

# WOAD



*FASHION | OPERA*

WHITE  
POUKENS  
VANDERHEIDEN

# WOAD: A Fashion-Opera

*Seven Scenes from the Tale of Tam Lin*



I.	Everything Is Always Possible	5:52
II.	Superposition	12:25
III.	Scene	6:24
IV.	Tam's Speech	3:58
V.	Interim: The Painted Ones	7:23
VI.	The Light That	5:06
VII.	The Transformation of Tam Lin	16:01
Total Duration:		57:12

In the medieval Scottish Borders, a boy is bewitched – into an ape, an adder, a speck of dust. But is it his shape that twists and churns, or that of the world around him? *WOAD* is a fashion-opera about metamorphosis and parallel worlds that re-reads the Scots myth of *Tam Lin* to ask: in a multiverse of endless possibility, what becomes of our potential, our regret?

*Tam Lin* is a traditional tale of transformation which, through its imagery, regards the mutable nature of the body: how, in adolescence, our bodies are recast and divided through time as a series of separate versions of ourselves. In *WOAD*, these ideas are used to explore the implications of the multiverse: where versions of events coexist in different areas and types of space. How could such knowledge allow us to re-imagine music, society, even ourselves?

*WOAD* engages these themes by further developing ideas devised in the fashion-opera cycle. For this particular piece, we wanted to create a sense of material objectivity in the listener's experience. This is achieved through the overlay of different compositional methodologies that each imply mutually exclusive ways of listening. It is hoped that this interpretive complexity allows for a series of different paths and perspectives: a constantly changing experience that is marked by the collapse of other possibilities. This was expanded throughout the process to radically incorporate contingency into every aspect of the work. *WOAD* seeks a way of dramatising absolute change, and the potential this implies, without it being neutralised to mere indeterminacy or simply another signifier within the work's limits.

Adaptation becomes a method for considering how fear of translation manifests an anxiety of limitlessness. That, on the one hand, scores persist through any interpretation; on the other, the endlessness of space rests upon pinpoints of quantum particularity. *WOAD* appeals to models of annotation within older artworks: Lear's fool; Gibbon and Eliot's footnotes; more recently, Gonzo and

Rizzo in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Here, this becomes a double focus that brings the work out into the world with edges intact: unstable fragments from the characters' lives are encircled by a commentary that – like the writhing backdrop against which Tam is caught – obscures and merges.

Created during 2020, the work contextualises itself against the social change foregrounded by that year's health crisis, relating its themes of metamorphosis and quantum 'flickering' to socio-historical revolution and the possibility of a break with the horrors of multinational capitalism. We know that cosmology teaches us: everything is always possible. Even tomorrow, the world could change utterly, into a beautiful, wonderful thing for all.

*Alastair White*



# 1) Everything Is Always Possible

Doom Metal's not the same as Thrash,  
yet only in their sameness can they be.  
Our minds know no negativity.  
There was so little in the change, you see,  
that kept times separate as roll and flash.  
How birdsong and morning coffee  
casting rings of steam upon pebbledash  
grey, gunpowder-grey of sky, gate, scree  
became separate as birch and ash.  
Steam blots the window, a careless brush  
with glass and death, like a million screens  
against which granule-sticky fingers push,  
paw the conjured

other-darkness of red, blue, green  
separate from darkness as flame and bush.  
Yet so little in the change you see  
that keeps all as possible as dry wood, as a living sky.  
Cornsilk-, Periwinkle-greys,

changed to awful light

*petal's pink upon the window*

*blots a stain on glass*

*yet only in the sunlight can they be  
empty structures, filled with watching  
pollen on panes in Troon, Eigg, Dundee  
discrete, separate as glow and glass  
the bloom's brittle, clotted veins*

*a rash*

## 2) Superposition

*O, the one dreaming. Be brave.  
You'll change. You will warp and change.  
You are made of chance, only, time.  
Shut your eyes.  
The magic is only time.*

Tamlane's in hell,  
Tamlane's eyes  
scooped out. Birch-plucked peel,  
potato-grey pinked as beetroot stains  
russet skin red, in skin and brains:  
birchwood clotting in the blood-meal.  
Tamlane's chest is burst, stuffed with dry,  
lichen-grey gravel.

The sound of gravel beneath the tires.  
Cooling shade of branches.  
An Audi pulls in the garage.  
Out steps the tired driver

shoulders coiling as a spell  
arms lengthened by keys  
and polythenes' shining yellow.

Tamlane's in love and a semi-detached.

On Sunday he pulls weeds from the rosebed,  
known for silver, ridiculous glasses.

Last year we heard he survived a bypass.

*...never know another's heart beats blood...*

Just a word to Janet as she went out the back,  
"Glorious, just to live."

Even sun upon the window dyed pink by petal-gauze.  
Against his skin: pressure, and the cooling stone of rose quartz.  
She dusts him like a broken pot, an antediluvian comb  
poking through years' rubble. Dumb, he writes upon his phone:

*"I dreamed I was an adder slack against your palm.*

*A moment between the black ape and the naked, greetin' knight;  
the plump man - both - and the poison's ancient witchcraft."*

### 3) Scene

The thing that changes -  
The thing clutching hold -

The table frames the dice roll.  
Illegal lives encircle suffrage.

The coin that ages -  
Its symbolic gold -

Innumerable exchanges  
between the bank and the kermode.

Reams of rotting pages -  
Their cipher and code -

Unending transformations  
in the same iambic odes.

Algorithms' fleshy, human nodes  
preserved by habit and chlorination.  
Arranged columns, identical abodes  
project difference, interminable phasing.

Time maintains its own unchanging.  
History keeps itself from ageing.  
Like gerund rhymes and perfect cadences:  
Content, structure. Goad, then continence.  
Contents, tucked in form and common sense.

The shuttered dance of quanta -  
foaming infinity -

behind the canyon range  
blacklit bowl  
by light

universes old.



#### 4) Tam's Speech

of course I read the poem who doesn't  
google themselves from time to time I don't  
remember exactly how it happened but sure it won't  
surprise you it's not the way it went at all look if it wasn't  
my glasses my nose my hair this shirt of course my ears I know you wouldn't  
believe me I used to be blackberry eyed a dancer even and free Jenny couldn't  
keep her hands off me the cinema's damp the diner's leather and heather she  
shouldn't 've picked have pulled have clasped have lain have laughed 've held  
on have changed I shan't ever feel that way again I expect but can't  
complain you get your lot beer and Roxburg and not  
dead yet what did you say the treespell the spell of change I daren't  
speak of it just that I was beautiful to say I am I am I am not  
the stonespell and spell of bark and hell yet what we dare not  
speak of is beautiful still to say I am I am I am not I am I care not  
dead yet or not what did you say what what do we dare not speak of it not  
that I was not  
speak of it just that I was beautiful to say I am not I am I am not I I am not I am

getting a little carried away with myself.  
The spell was never meant to about change,  
whether the knight, the adder or the hooting ape.  
From the wand of that bonny, callous elf  
came a curse far stranger than hell or shape.  
See, Tamlane is Tamlane when Tamlane's made strange.  
He's stone, adder, knight, faery-ape, again, him.  
But *where the fuck was he in the interim?*



##### 5) Interim: The Painted Ones

Wallace paints himself with woad.  
Gibson paints himself with Wallace.  
Tom Church paints the stone with Gibson.  
Stones split and smoothed to bowls.  
Bowls crush Glastum-pulp to colour.  
*Gorm ceilteach* pasted on the skin.  
Wallace dressed in love and leather,  
leather that rents and splits the body.  
Pink, body-sundered pieces.  
Pieces sent to myth and legend.  
Legend paints itself with woad.  
Woad paints itself with Wallace.

That same blue is painted on the skin  
of some sorry child, huddling in the heather;  
his spleen pierced and boyhood friend  
lying in bits; nearby, a snail crawls across a piece of tongue  
naive to the lays and pictograms.

That same blue shows the snake, bear and ape's  
flux of an endlessly mutable world  
the boy finds as he becomes the heather,  
becomes dumbness of the crawling snail  
slime that paints the earth with woad.



6) The light that

lights the canyon comes from stars  
predates the internet and dinosaurs.  
Neither light nor stars are fixed and steady.  
The universe expands because it's stretchy.

So the stars are wheeled back into space  
as the universe blows up at a pace  
that would scare the bejeebies out your daddy  
because adults think such things are silly.

(They'd rather talk about the news  
or which bottle of red wine they'll choose  
reeling off a list of names  
even though they taste the same.)

What this means is the bush's flame  
holds lodestar to the spinning vane  
of everything that is and was:  
Glasgow, gods, *Gilmore Girls*, effect - both - and cause.

All in thrall to something strange:  
that everything can always change.  
Weirder still, like the stars' black shelf:  
this rule applies even to itself!

## 7) The Transformation of Tam Lin

Yellow petals'  
bells. Blue paint.  
Bread baked  
in red metal.  
Whitening albumen.  
Lightning flares  
bark, a red glare:  
sparks like halogen.  
One made a wish  
even now could shutter:  
cow become butter;  
bone become dish.

In the space between  
before and after  
Tam and Lin  
lip and paper

*mythos and memory,*  
*poetry, half-recovered*  
*joy* cries out  
to the space before  
the stage  
the space between  
the arms of the chairs  
cries out to  
the space between  
the aisles.

Becoming not  
when being not

Being not there,

become nothing

Never

Neither

nor

no

not

twisting  
writhing  
changing.

ourselves, most ourselves

ourselves.

filled with others  
by our own absence,

less than the world.

again anything but the world.

the bush

the lightning

sun or constellation

just the space between  
ape and adder  
turn to another  
across the auditorium

moving, and stretching

*I see you, Tam.*

*I see you, Tamlane.*

*I see you, Tam, beneath the word's, the spell's evil.*

The Adder.

*I see you, Tam, beneath the wicker ring of willow.*

The Ape.

*Before the strangeness of the dayspell that warps all what's now lost, Tam, see you I?*

The Iron.

*Fur, paw and scale and stone-skinned heaviness, through eyes of the adder and ape,  
dust-mote, iron and shamed undress, Tam, see you I?*

The Dust-mote.

*I see you, Tam, churning.*

*I see you, Tam, see a thing within another.*

The Man, naked and crying.

*I see you, Tam, beneath the white paper, the stone, before the*

nine silver bells.

Silk.

A needle.      A

Green  
green

leaves.  
kilt.  
tree.

Yellow hair.      A rose.      A

Caterhaugh. A milk-white hand.

		A	
		grass- green	sleeve.
			Faery-earth.
		A	green, green
		A	kilt.
Sickness.		A	
	ball.	A	
garden	wall.		
			Father.
		A	green
			kilt.
Yellow hair.		A	
Caterhaugh.		A	
	well.		
A horse.	A rose.	A beautiful child	between.
A cold day.		A	
hunting party.			
		A horse.	
The		Queen of	Faeries.
		A	green
	hill.		
The			fairy land.
	Hell's tiend.		
	Hallow een.		
	Hallow		
	day.		
		A	plea.
Midnight.			
	Miles Cross.		



A black	horse.	A	brown	
	horse.	A	milk-white	
	horse.			
A rider.	A glove.	A		bare
	hand.	A		bonnet.
	Your arms.			
An	esk.			
An	adder.			
				<i>Your bairnie's</i>
				<i>faither.</i>
A				bear.
A			lion.	
	Love.			
	Red hot	iron.		
		Burning coal.		
	Well-			water
The naked	knight.			
The			green mantle.	
	Night.			
A			green mantle.	
	Miles Cross.			
	Midnight.			
	Bridles.			
A			green mantle.	
A	bird	in spring.		
The			Queen of	Faeries.





## PERSONNEL

Belgian soprano **Kelly Poukens** (b.1992) is the winner of the Stiftung Blatow prize in the International Anton Rubinstein Competition (Germany, 2018), the silver award in the Manhattan International Music Competition (USA, 2017). She was runner-up in the Honda Competition for Classical Music (2017, Brussels, Belgium), and won the Prix Sophie, Laureates Award and Audience Price during the finals and preliminaries of the Princess Christina Competition (2012, The Hague, the Netherlands).

She has collaborated with Alastair and UU Studios since the beginning of the fashion-opera cycle, making an international impression singing the leading roles of "The Designer" in *WEAR* (shortlisted for a Scottish Award for New Music 2019) and "The Storyteller" in *ROBE* (shortlisted for a Creative Edinburgh Award 2019 and reviewed by BBC Music Magazine as "impressive...excellent").

Other recent opera highlights have included "Trio Girl" in *Trouble in Tahiti* (Bernstein – Dutch National Opera, The Netherlands), "Sand und Taumänchen" in *Hänsel und Gretel* (Humperdinck – Reisopera, The Netherlands), "Frasquita" in *Carmen* (Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, De Doelen, The Netherlands), "Regan" in *King Lear* (Verdi/Markies – Holland Opera, The Netherlands), "Anitra" in *Peer Gynt* (Grieg - Brussels philharmonic, Het banket, Belgium) and "Marie" in the children's opera *Meermeisje* (Van Geel – Holland Opera, The Netherlands). She was part of the ensemble in *Un Ballo Mascara* (Verdi – Opera Zuid) and C(H)OEURS 2020 (Alain Platel – Vlaamse Opera & ballet, Belgium). She performed the speaking role of "La servante" in *Manon* (Massenet – Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris) and played the role of "Marie-Christine" in the music theatre play *Landru* (Het Banket, Belgium) together with well known Belgian actor Jan Declaire.

As a chamber musician Kelly has given solo lied recitals in famed venues as the Henry Le Boeuf hall BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts (Belgium) and Het Muziekgebouw Frits Philips (The Netherlands). She made her Concertgebouw debut under the baton of Christian Arming (The Netherlands) as "Uxor Pilati" in the Mathew Passion under the baton of Marc Albrecht. Other highlights have included the soprano solos in the music of Morricone in Liege and Brussels, the orchestral song "I shall love but thee" (van der Roost) for soprano solo and wood/brass band with the Royal Symfonic Band of the Belgian Guides.

Kelly has made recordings of her role in the opera *ROBE*, released by Métier Records (2020), the orchestral song "I shall love but thee" (van der Roost) and "Dream with me" (Bernstein) released by NLBB (2019, Belgium) and broadcast by the BBC sounds, the song cycle "De Innigheid der dingen" (Swerts) released by Kurt Bikkembergs (2014, Belgium).

At the LUCA School of Arts (Leuven, Belgium) she obtained her Master's degree in classical singing (*summa cum laude*) and subsequently her Master's degree in Chamber Music. At the Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts, Kelly was named talent-laureate as she obtained her Master's degree *summa cum laude* in Classical Music theatre (Tilburg, the Netherlands, 2017). She was a participant in the London Masterclasses at the Royal Northern College of Music (Manchester, United Kingdom, 2017), and artist in residence for TalentLab (Luxembourg, 2021).

Currently Kelly is coached by the Dutch mezzo-soprano Jard van Nes and American soprano Roberta Alexander. She regularly takes private classes with the English soprano Dame Felicity Lott and the American mezzo soprano Jennifer Larmore.

Saxophonist **Suzy Vanderheiden** (b.1968) took her first steps in music education at the age of 8. Apart from her high school education, where her major subjects were Latin, Greek and modern languages, she took lessons in music theory, saxophone and piano in a music school in Tessenderlo. She studied at the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp where she graduated for saxophone (1991) in the class of Freddy Vanattenhoven and also for chamber music (1991) in the class of Theo Mertens. She took singing lessons in the class of Rachel Fabry and composition in the class of Gilbert de Greeve. In 1992 she received her pedagogical diploma to teach saxophone.

She has been active as a soprano in a number of choirs: she sang in the children's choir de Nachtegaaltjes and, during her time in Antwerp, in the chamber choir Pratum Musicum led by Marcel Oncia and Musica Nova led by Roger Leens.

As a saxophonist she has played in several harmonie orchestras: the Royal Harmony Orchestra St. Lutgardis of Hulst-Tessenderlo, the Royal Harmony Orchestra De Kristene Gildebroeders of Val-Meer, Freddy Couche's Big Band, and also the Talking Saxes: a saxophone quartet of 4 women which originated in the chamber music class of Theo Mertens. This ensemble played regularly around Belgium and between 1993 and 1994 developed their performance in the chamber music class of Paul Beelaerts at the Lemmensinstituut Leuven.

She is currently a member of the Royal Harmonie Tessenenderlo led by Kevin van Giel and the saxophone quartet Sax-o-Fun, which toured across China in the summer of 2019.

Suzu teaches saxophone at the Urban Conservatorium of Hasselt, The Academy of Arts Noord-Limburg (KANL) in Neerpelt and a high school for music (Musart) in Hasselt.

**Alastair White** (b.1988) is a Scottish composer and writer. Described as “spellbinding” (Bouleztian), “excellent” (BBC Music Magazine), “virtuosic” (Winnipeg Free Press), “deftly manic” (American Record Guide) and “passionately atonal” (Gramophone), his work is characterised by a lyrical complexity which draws influence from technology, science, politics and materialism. Recent projects include the fashion-opera cycle of *WEAR, ROBE* (Métier Records February '21), *WOAD* and *RUNE*; a string quartet for the Altius Quartet's album *Quadrants Vol. 3* (Navona Records); the documentary opera *A Boat in an Endless Blue Sea* with Rathfern Primary School; *WORK* and *Time's Grains* for .alfabet; and *The Drowning Shore*, a Scots-Yiddish cantata.

Shortlisted twice for a Scottish Award for New Music (in 2019 and 2020) and a Creative Edinburgh Award (2019), Alastair has created work for the opera festivals Tête-a-Tête and Opera in the City, the international poetry festival Stanza, UKNA City Takeover, Compass Presents, The Scottish School of Contemporary Dance and The Scottish Poetry Library. His music is supported by Help Musicians UK, The Hinrichsen Foundation, The Marchus Trust, The Hope Scott Trust, The Sarah Caple Scholarship, The Royal Musical Association, and The Goldsmiths Graduate School Fund and Music Research Committee.

Alastair was a founding member of the Edinburgh-based bands White Heath (Electric Honey) and Blank Comrade (Red Wharf), and has worked as a session pianist and producer. He is a PhD candidate (supervised by Roger Redgate and Lauren Redhead) and associate lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he organised the interdisciplinary conference on New Materialism *Futures of the Real*. He publishes and speaks internationally on his research interests, which include the theory of contingency dialectics and its methodological implications in fashion-opera.

**ROBE** by Alastair White is on Métier **MSV 28609** (CD/digital)

“Fantastical, dystopian, highly poetic. The music is excellent.” – *BBC Music Magazine*

Words and Music by Alastair White  
Interpreted and Performed by Kelly Poukens and Suzy Vanderheiden  
Produced by Pieter Franssen  
Recorded at his Eastside Recording Studios in Belgium on the 29th-30th January, 2021  
Mixed by Henri Växby  
Mastered by Nick Powell  
Booklet design by Jo Hogan and Stephen Sutton  
First performed at the Cultuurcentrum Achterolmen, Maaseik (Belgium, 2021)  
Filmed and Edited by Robin Todde  
Fashion by Renli Su  
Fashion Direction by Gemma A. Williams  
Commissioned by Kelly Poukens and Suzy Vanderheiden  
Produced by UU Studios  
Supported by UK New Artists, the Goldsmiths Graduate School Fund and  
the Goldsmiths Music Research Committee  
Special thanks to Stephen Sutton and Daniel Wackett for all their advice and support

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