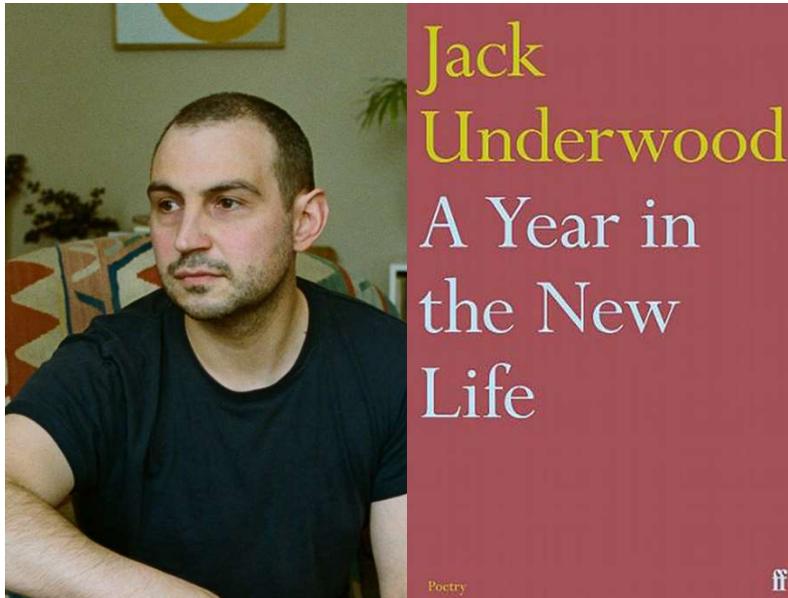


# ***A Year in the New Life*** **by Jack Underwood**



Jack Underwood was born in Norwich in 1984. He graduated from Norwich School of Art and Design in 2005 before completing an MA and PhD in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College, where he now teaches English Literature and Creative Writing. He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2007 and Faber published his debut pamphlet in 2009 as part of the Faber New Poet series. He also teaches at the Poetry School, co-edits the anthology series *Stop Sharpening Your Knives*, and reviews for *Poetry London* and *Poetry Review*.

## **Reviews**

'Jack Underwood demonstrates in *A Year in the New Life* that he's one of the most innovative imagists and thinkers writing in the English language. The poems work as multiform inward pieces which sustain a deep sense of their social and cultural positioning. Subjects range from parenthood, age, locality and political rallies, right through to the complexities and intimacies of love. The poems move to establish their own distinct archipelago, balanced and populated by vibrant discursive metaphors which rove the landscape of the private world, while still maintaining an affinity to a wider global consciousness.' – Anthony Anaxagorou

'I was done in by these poems, but I really lived as I read them; each one holding life and time in a balletics of stress and flow. Technically beyond much else around, Underwood's measured life-matter, humour and Creelyish syntax capture what's hardest to capture: love, new love, its growth and fret. A simple day at its most cruel and hilarious is clearest when witnessed like this.' – Holly Pester

## Alpha Step

A change to my usual sleeping position,  
earth holding me close  
like I'm something it loves.  
I feel a murmur through the hedgerow,  
old gods thawing from the permafrost.  
Only a matter of time  
before an empire falls  
into the hands of an idiot,  
and there are more ways of saying things  
than things worth saying;  
only a matter of steering the wind,  
which batters us daily; this only life  
that climbs beyond unfashionable  
beginnings, leaving us leaving it,  
breathless software, a bite taken out  
of the grand old narrative,  
while our ghosts refuel mid-air.  
Deep time. Homely time.  
The human print will not survive.  
I mean like, *woo*, there it was.

## Fifteen Babies in My Garden

each at a different stage in their development,  
including a fully grown adult baby, all of them  
sitting around, or lying, or trying to turn  
over onto their fronts, or back onto their backs,  
the sunshine apple-scented, the still trees  
monastic, as I carry a large tray of drinks  
out to them: different milks in different  
bottles I've sterilised, and, for the adult baby,  
an Old Fashioned in a tumbler, orange peel  
suspended in amber, a black cherry blot.  
'Here you go, babies!' I say, and they coo  
and squirm and gripe and sleep regress.  
'What are you guys talking about?' I ask,  
and the adult baby, being the best speaker  
among them and therefore, I suppose,  
their designated spokesperson, replies,  
'We were just talking about the ruinous  
and beautiful ways we're going to break  
your dumb old heart, and totally fuck  
your life up' and they all start laughing.

## The Novel

So there's a man, or a woman – OK, a person, and this person has a problem. Not so much a problem as a yearning. They live in a city but yearn for the quiet of the countryside. No, they yearn for the geometry, the voltage, the violent anonymity of the city. Or they yearn for the selfish, fat simplicity of their childhood. OK, something more specific. They yearn for the silence that followed the call of the mother-owl across the misted glade that morning in June. Or the silence of a blown filament, like a ruined suspension bridge in a snow globe without snow. That is the silence the person yearns for. Only they don't know they yearn for this silence. Instead they cast around, throwing their yearning over everything like holy water, not knowing the attainment of surrogate objects of desire only frustrates or aggravates their yearning, since the act of attainment itself eliminates an object from the category of desire, throwing it into relief, so that it takes on a figurine aspect, a repulsive resemblance of the silent moment that the person does not know they yearn for. Thus abandoned, the search continues, the world always ready with fresh and bright distractions. And this person is just like us. It could be us. Only it isn't. But you do know this person. I can tell you that much. Though of course, I needn't tell you. You know exactly who I am talking about.

## Discussion Ideas

- 'Alpha step' is the penultimate poem in this collection. How does 'there are more ways of saying things / than things worth saying' function as a poet's manifesto?
- Is your reaction to the observation 'The human print will not survive' also 'woo' – or not?
- 'Fifteen babies' – a cute cartoon or a scary horror film? Is what Holly Pester means when she talks about the 'cruel and hilarious' tendencies of Jack Underwood's poetry?
- What is the word 'monastic' doing in 'Fifteen babies'?
- Goodreads has more than 200 listings for novels titled some version of 'The Yearning'. What does 'the Novel' say about the art of novel-blurb writing? What

about the art of novel-writing? Do you think the speaker of the poem would like to write a novel of their own?

### **Other books by Jack Underwood**

*Happiness* (Faber & Faber, 2015)

### **If you liked Jack Underwood, try ...**

- Luke Kennard
- Lila Matsumoto
- Chrissy Williams

### **Jack Underwood online**

<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/underwood-uncertain-subjects>