

Helios 3: Rebecca Sharp's *Rough Currency*

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Helios is an *EH* interview series about new research in the energy humanities and the creative processes that bring it to life.

Our third interview features Scottish poet and playwright Rebecca Sharp, whose interdisciplinary work explores ideas of landscape and place across artforms. In her new poetry pamphlet, [Rough Currency](#), Sharp plumbs our personal and collective entanglements with fossil fuels with an eye for the mythic and the magical. A selection of her work is featured in [The Art of Energy](#) exhibition at the Centre for Energy Ethics, where it won second prize in the inaugural Art of Energy Award.

EH editors Imre Szeman and Caleb Wellum sat down with Rebecca over Zoom on June 25 to talk about her poetic process during a pandemic, why she wanted to write about oil, and how poetry can help us see the world differently so that we might change it.

Caleb Wellum (CW): Can you give us a glimpse of your poetic biography? When did you become a poet, who influenced you, and what kinds of work have you done leading up to this new collection, *Rough Currency*?

Rebecca Sharp (RS): I started in theatre and performance. I'd always written poetry, but for many years it felt more private. That shifted around 2010 when I made a project called *The Ballad of Juniper Davy and Sonny Lumière*, which is a collection of poems and a performance with music. Since then, my work has been a mixture of theatre and poetry, with poetry coming much more to the fore. A lot of my work is rooted in interdisciplinary and collaborative practice, which I feel quite strongly about, influenced by the likes of Laurie Anderson.

I have often collaborated with sound artist [Philip Jeck](#), who [composed a soundscape for *Rough Currency*](#). Philip works a lot with vinyl sampling, which is an oil product connected to a sort of nostalgia for a certain materiality that offers such a useful bunch of metaphors. Philip's contribution is so full of textures, and the sounds bring their own language that offers doors in and out of the ideas presented in the poems.

Leading up to *Rough Currency*, I made two projects about similar issues of indeterminacy and the unknown. One is an interactive digital poem called [This](#) that I made with an artist, [Steve Smart](#); and another is [The Beginners](#)—a poetry collection that reimagines different earthworks where I live in Fife, Scotland. It was also with a sound artist, [Simon Whetham](#).

Imre Szeman (IS): What drew you to the issues of oil, energy, and transition specifically, and what was your research process like for this collection?

RS: Oil, energy, and transition are issues that I personally—and we collectively—have been very aware of year on year. And yet, they still felt very abstract to me, which I think is true for many people. Energy functions as this huge, unwieldy subject that influences our lives on a daily basis, but it's always over there somewhere, abstract and unreachable. I asked myself: what I can do through poetry? Poetry is good at dealing with abstraction and I wanted to explore why these issues were so abstract given that they are fundamentally so material, so literal, and so day-to-day.

COVID-19 altered my research process. I'd planned to visit the oil museums in Stavanger, Norway and Aberdeen, Scotland. [Tapsalteerie](#), the publisher, is based in Aberdeenshire as well, where oil massively affects the local community. One of the editors is from Shetland, and we were going to go up to Shetland together. But if you're going to do that kind of engagement, it's only meaningful if you can really give it time, not just arrive and spend a couple of days and have this superficial experience. The work deals with all of these things that are abstract and slippery, and not being able to go and do any kind of face-to-face work probably ended up helping because I was just in my head with it. The locations I do mention are there for very particular reasons.

I found the Petrocultures Research Group and [After Oil](#), as well as the [Centre for Energy Ethics at St Andrews University](#)—all amazing resources. I remember last summer I was also enjoying poets Anne Waldman and Ulrike Almut Sandig, who both unpack mythologies in really compelling ways.

CW: You've mentioned that poetry is well-suited to engaging the abstractness of oil and energy. Could you say more about how poetry helps us wrestle with these issues and what it might offer that's different from other genres or critical approaches?

RS: For me, it's definitely the capacity that poetry has to imagine real situations differently, and also to evoke the uncanny or imaginary. Risk aversion is a huge obstacle when we're talking about transition. So, the ability of poetry to imagine alternatives and to step into the unknown is important. The whole idea of *acting into the impasse*, a phrase from *After Oil*, was really empowering for me when I was writing *Rough Currency*. This is something poetry does really well: stepping into the unknown and activating that space. Not just to look around and wonder at how unknown it all is, but actually to populate that space with other things, other ideas, other images.

IS: *Rough Currency* is organized into three sections: Above, Between, and Below. Where do those terms come from and how do they work together?

RS: I came across Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*, which talks about the oil industry using the category of 'below ground' to refer to geology, surveys, and digging—the underground work of oil discovery and production. 'Above ground' is then categorized as everything that happens after, including transport, logistics, storage, but also the societal

and political implications of what happens next. Mitchell posits that the middle ground is occupied by what he calls the ‘calculative space of economics.’ I love that word ‘calculative,’ with its sense of making material or concrete. It evoked for me the medieval alchemists who used a similar phrase: “as above, so below.” They were talking about ‘above’ as the heavens, astronomy, and astrology, which for them was just as much of a science. And ‘below’ to them meant life here on the ground. So that direct link between the oil industry and alchemy felt like they were playing with the same kind of ideas, except maybe the alchemists were just more honest about it. I mean, the role of economics to make concrete ideas that suit only some people's purposes is quite mischievous, to put it very lightly. So, I decided to invoke those different sections in how I structured the book with Above and Below, and then I inserted Between. But when I was organizing the poems, I didn't want to hold myself specifically to, for example, the Below section being all about geology and digging and material, and Above as everything else. The poems didn't fit neatly into one or either of those categories, so I deliberately used the template and then blurred the lines between the sections, which is really the point, to dissolve divisions.

IS: I'm curious about Vinyl/Pirates, which you call the keystone poem of the collection that activates an “alternate visioning of transition.” How did you approach writing about transition in poetic form?

RS: Much of the book is about invoking suitable guides other than economics. That's why there's a fair bit of reference to mythology, astrology, and alchemy. I was looking for suitable guides for navigating indeterminacy and the need to move between things without knowing what's coming next. Tools like intuition and imagination have been discredited within Western patriarchal power structures, which has fueled our disconnection and done a lot of harm. The poems are about reclaiming those abilities, in order to navigate whatever is unknown or disruptive.

CW: This collection features several concrete poems. How did that particular form help you write about energy?

RS: There are three main reasons why I think the form works really well for my purposes. First, it evokes materiality. You're literally looking at shape on the page, so straight away the mind goes to physical form, which is useful for talking about oil and reconnecting it to a knowledge that it comes from something physical and affects us in a very real way. Second, concrete poetry is useful for exposing mechanisms. A concrete poem will expose its own mechanism first. An example would be my spiral poem, “What drilling does #2,” which is a simple one that literally evokes the spiral form and tells us about action and an illusion of perpetuity. It's not hiding anything. Third, concrete poetry requires an active engagement from the reader. It empowers the reader as they perform the poem into existence or decode its meaning in a very material way—which also speaks to agency, the reader discovering their role in these processes.

What drilling does (I)

Drilling does what drilling does – and disappears inside itself. Perpetuates a motion
that revolves around the action of pointing to a dark unknowable core. And
a hole appears as evidence to justify its progress – and never appears,
but a drill-shaped space just big enough to hold itself and separate
the rest. Because that's what magic does. And *core* suggests
a finite place – a focal point; at once beginning, middle
and an end – if not in sight, at heart – a flattened
trinity, blackened light. A way to say *that's*
far enough, for now – no more. And it's
true that cores hold the seeds of
that thing's image of itself –
so when there's nowhere
left to go, maybe it's
seeds we're
dreaming
for

What drilling does (II)



IS: Throughout the collection there are references to magic, coin tricks, a magician, Houdini, the occult, and what you call “the spell of revenue” and “mythologies of endlessness.” Is there a sense in which the world built on oil is unreal?

RS: The world built on oil is unreal in the sense that it requires our disconnection from how it's produced, where it comes from, and how it becomes the stuff we use every day. I think we live under a veil of illusion in that sense, or a spell, so I wanted to use references to magic to expose some of it. It's a grand illusion that what we do to the planet and to other

species doesn't also do us harm as humans. COVID-19 has shown us how fragile these illusions really are by reminding us that we're all connected. In the poem "Did we forget we're tectonic," I say that we have "an armor of mirrors and imagined immunity", again evoking this illusion of the human species as separate. It's that very illusion that has allowed us to carry on to a point where it's just not possible to do so anymore.

CW: While *Rough Currency* is exposing and perhaps dispelling illusions, it also calls on us to dream differently. What do you make of this tension in the way you treat illusions and dreams in the collection?

RS: It's really powerful to remember this is all made up. What poetry can do, and what I'm doing in *Rough Currency*, is exposing that everything is story. We make all of this up. Capitalism: made up. And if we can make it up, we can unmake it and make something better. We tend to believe the story that's closest to hand, the comfort of the status quo, for some, which makes change feel threatening. So that's where the power of dream or imagination comes in. Really what we're getting towards is the question of the core values that drive these structures. Do we agree with them? It's similar to mythology in that sense: what's the moral of the story, what does it say about us, and what story do we *want* to tell?

IS: How has living in Scotland, and in Fife in particular, shaped you as a poet and how has it shaped this collection? What does it mean to live in Scotland in relationship to energy and oil?

RS: Scottish and UK politics is going through a transition and has been for decades, and the end isn't in sight. I'm pro-independence and pro constitutional reform, and I'm dismayed to see how oil has been used as a bargaining chip, as a reason why we would have enough money, resources, and potential to be independent. It's long been an issue, but it's not helpful that we should still be reaching for that argument. It also speaks to this state of political indeterminacy. We're neither one thing nor the other. From my point of view, the feeling of being Scottish is the feeling of being hopeful, optimistic, and very open to the world, but always reaching for something. It feels like we're speaking that language of transition, in a way. The question is how do you break through that barrier? In Fife specifically, in Levenmouth,



Wind turbine construction, Fife Energy Park, Methil. Nov. 2013.
Photo by Kim Traynor, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

we have a huge amount of post-industrial poverty. Levenmouth and Methil are amazing palimpsests of industry. It was coal, then it was oil, and now there's an energy centre with turbines. So, it's an interesting area to look at in terms of just one tiny little pocket of how industry has been layered up over the years and affected local community communities and local economies.

IS: The way you're describing Scotland reminds me of the tensions surrounding extraction in Canada and Latin America. In the latter, there's simultaneously the felt necessity of the resources provided by extraction—on the part of governments, at least—to use extraction to amplify GDP and perhaps to move to a post-extraction economy. In Canada, the continued commitment to fossil fuel extraction by the federal government is, in part, motivated by the need to maintain an electoral advantage: it is wary of alienating provincial governments and of invoking the fury of industry. Provincial and federal governments also imagine—cynically or not—that money from extraction can be used to fund green initiatives. The Scottish case sounds akin to this, though with the added belief that resources can mobilize the creation of a national identity. If this is the case, does a move away from oil imperil Scottish nationalism in any way?

RS: Scotland is also a leader in renewable energy production, so I don't feel like Scottish identity is especially wrapped up in oil, though in the past it has been. It's just as much engaged with alternate energy. I'm struggling to articulate it, but we don't struggle to understand ourselves and I think that is something uniquely Scottish. Oh, that's not fair. No, it is.¹ It is, because if you look at what's happening in England just now—the huge unraveling that's happening—it's partly about not having understood themselves for so long, with English and British national identities having gotten so intertwined and all that comes with it. In Scotland we're looking at 'the UK' as just another made up thing, seeing how it doesn't work for Wales, Northern Ireland, and England, and we're trying to change that for the better. Politically, for sure there's a lot to disentangle, a lot of conflicting interests. There's certainly the argument that oil jobs can transition to renewables. But really the issue of self-determination goes beyond all that – we first need to get to a position where we can make these decisions for ourselves.

CW: Your poem "Fife's Prometheus" describes the gas plant in Mossmorran as having an eerie species of reason that can be "seen too clearly glowering our horizons." I'm curious about that form of reason—is there a poetic reason being placed in opposition to it? And does the poem relate in any way to the notion of Scottishness we've been discussing? I'm thinking of Prometheus bringing back fire and freeing humanity from the gods...

RS: There's a lot in that poem. I came and went with the title so many times because it felt like just another layer of mythology. But with Prometheus, there is absolutely this idea of fiery potential, both to create and destroy—opportunity and undoing. There are various references and allusions in the poem, including William Blake's "The Tyger" and the Esso

¹ Ed's Note: This is, we are told, a classic example of [antiszygy](#)—the idea of polarity, especially within the Scottish psyche.

slogan about putting “a tiger in your tank”, which is what brought me to Blake in the first place. In his mythology, Blake posited a God-like figure called Urizen who is the embodiment of reason and law. The name evokes ‘your reason,’ but can also be traced to a Greek word meaning “to limit.” Blake’s Urizen is often depicted as a figure in shackles or with a net over him. He created the material world but was jealous of humankind’s freedoms. Blake positioned Urizen in opposition to the God-figure Los, who is of the imagination. So, we do have this mythological battle going on between reason and imagination, structure and freedom. Certainly, the situation at Mossmorran, and everywhere, the energy and the oil makes some things possible, but it also limits, damages, and destroys. In the wider sense of applying to Scottishness, the poem speaks to imposed limitations and having the courage to challenge them.



A Highland cow chews the cud with Mossmorran Petrochemical Plant flare stacks in the background. Wikimedia Commons. Simon Johnston, “A Hairy Coo.” [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

IS: Your poem “The deeps” tells the story of starlings interrupting power delivery in Airth and praises them as heralding the “season of air.” We can’t help but ask: is this a true story?

RS: [It is, joyfully.](#) It happened last December. Who doesn’t love a starling murmuration? It was such a message. Last year just kind of got really cosmic. It was like the birds were literally showing us the way. The starlings were being our storytellers. They were literally clouding the power lines in this village, interrupting the day-to-day, forcing us to stop and showing us this lighter way of being. I just thought that was an absolute gift from the

starlings. Even the name of the village, Airth, is the same as the Scots word for earth; yet it also contains 'air'. In terms of astrology, we are now in an Age of Aquarius—an air sign—and it turned at that exact time last year. Astrology is symbolism, connected to mythology. It's all story, and you can tune into that. We've come through a huge period of earth signs, which brought us agriculture, industry, capitalism and oil, for better and worse—and we're now entering a period of air and I think the starlings were showing us that. Pointing us towards airy things like collaboration, fairness, change. It's the way forward. Follow the starlings.



Starling murmuration, Hengistbury Head, Bournemouth, UK. Photo by [Nick Fewings](#) on [Unsplash](#)

CW: What do you hope readers take away from *Rough Currency*?

RS: The pamphlet ends on an unashamedly hopeful note. I hope readers will feel empowered because every single poem is about everything we've talked about: dispelling illusion, exposing mechanisms, and empowering the reader through the active process of encountering these words on the page and turning them into something else, which is a form of alchemy in itself. I hope to empower the reader, whoever they are, to feel that they can engage with these ideas. Maybe they're not so unwieldy. And be encouraged to act in whatever ways they can, that we all have a role to play. I ended the collection, kind of ironically, on a triptych of prose poems called "Alternate endings," which is a way of offering all these different mythological doors to what may be next. Which one do we want to try? It's all story. That sounds really whimsical and as a writer I'm always half

apologizing for being whimsical or offering that up. But actually, that's where so much of our power lies – in imagining alternatives that we can collectively call into being.

Rough Currency is available now from Tapsalteerie. Learn more about Rebecca's work at www.rebeccajoysharp.com.