if the wind gets up, if the sisters start to move.  
We watch the altar coverlet, the chalice cloths. But the day is long  
and, soon we're sleeping on the job.

We wake to a wall of dark and reaved with lightning. A great and  
terrible wind. We run headless, gathering. Basket, quick: throw in  
sisters Joan and Benedicta, chasuble and cloak, make a bundle of  
the abbess. But the new veil! with the fancy stitch, it gives us the  
slip.

Snatched by the squall from a lavender bush. It goes first to swaddle  
a birch, then up to dust the hornbeams. We get our fingers to a hem,  
but then, off again. Fingers to a hem. Run till we are knotted up in  
leaf-stripped branches. Lifted off our feet, returned. Lifted. As  
tripping down a step.

Above, two skies. One still and tacked with stars, the other haste  
and racing. Dark green, tumbling debris. Balls of hail, roaring. How  
does the heart? How does the heart hold to its branch in such a  
brawling. We let go the laundry.

Up into the air, the howling. We gather the wind in our fists, move  
like storks above the estuary. Snuff up the wind, and are gone.  
Nothing but the whiff of lambswool.

## Notes

### Girl abness –

Ælfgyva commissioned Goscelin of St Bertin's *Lives of the Abbesses at Barking*; Goscelin was a close friend and advisor of Eve of Wilton, who had a vision concerning him. Ælfgyva's dream is modelled on this. Intense spiritual relationships between monks and nuns were something of a trope of the period, but I have invented the relationship between Ælfgyva and the renegade bishop Spearhafoc. This invention was also inspired by the *Et Ælfgyva* panel in the Bayeux tapestry, where a metal worker, who appears to be a cleric, can be found embroidered in the margin below Ælfgyva. Spearhafoc ("sparrowhawk") was a noted goldsmith and was elected to the Archbishopric of London in 1051 but was never consecrated. He was expelled from London but fled the country with several bags of treasure, including jewels and gold entrusted to him by Edward the Confessor. Edward the Confessor's wife was Edith of Wessex. She gave Spearhafoc a ring, which was involved in a miracle connected with him. It is believed Edward dispatched Edith to a nunnery as she was childless. This was at the time of the rebellion of her father, Godwin, Earl of Essex; the ships in the Thames are his. The 'babes trampled' is a reference to Eustace, Count of Boulogne's altercation with the citizens of Dover, which precipitated Godwin's fall from grace with Edward the Confessor.

Queen Dido was the founder of Carthage and a popular point of comparison for an abness. The nuns of Barking would have been aware of Virgil's *Aeneid* in which Dido appears. This section and the two following nod to scenes in Books 1 and 4 of the *Aeneid*. The quote is from Job 39:26.

### Cusp and corbel –

Following his coronation at Westminster Abbey, William the Conqueror stayed at Barking Abbey for three months where he received the surrender of many of the great earls of England. He and his wife Matilda of Flanders were keen builders of abbeys and castles. Eadyth Swanneck was the first wife of Harold, whose mutilated body she was reputed to have identified on the battlefield. The various quotes: Song of Songs 2:5; Job 38:4; Isaiah 54:1 & 2; Psalms 31:8.

### Settle down muddy beds –

Edith Forne is the concubine of Henry I. Her dream of magpies is painted beside her tomb. Beatrix is the mother of the anchoress and visionary, Christina of Markyate. Beatrix was pregnant with Christina at the time of the dove in the sleeve, which she interpreted as a sign of her daughter's future holiness. I have merged two storms into one: there was an incredibly destructive tornado in London, October 1091, with winds estimated as reaching 240 miles per hour; also in 1092, five days after its consecration, the roof of Old Sarum Cathedral was torn off in a storm. Saint Benedict's sister Scholastica was the patron saint of convulsive children and was invoked against storms.

Urine, moonlight and frost were all considered useful bleaching agents. Winterfylleð, was the first full moon of winter, it was also the time of the Great Wash. The veil is inspired by the one given to Dido by Aeneas and, previously, to Helen of Troy by her mother Leda. See Proverbs, 30:4 and Jeremiah 14:6 for some of the storm language.

**Ruth Wiggins'** poetry can be found in *Poetry Review*; *POETRY*; *Perverse*; *Blackbox Manifold*; *Long Poem*; *Route 57*; and *Stinging Fly*. Her pamphlet *Myrtle* is published by the Emma Press (2014), and her pamphlet *a handful of string* is published by Paekakariki Press (2020).

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