

# I'M TOTALLY KILLING YOUR VIBES



AHREN WARNER

'A messy, disturbing triumph in the traditions of Arthur Rimbaud and John Berryman: how *Le Bateau ivre* or *The Dream Songs* would read if they'd been written today. It too could be the anthem of a generation.' – Fiona Sampson, *The Guardian*, on *The sea is spread and cleaved and furled*

'There is a breathtaking sense of formal ingenuity, irreverent wit, and unapologetic erudition in Warner's lines. As in his previous collections, allusion occupies an almost central position: the poet emerges a bricoleur of sorts as he generates a cross-hatched poetic landscape from disparate sources. Warner traces the performance and dissolution of the self through poems that are both ludic and sincere; manic and darkly comic; subversive and deeply vulnerable.' – Shalini Sengupta, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Winter 2022,.

'Warner's dexterous overlaying of tone paints our multi-channel reality. Two of the three long works comprising *I'm Totally Killing Your Vibes* began life as voiceovers for art films, yet the laconic exchanges live exuberantly on the page... Warner's iridescence of feeling stokes the life force of this book.' - Sylee Gore, *Harriet Reviews (Poetry Foundation)*

'Warner's verse appears to discuss this collocation of scarified surfaces – their bitty, cracked, granular noise, redolent of industrial disuse, and abuse – with the hygienic space in which art is consumed... this is poetry (it is poetry) of extraordinary poise and power.' – Vidyan Ravinthiran, *The Poetry Review*.

**Ahren Warner** has published three previous books of poetry with Bloodaxe, including *Hello. Your promise has been extracted* (2017), which was shortlisted for the Roehampton Poetry Prize 2018. His debut, *Confer* (2011), was shortlisted for both the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize 2013. His fourth collection, *I'm totally killing your vibes*, was published in 2022. His books have received three Poetry Book Society Recommendations and awards including an Arts Foundation Fellowship. He works across writing, photography and moving-image, with an intermedia project, *The sea is spread and cleaved and furled* published by Prototype in 2020. He was selected for Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2020 and his work has been exhibited at galleries and institutions including TJ Boulting (London), South London Gallery (London), Saatchi Gallery (London), Centro de Cultura Digital (Mexico City), Nikola Tesla Museum (Zagreb) and the Great North Museum (Newcastle).

I'M TOTALLY KILLING YOUR VIBES

Poems & photographs copyright © Ahren Warner 2022

ISBN: 978 1 78037 602 8

First published in 2022 by  
Bloodaxe Books Ltd,  
Eastburn,  
South Park,  
Hexham,  
Northumberland NE46 1BS.

[www.bloodaxebooks.com](http://www.bloodaxebooks.com)

For further information about Bloodaxe titles  
please visit our website or write to  
the above address for a catalogue.



#### LEGAL NOTICE

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from Bloodaxe Books Ltd.

Requests to publish work from this book must be sent to Bloodaxe Books Ltd.

Ahren Warner has asserted his right under Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Cover design: Neil Astley & Pamela Robertson-Pearce.

Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Limited, Glasgow, Scotland, on acid-free paper sourced from mills with FSC chain of custody certification.

# AHREN WARNER

# I'M TOTALLY KILLING YOUR VIBES



**BLOODAXE BOOKS**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems have previously appeared in *Poetry London*, *Prototype* and *Test Centre*. *The sea is spread and cleaved and furled* was first published by Prototype (2020). The text of *The sea is spread and cleaved and furled* was developed from the voiceover for a moving-image work, *I'm thinking what would sound sincere, but also, like, oh that's super cute* (2019), selected for Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2020 and exhibited at the South London Gallery (2021). *Serviced Living* is developed from the text for a film exhibited as part of a solo show, *We have a space for your every mood*, at TJ Boulting (London, 2022). I am grateful to Arts Council England, A-N Freelands Foundation and the Society of Authors for funding that enabled the completion of this book, and to Vahni Anthony Ezekiel Capildeo, Jess Chandler, Sophie Ruigrok and Mark Waldron for their critical advice, influence and indulgence.

**THE SEA IS SPREAD AND CLEAVED AND FURLED**



Are you happy, she asks. i'm happier, i say, and then: if you had to be an animal, which animal would you be.

She cannot fit her mouth around the English for the animal she means. Have you ever been happy, she asks.

She means a swan. She likes the way it wraps the long elegance of its neck around its lover until, like, forever.

i don't think i've ever been happy, i say. And then: if i had to be an animal, i'd be a zebra.

A zebra is just a horse with stripes, i say. i can tell she was hoping for something more profound.

I was hoping for something more profound, she says. In front of us, two cats are rolling on what used to be the grass.

The cats are rolling in the heat. Beyond, the ground gives to cliffs, it gives to the Tyrrhenian sea.

I think too much, she says, it's one of my problems. Let's play a game, i say. My skin itches on raw heat.

What type of game, she says. Let's make a list of all our problems, i say. You go first, she says.

We drink meloncello for breakfast. i make a silent list of my problems. i am thinking which ones would sound

like bare sincerity, i say. i'm thinking which would sound, like, super vulnerable. i'm thinking which would sound

sincere, but also like, *oh, that's super cute.*

You're a good me, i say. That dude with the gut behind the counter, he's a bad me, i say. She's snoring gently.

She's a good me snoring with elegance. The man with the gut brings coffee. Cardi B is a good me, i say.

Leonard Cohen is a good me, although he's dead, obviously. Michel Foucault is a bald me.

Foucault is a bald me that looks like Doc Brown. Michael J Fox is a metaphor for my own inevitable decline,

in the sense that another's misfortune is, actually, always about me.

Chris Brown is a terrible me, i say. She is wearing my underwear, she is purring like a hedgehog.

You snore like a hedgehog, i say. She is embarrassed. The taupe of her cheek flits rouge.

This is what i want, i say. What, she asks. To watch you blush, i say. The sea is cold, and we

are so very drunk. The sea is cold and she is not here. The sea is cold and we are spread out on a hot rock.

The sea is spread and cleaved and furred by the relentless heft of a tanker.

i am on a tanker and a drunk Estonian rigger is sleeping on my shoulder. i am on a ship sidling into Sicily.

i am on a ship that grinds and bumps against the Spanish waves. i am on a ship watching the water break

and acquiesce and sew itself back together again. That's what i want, i say. What, she asks.

i want to feel you give, i say. That sounds hot, she says. You're always thinking about sex,

i say. Will you sew me back together, she says. Probably not, i say.

And then, i say, are any of us really anything other than gaping wounds. Are any of us more

than a patch of weakened bone. That's dark, she says. i know, i say, and then: i only love my bed

and my mama, i'm sorry, i say,

because citing North American hip-hop artists is something i do, i say, it's something i do

to ease the tension, it's something i do with the kind of irony you should read as sincerity, i say.

This isn't cynicism, she says. No, i say. Or if it is, i say, it's also love.

It's also love, i say. It's also love, in the way your boot on the head of a kitten you've doinked with your fender

is a kind of love, i say. In the way, sometimes, when you're making a hollandaise sauce and it splits, you launch

the electric whisk so that the plug snaps right out of the wall, and the whisk crosses your open-plan kitchen,

the whisk spins and glides and spans the living-room wall, and you pick up the whisk and you kneel down,

and you start to thrash and gash the antique parquet floor until it splinters and the whisk is little more

than mauled plastic, and the sawdust of the floor is beginning to float gently in the tiny puddles of your hot tears.

It's a bit like that, i say.





Your tears are hot, i say. Thanks, she says. i like tears, i say.  
Thanks, she says, looking down at my

erect cock. It's not tears themselves, i say, it's not that i have a  
fetish for salted water,

a lachrymal kink. It's not the sadness, either, i say. Sadness is  
an unfortunate bedfellow of tears, i say.

No, i like the fact of a dam breaking, i say. That's a cliché, she  
says. Ok, i say, i like how tears feel like an oesophageal sphincter

giving, i say. Tears are like delicate eye-vomit, i say, in the way  
that puke is the unfortunate bedfellow

of vomiting, i say. You like to vomit, she says. It scratches an  
itch, i say.

i am itching at my skin. i am itching at the insides of my arms.  
i am itching at the backs of my legs,

i itch until my skin deepens to a red beyond this ridiculous  
British sunburn. i am itching until

my skin is a polkadot of hives. i itch until i bleed, until pin pricks  
give to errant drops that smear

across my thighs. She is drinking her espresso, slowly. She is  
talking about swans. She places her hand

on mine. She moves my hand away from the particular patch  
of skin i am mid-way through shredding.

She places her palm as a cool salve on this patch of half-fledged  
skin. She curls her fingers into her soft palm.

She runs those tiny, milk scythes against my arm. She runs the  
nails of both hands against the length

of my arms. She is itching my calves, she is digging her nails  
in. She is smiling sweetly as she

bleeds me. i am fizzing. i am humming, thank you.

Thank you, i say. She is not here, she is not here to say, 'you're  
welcome', in that way that both demurs

and says, 'damn right'. She is not here and i am sat on a hot rock,  
i am sat on an inflatable flamingo, i am floating

out to sea, i am floating towards the Albanian coast and the sky  
is clear and all i can see is the full moon

and the furcle and fizz of sea foam. A Dutch boy is unconscious,  
he is snoring on a sunbed as i trudge in

from the sea and place my wet, inflatable flamingo on the sand.  
The Dutch boy is barely eighteen.

The German girl by his side is twenty. The German girl is  
singing let's go to the beach, beach,

let's go to the beach. And i say, but we're already on the beach,  
and i make a slow

mournful gesture towards my flamingo.

The gestures of mourning, i say. That's a good title for a poem,  
i say. I don't think so, she says,

and i gesture to an inflatable flamingo with the closest i can  
manage to puppy-dog eyes. You're always

pointing to your damn flamingo, she says. And she's right, of  
course, she's always right. i spend my life

as a drunk Italian stag on an all-you-can-drink boat tour, necking  
complimentary

shots, and drinking something that has once been described as  
Prosecco.

i am wandering the dance floor, i am pacing in ever smaller  
circles, i am wearing a large

inflatable flamingo around my waist. i am pointing to its long,  
pink plastic neck protruding

from my crotch. i am pointing to my flamingo in the hope you  
don't look at my face.

*[A country wrapped in militarism, a country dug into autocracy. A  
bridge on which tanks are wont*

*to park themselves: as coup d'état, as show of force.]* There is a  
nearly new-born kitten outside the window.

She is not here. The kitten is making the exact noise one might  
expect of a stuffed toy.

She is gazing out of the window. It is a nearly new-born kitten,  
she says. It's dying, she says.

That's the problem with stray cats, i say. They're everywhere,  
but so are their mouldering corpses.

i want to take the kitten milk, i say. i want to spoon it, hushing:  
*it will all be OK.* It won't, she says.

i want to cup that kitten in my hands and bring it to our bed,  
i say. The hotel would have a problem with that, she says.

i want that kitten, i say.

and then: i roll over, i tuck myself into the one position that almost always brings the soft descent

of sleep. i am forcing myself to sleep. i am counting dead and dying kittens, i am counting undead

cats, i am counting zombie felids scampering, and bouncing, and making the sound a cat might make

if it had smoked a couple of packs every day of its nine lives, if a cat had puffed woodbines

like a cat-like beagle, like a cat who has sidled off to a hedgerow or roadside bramble to die a lonely death before

being stuffed and rigged with wires and having its sternum cracked to be fitted with a small plastic box

that makes the noise a cat might make if it were not, in fact, a cat, but the digitally enhanced fact

of my own pain.

Of your own pain, she says. Yes: the kittenish squall of my own pain, i say. And then: she laughs,

she rolls her eyes and puts her finger and thumb together like Steve Buscemi in *Reservoir Dogs*. She is playing

the smallest violin in the world, she is gesturing to the absurd depths of my sullen self-indulgence.

But it feels so good, i say.



It feels so good, i say. Really, she says. i'm not sure you're properly accounting for my #emotionallabour, i say.

She is demonstrating very little interest in my emotional labour. In fact, she is demonstrating an emphatic lack of interest

in my emotional labour. i am good with that, i say. With my disinterest, she says. Well let's be blunt, i say: you and i

are really the same person, aren't we. She is nodding. A little disinterest might be healthy, i say.

For someone who finds themselves so compelling, she says. i am nodding. i am not really listening,

i am thinking about Cardi B. i am thinking about how i am a rich bitch and i smell like it. i'm in a boss bitch mood, i say,

and these are boss bitch shoes.

These are boss bitch shoes, i say. She is making the exact sound a gerbil might make, if the gerbil was trying to lift

a relatively heavy weight. A ham sandwich, for example, a ham sandwich larger and heavier than the gerbil on which it sits,

a gerbil trying to squat-lift its own weight, along with the heft of a thick-cut sandwich, constituted largely of bread

and ham, and the slightest scraping of a particularly delicious dijonnaise. It is a noise that sounds pretty much

like a squeak. It is a snore. She is squeaking and snoring and dribbling lightly on my chest.

Our taxi is skimming the Bosphorus, slowly. Her hand is absently pummelling and pawing at my crotch.

i am hot and hard and alone in a cab with a middle-aged man called Mehmet. Do you think Mehmet can see

how horny i am, i say, how obscenely jacked and awfully desirous i am. And alone, she says. Yes, i say, and alone.

We can all see that, she says.

You're terribly alone, she says. i know, i say. And then, i say, aren't we all, at bottom, just wrapping ourselves

in others, in their cuddles and kisses, and spooning in the rapt haze of dawn light, our only free hand

moving from their knee to their hip with a slight twist at the mid-point bringing our fingers slipping between

their thighs as a very gentle good morning, that leads to an incrementally firmer how did you sleep, as they turn

and nibble sloppily on your bottom lip, until they open their eyes and one of you enters the other,

much like how the Sartrean subject exists only in the eyes of another, much like the way Drake sings

*baby, you finer than your fine cousin, and your cousin fine, but she doesn't have my heart beating double time,*

but it's only his own heart that beats.

Is that your heart beating, i say. i feel myself cringe. We are spread out on a hot rock rising from a shallow bay

between Naples and Sorrento. Our clothes are bunched and sullied among the pebbles and boulders on the shore.

What is this all about, she says, are you just fucking with me. Yes, i say – i place her arm around me

and snuggle up – i'm totally fucking with you. But also, i'm not.

She is suggesting a second defensive line of poison. i am spraying a second defensive line of poison

between the old oak stable door and the second, interior door that is made of glass and steel.

We are digging in, we are waiting for the cockroaches' dusk offensive, when they swarm up from sewers

and scuttle along the old slabs of the Palermo pavement, when they charge under the doors of our Airbnb

as we are upstairs and one of us is going down on the other, or we're spooning in the glow of a Netflix Original Drama,

until the lull of sleep and the vicious light of morning and i am sent down with an aerosol of poison

and a boxfresh sneaker and our defensive lines have not held, but have limited their advance

to a few dozen roaches pitifully trying to drag themselves towards our bowl of Cantabrian stonefruits

and i am at last the vengeful god i've so often dreamt of being, and i am slapping my boxfresh sneaker down

and i am splatting and spattering and shouting *die motherfuckers, die* and they are dying with a crunch and a spurt

of their entrails, of the frothy egg-white of their young who are nothing but spawn, but who will hatch soon enough

and come for us in the hot fug of night.

Tonight is a super hot fug, i say. What is a fug, she says. That's difficult to say, i say.

We have paid a krunked Italian man with a very small car and a questionably-cropped denim jacket

to drive us back to the city. She is sat next to him, i am sat behind her, i am pressed against

a middle-aged Hungarian woman who once worked in B2B telesales. Our B2B saleswoman

is squished against a former US marine who has seen the business end of her penchant

for snorting sambuca. He is covered in his own vomit, he is sat behind our monumentally shitfaced driver.

The driver speaks at an alarmingly rapid pace. She turns to tell me that he is refusing to stop the car

unless he gets her number. i giggle; she is worried. i'm not worried, i say: we have a US marine

and he's sat behind that krunked motherfucker. He could wrap his brutish arms around our driver's neck,

i say, he could whisper 'don't struggle', like Jack Bauer, in episode after episode of hit 2000s TV show, *24*.

He could whisper 'don't struggle' as some enemy combatant, some spy, or – in fact – our monumentally shitfaced driver,

refuses to comply, then flails and jerks until he sinks softly into the benevolent violence of our ex-marine's arms.

Our ex-marine is sobbing uncontrollably. He is knocking his head into the back of the driver's headrest.

He is clawing at the driver's headrest.

The sea is spread and cleaved and furled, i say. You've said that before, she says, you're starting to repeat yourself.

The sea is spread and cleaved and furled, i say. By the relentless heft of a tanker, she says.

Yes, by the relentless heft of a tanker, i say, and by the small diesel-powered skiff we've borrowed for the day, and filled

with Antipodean millennials and crates of *Mythos*, until its hull sits a little lower than the Albanian gent who rented it to us

would like. That's true, she says. And by our own bodies, i say. You mean by your own body, she says.

i do, i say, the sea is spread and cleaved and furled by the stuttering heft of my own body, by the whip and flicker

and chunk of my own legs, and by the spread and drag of my oddly spindly arms that heave the weight of my recalcitrant heart

through the waves. I know, she says. i swim like a sad hippo, i say. Without grace, she says.

Yes, i say, but with the plump, grey certainty of getting my own way.





i like getting my own way, i say. Don't we all, she says. You really want me to tie you up, i say.

I do, she says. But what should we use, i say. She is gesturing at the towelling belt of my dressing gown.

i'm not sure, i say. Why, she says. i'm not sure these hotel gowns are 100% cotton, i say.

i feel like it might be a polycotton blend, i say, and that could be unpleasant. Unpleasant is what I like, she says.

That's why you're here with me, i say. It is, she says. She is crossing her wrists behind her back.

She is turning away. i am tying her hands behind her back. She is turning towards me.

i'm not sure, i say. Why, she says. i feel like you're performing a role for my pleasure, i say.

Are you enjoying it, she says. i am, i say. Are you happy, she says. Enjoyment and happiness are not the same, i say.

I know, she says, but are you happier. i'm happiest when i'm enjoying myself, i say. How long will that last, she says.

i'm not sure, i say. i'm trying to perform the vacuity of my own self, i say. Why, she says. Why not,

i say. And then, i say, have you ever thought about how, when Drake sings *take that fucking dress off, I swear you won't forget me.*

*You tell me you're just not the type, you wanna do this right, but... does waiting really make us better people?*

He's really just another iteration of Marvell's *But at my back I always hear, time's wingèd chariot*

*hurrying near; then worms shall try, that long-preserved virginity, and your quaint honour turn to dust...*

i think about it often, i say.

I live it, she says, and it's not very interesting.

i think about it often, i say. About what, she says. The sea, i say. Oh, she says, stirring her tiny coffee

with a tiny spoon. It is six in the morning and two men in high visibility jackets are turning a massive cog

and a massive coil of rope is unfurling, and slipping into the sea. i am sipping a tiny coffee and eating a tiny

chocolate croissant, and licking the salt and sweat and the odd pépite of chocolate from my upper lip.

i am shivering, i say, to no one, or to the sea, or to a self that is almost entirely a network of conjectures

about a certain person's thinking about me. It gets to a point, i say to this loose filigree of conjectures that are just about

hanging together, where you can't tell if you're slapping another's, or your own, face, it gets to a point

where you want to slap yourself so hard, you think you find yourself slapping another, and then you think you're slapping

another, but you're tearing strips from your own face.

i am tearing strips of jackfruit from a jackfruit taco at a vegan fastfood eatery, because vegan

is in, and jackfruit is the new catch-all vegan feel-good meat substitute for people like me

who like the dirty slip of something akin to flesh, and more cashew-mayonnaise than is possibly

good for them, but who also enjoy the semiotics of their own moral rectitude nearly as much as the food.

So, is that a problem, i say. For who, she says. Is it a moral failing, i say. It is, she says, although

in the world we live in, it's hardly up there is it. Up there with what, i say. I don't know, she says, perhaps

genocide, or sex trafficking, or the systemic oppression of women. That's a fair point, i say,

and this jackfruit is delicious.

i was staying in LA and the jackfruit was delicious, i say, and the farmer's market had the most wonderful array

of speciality peaches, i say, all laid out by variety, with sample slices for each type arranged perfectly on a tray.

She is giggling, gently. What, i say. I'm just wondering if you're aware of how you slip so easily

into self-parody, she says. i'm aware, i say, slipping into self-parody. i'm aware that i am sat at a small ornate table,

alone, facing a smallish mosque, picking at a small plate of tabouleh as, somewhere, the muezzin

issues his call to prayer. Where do we go from here, i say. We keep going, i say.

We keep going, i say. Why, i say. Why not, i say. Shall we talk about Freud, i say. Do we have to, i say.

We do, i say. And the 'death drive', i say. OMFG, what is your problem, i say. Why can't you just

leave the artifice of your own learning at the door, i say. i can't, i say. It's kind of like brain damage, i say,

it's like the patient who recovers from hypoxia but who will always tremble or forget certain names, i say.

OK, i say, but keep it brief, i say. i've always felt a certain affinity with Freud's description of the death drive, i say.

*Blah blah*, i say. Of the drive to destruction, to darkness, to a nothing that is also the only way

of quelling the terrible excitation of living, i say. You're such a bore, i say. That's true, i say,

but what i'm saying is also true. OK, i say, so why keep going.

So why keep going, i say. Because of this, i say, gesturing beyond a few rocks to a couple of crabs

scuttling and stopping to bathe under a late Sicilian sun. i am slipping my hand into her hand and curling

her fingers into my palm. She's not here, i say. i know, i say, but the tears streaking my face are real, i say

and so is the way my neurons are shivering with something i have, in the past, called love, i say. That's fair, i say,

but is it enough, i say. It is, i say. Even if you're alone, i say, even if you're dawdling and dithering and floating

from one shore to another, endlessly partying and forgetting what it feels like to inhabit your own face.

It's not ideal, i say, but it's a bed of my own making.

