

NEWCASTLE POETRY COMPETITION 2020



PRIZEWINNERS' ANTHOLOGY

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Foreword

What can it mean to be reading, writing and sharing poetry at a moment of crisis? During this great pause in normality, sitting with poems might be one connection we can all enjoy. While the recitation of poetry foregrounds the figurative art of language-making, it also invites a coming together: in common witness to the act of a poem, we each bring our own experiences to bear on the reading, the singular poem exponentially multiplying and expanding on its outward journey.

The event at which these poems were supposed to be launched, the 2020 Newcastle Poetry Festival, has been suspended as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the spirit (and in some cases the letter) of the Festival has moved on-line with the launch of *Inside Writing* – an exciting and varied offering of digital poetry events throughout Spring and Summer 2020: <http://archive.nclcommunity.org/content/?tag=inside-writing>. You can also access all of our *Inside Writing* digital events via our social media channels:

Twitter: @NCLA_Tweets

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/newcastlecentrefortheliteraryarts/>

Through the age-old art of *poiesis* – the bringing forth into life of something that did not previously exist – we are reminded that, in whatever format they are transmitted, our words carry weight and meaning; that through them we can work to move forward—together, despite our isolation.

As the 3rd March deadline for the Newcastle Poetry competition approached and our inboxes swelled with entries, corresponding news of the COVID-19 crisis spread. Soon we were locked down, scattered and working remotely, united in our apprehension. And while it is difficult coping in isolation, we hope that, in reading this anthology of prize-winning poems, you will feel as we did reading them: temporarily joined with another person, one who might be saying—*This is what the view's like from over here; sit a while and enjoy it with me.*

Newcastle Poetry Festival team

Jake Morris-Campbell, Sinéad Morrissey, Linda Anderson,

John Challis, Theresa Muñoz, and Peter Hebden

Judge's Report

Colette Bryce, Adult Poetry Prize judge

Neither the author nor I could have imagined, when 'The Handshake' was submitted, that the simple handshake would be outlawed at time of reading, along with so many other gestures of connection during the Coronavirus pandemic. I admired the strength and directness of the speaking voice in this poem, evenly addressing a public figure (we might think of the news story of Brett Kavanaugh turning away from the father of a murdered Parkland student). The poem's inquiry into the meaning and motive of the deferred gesture opens out to bigger questions of human connection and empathy, 'the reaching out of two creatures [...] in our separate galaxies of skin'. 'The Handshake' builds in momentum to arrive at the searing image of its closing lines. It is a poem for our times and I'm pleased to award it first prize in this year's competition.

'Girlfriend-watch', in second place, is so chilling I nearly didn't choose it, wanting to move quickly away from the character it depicts so precisely. The poem has a great opening, taking us straight in to the claustrophobic interior of the obsessive, controlling scenario. By the end of the poem, we're not sure if we have witnessed something terrible happen or just about to happen. We may not even be sure if Girlfriend is real or imaginary to her constant watcher. The scene is expertly drawn, the lines well-paced. There's a Browningsque quality to the god fantasy of the obsessive male who 'can never change the channel' of his thoughts, a kind of Porphyria's Lover for the technological age.

The rich colours and sensations in 'Spell for a Stonemason' make it a poem you could almost warm your hands at. Its palette of autumnal yellows and golds, as the year turns away from the sun, seem to suffuse the poem with warmth as its narrative unfolds. Much happens in the small space of six tercets – a long journey, the relationships between the speaker, the sister, the stonemason who is addressed, and the boy in the 'wind-bleached grave' at the other side of the world. I loved the description of the gold leaf 'fine as skin' in the 'ammonite darkness of her case', destined to illuminate the 'sockets' of the boy's name carved in stone. It's a poem that seems to unfold a little more with each reading, and I'm pleased to award it this year's third prize.

First Prize: Damen O'Brien

The Handshake

When he reached out his hand to you,
the father of the boy your government had
murdered for a policy, or so the papers said,
you did not take it. Why was that?
Perhaps you felt he offered something heavy
as a neutron star, slick in-falling burden
of despair, too hard to grasp, or gift
of unwanted knowledge, poison chalice of
truth, the wither and the charring of that
inconvenient light, which torches out self-
deception. Perhaps you know that you can
stopper up your ears, can hold your heart
in the cold ocean between each beat, can
place a lock upon your tongue, if you must,
but a handshake is part of the oldest language
and will disclose what you hold back, what
the politburo, apparatchik wish you not to say,
rehearse it though you might: limp fish, sweaty
or dry palm, masterful and firm, crush
and domineering, pull-in and shoulder squeeze,
tool of politicians and of stars, but
more is taken in a handshake, than is given,
comfort if it is offered, or disdain, the
reaching out of two creatures separated by
a frangible and uncertain strait, the cellular
barriers of policy and position, and grief,
which is the yawning chasm over all. Perhaps
none of this: you'd turned away, the cameras
flash and fruitless dissections fill tomorrow's news.
So few opportunities to reach out, so few to take,
to show amity and kindness, in our separate
galaxies of skin. Perhaps it was a media
stunt, an impossible trap, an ambush of
ideologies, but you cannot hide from
a handshake, and to shake a hand both men
must come close enough to touch and wear
each other's fingerprints burning on their palms.

Second Prize: Natalie Crick

Girlfriend-Watch

Poorly Girlfriend sleeps like a parched stone.
Boyfriend watches her instead of television.
Boyfriend watches when light slats
dangerously expose her black eyes to him.
His hand is a quill; the crow feather a flutter to ease
out her bad, the nib a point stroking her cheeks.
Boyfriend makes up Girlfriend's face
with motes of ash from his fingers.
Her face is lengthening, looking up.
To Boyfriend she seems Unsafe. Undelicate.

He plays love with her,
plays fetch, plays harm.
He likes her to suck his fingers,
He likes her to smile, always.

Boyfriend likes to use the biggest knife
to slice Girlfriend's strawberries, likes to see
the red of them against the lap of white at her throat.
Boyfriend confesses how much he loves Girlfriend
to the mirror. He whispers the names of the others
he loves, but can never change the channel on the remote.
Boyfriend watches Girlfriend instead of television.
He turns the ceiling light on and off to see just what she will do,
lights up the room bright to check she is still breathing.
Off and On.

Third Prize: Pippa Little

Spell for a Stonemason

Sister flies south for a day and a night,
a night and a day.
This first early dusk without her

I stir cumin, turmeric and saffron into burnished oil
as god-speed and in gratitude, for here
we are turning away from the sun; soon

your hands will remember how cut stone sings with cold,
new tombs memorise themselves in frost.
Shyly you brought it, gold leaf fine as skin,

burning soft for the sockets of her boy's name
on his wind-bleached grave. It warms itself now
in the ammonite darkness of her case.

The kitchen looms yellow-deep;
I think how loving kindness can anneal old hurts,
bless dry tributaries; how my spoon's arc,

swirling jet trails of gleam and solder,
is a kind of wildfire
seen from a back road far into the woods.

Highly Commended: Emily Cooper

Garlicking

Until I was an adult I always burnt the garlic –
it charcoals so quickly in hot oil.

To temper the heat you must first add onions,
perhaps some carrots and celery. If you choose
to add the garlic first never look away.

Soon you add the tomatoes.

A quick cooling is civilising. Such as a swim
in a cold sea after you have had a row.

The sea and tears have the same composition,
they taste the same.

Consider wildgarlicking your sourdough.

It will not rise. The antiseptic qualities of the garlic
interfere with the propagation of the yeast.

Their similar wildnesses do nothing to cohere
the two. You must add larger volumes of yeast. Allow it
to bubble to excess. Give longer rising times. Be gentle
but not overly considerate. Use the better basket.

Raw garlic thins the blood.

My Grandfather swore by it. A garlic clove in the vagina
is a treatment for thrush. Be forewarned of the lingering
metallic taste of garlic in your mouth. Do not be alarmed.
It seems obvious, all these things are connected.

Highly Commended: Vanessa Lampert

Student

Two stray dogs in the town criss-cross winter streets,
but mostly skirt the shoreline, drawn like all of us
to the sea's colossal glass pool.

You've started looking out for them
their tail-up trot behind strangers, the two inseparable,
never tiring of the search for someone to be with.

Renée says *you must try harder to be a neutral observer
of island life*. So you scissor your long dreadlocks, sever them
at the roots, blades hard on skin and it still feels like defiance.

The matted ropes fall around you one by one.
Now separated you give the afternoon a second chance,
open the letter that came yesterday

your name inked purple and green felt tip.
Swathes of vivid flowers circle the address,
longing, condensed to ink on paper,

the reverse a cloud of small pink birds in flight,
on the seal where she put her mouth and thought of you.
Come back, it whispers. *Fly home to me*.

You let the letter drop to your bed, to your fallen dead hair.
In the evening you leave the flat, cold sea air on your neck,
to buy strong cigarettes and cakes neatly packaged

in a white box. You walk down to the beach, light up,
inhale hard. The two dogs stand to greet you,
each one panting, eager for another chance to matter.

Highly Commended: Charles Lang

The Chase

for Ciaran Carson

Aw it takes is a wee *fuck the polis* n a night ae excitement is on:
the chase, navigatin the side-streets n gable-ends, hidin in bushes,

under motors, behind wheelie bins. We get up close so they cin see us
then we're away again wae another *fuck the polis* between pantin breaths.

They've sent fur back-up, a second van tae negotiate as its gettin dark,
but we know the scheme better than they dae, or ever will,

n we map it wae ease – the school, the wee shop, the tree swing,
the bought hooes, ma granny's hoose, ma pal's aunty's hoose, the lane.

We've took a break in a close. They approach it n we're oot
the back door n er the fences like hurdles, athletes fur the buzz.

Before ye know it the chopper's oot (coppers in a helicopter) n the searchlight
shines like a Hollywood premiere – we're the stars ae *Catch Me If You Can*

but they canny, n we've just slipped intae ma pal's hoose fur a drink,
changed oor tracky taps n skip hats cover oor heids. Incognito.

Watch this. We're walkin right doon the street right past the polis
casual as, no givin a fuck, n ma pal turns roon n says *awright officers*

mit yees been up tae the night?

Highly Commended: M.R. Peacocke

Flies

There's a rusted yellow rose tapping at the pane.
In here a bluebottle keeps veering and droning,
wanting the air to open.

I'm old, I'm like Roman glass,
no more use, carefully kept, fragile and cloudy.
Everything about me is a long time ago.

There was a kitchen where I used to play. I watched
houseflies riding an invisible carousel.
They were happy as they were,

sipping the smells. Let me out
to the ragged world, freed from sweepers and sprayers
who come in early for those of us on our backs.

Highly Commended: Claudine Toutoungi

The marmots are suffocating

J'admire votre hérisson

you tell the woman in the artisanal cake shop
because it isn't every day you see a chocolate-sculpted
hedgehog

and in the forest glade
upon discovering that all wild bees
are welcome at the bee hotel you ask the hive
and what about les abeilles domestiques?

the hive makes no reply

likewise the mountains
—textbook blanket
silence

and
you
below
overcompensating

filling the void with topic after random chitchat topic: *le kilomètre vertical*, the recipe for *tartiflette*,
the conjunction of the sirocco and foehn that blew a little bird straight through the restaurant,
the cat Macaroon (*perdu ou volé*) and the writing on the wall in the tunnel under the bridge:
ici les marmottes suffoquent

Judge's Report

Vidyan Ravinthiran, Young People's Poetry Prize judge

I enjoyed reading these poems, and it took a few tries to pick out the twelve I liked best. Why these ones? Because in all of them, there's a moment—or, longer than that, a duration—where language comes alive (it sparkles, flares) and words, rhythms, images achieve a compelling fluency. Impressed by the number of young people who wrote about social issues—bullying, race, gender, the environment—I didn't decide on this basis, but looked for instances of imagination and verbal daring. A poem, said Robert Frost, can't be worried into being, but must ride on its own melting, like a piece of ice on a hot stove: these twelve possess that momentum. Some are funny, some have a twist at the end, some explore relationships, and there's deft use of form, and some startling lines which will stick with me. It was a pleasure to read them, and I hope the poets go on writing, and sharing their work: I look forward to seeing what they come up with in the future!

I'd like to say something about each individual poem, even though there are twelve of them! There's no order to the following, no ranking—all are winners. 'Patti Smith' has a wonderful, mysterious last line. 'You Taught Me' is careful, touching, and musical (those lovely monosyllables). 'Windows' is a burst of invention, a witty, metaphysical poem. 'Cutlery' impressed me with its surging, swaggering lines, its range of tones. 'Baba's Burgers' is near-perfect: vivid yet controlled, it wouldn't be out of place in a magazine. 'Comfort' is just as long as it needs to be: suggestive and haunting. 'Grandad's house' is funny, and I loved the twist at the end. 'Once' contains some beautiful, exact imagery, and a feeling for the lilt of a line. 'Frankenstein's Monster': a character is created, succinctly, in a poem of psychological exploration. 'Constellation' uses form beautifully: sculpted lines melodiously intertwine. 'The daisy chain...'—there's so much energy in this poem, a devil-may-care slalom from image to image. The line-divisions of 'Treading Water' are subtle and significant: this is a poem about control, and its shape carries much of the argument.

Windows

The reflections in windows,
are parallel universes
and they are filled with
the same people
but
underwater.

And in this universe,
are their dreams the same?
They flitter and flutter
behind the glass,
somehow
brighter.

I watch them,
blurred by the streetlights.
Small like dolls
a camera obscura vision
detached
holograms.

Freya Buckley, 17

Comfort

The closet is a space I climb into for comfort.
I can sense the darkness enclosing around me.
My mother's scent lingering in the air.
I can feel the softness of the carpet inviting me in.
To lay down and sleep.
I can hear the shouting starting again.

Maria Cunha, 13

Frankenstein's Monster

He always loved looking at himself.
It was a hobby,
a passion.
He'd take in his whole image –
his hair, his skin –
but now he knew his own eyes
would draw him in
like the call of the void.
He wore eyepatches
and sunglasses;
goggles,
painted eyes on
the back
of his gloves;
tried to bring himself to
pour vinegar in his pupils,
but remembered some past life
with deep brown
coffee to go.

Maisie Goodfellow, 18

Grandad's House

My Grandad's house is a home
stacked with memories piled like photographs,
scrapbooks and albums and boxes of string,
a place to remember when the years grow old.

My grandad's house is a tidy one,
compared to my nanny's nest of print
where she sat like a dragon hoarding gold.

My grandad's house is a shadowed house,
where the fridge is never empty
but the cupboards are bare:
a KitKat always sneaks away
and settles on a table with a cuppa.

My grandad's house is a Sunday roast,
with ice lollies, crisps, and a sofa for three,
a conservatory strewn with the bones of empires
and beetles rolling with wheels on their backs.

My grandad's house is special,
a feather boa in the spare room,
a pair of laddered tights.

Antonia Johnson, 16

Once

Once I carried a girl,
sitting sadly on my shoulders,
a trapped lamb crying for the sheep she'd lost.
Every night our bodies touched;
we flickered like candles on the lake.

Once I carried a girl,
lying softly in my arms,
starved by pestilence and sickness of the mind.
Every morning I held her hand,
making sure the travellers saw our flight.

Once I carried a girl,
who held tightly to my back;
I was stricken with grief with the load I had to bear.
Every mealtime we talked,
spilling every secret.

Now I'm carried by a girl
who lifts me up to heaven,
the shoulders that I always craved
but never knew I had.
She pulls me through.

Antonia Johnson, 16

Constellation

Strung from the blank side of the moon,
Tipped wings brush craters,
Mouth open ready to swallow oblivion whole,
Her white cinders mellow against the cosmos.

Tipped wings brush craters,
Pulling against Orion's bow,
Her white cinders mellow against the cosmos,
Dwarfed by luminous scree.

Pulling against Orion's bow,
Flung into the heat of quarrelling universes,
Dwarfed by luminous scree,
Her mind drifts between fire and ice.

Tender hands cup reality,
Mouth open ready to swallow oblivion whole,
The viscous night succumbs to amnesia,
Strung from the blank side of the moon.

Philippa Musgrave-Asher, 17

Treading Water

Every new day is a leap of faith,
Hope, when you drag through the air
And take the plunge.

But the deep water's cold and oppressive —
Claws raking up your skin,
Exposing your bones. Leaking blood

So the warmth can leave you too.
Hold your breath to keep it inside
You. Else it'll be stolen. Poisoned.

Some days each breaking wave is enough to
Overwhelm, the power to tear you from your feet
With unmeasurable force.

If you fight the Tide, you'll drift
To some paradise of originality. But
To fight is to expect fatal wounds.

Your legs writhe frantically
But it is barely enough to keep your head
Above the water.

Amy Nugent, 17

Cutlery

I am not lazy
When you ask me to go and get the knives and forks for dinner,
And I act reluctant.
My sigh and slumped shoulders are not a sign of teenage apathy. Don't 'kid' yourself.
Truthfully, I am unwilling because
My hands betray me.

I see the dull silver cutlery –
Obedient in lines
And my hands grab four pairs
Of knives and forks. Habitually.
At the start, I was not able to bring myself to put back the useless pair
So the knife and fork would sit (hidden) on my lap while I ate, secretive and lifeless.
The warmth of my body could not thaw the ice of the cold cutlery. At least they have each other,
I would muse.
I cannot be happy for them.

Now, it's just another reflex:
To drop the fourth pair back into the drawer
And hear the clang echoing in the space where you no longer stand.
Although I don't have to think about it anymore, I still feel it.
No level of rehearsal leaves my emotions silent.

So every dinner time I am confronted by the visceral sensation of my blood draining,
And heart gasping: as if I have missed a step on those stairs.
(that your feet no longer tread.)

Worst of all, sometimes I bitterly remember
That each of these knives and forks has a pair,
And when I approach the table,
At either house –
My mother and father no longer have their pair.
No longer complete, in my eyes, at least. The pair of cutlery on my lap and in my hands agree. I
cannot look away.

This is one of those small, small, moments each day where I am reminded of the sorrow buried
within me.
It is trying to breathe. Stop suffocating it.

The cutlery tells me – my sorrow is begging to be heard.

So do not call me lazy – I am trying to breathe.

Alice Parsons, 17

Patti Smith

She taught me that life is a series of
rituals,
routine held and loved for all it is, no wish
of what it could be.

she taught me that to live and feel every
breath came
when at once I could hold a broken wheel
and love it,

for the wind rolling between the broken
silver spokes,
and for the languid motion locked in so
earthly a metal.

Milly Sage, 17

You Taught Me

You taught me that:
Tomorrow,
The birds will still sing
And, the sea waves will still swell
And, sunrise will come again.

I watch
You watch
The adolescent magpies fledge
(Agitated and sensitive)
No longer reliant, yet,
They will return.

You showed me a healthy family,
You gave me an infancy rich with freedom,
You told me to remember the things
You taught me.

*To wake and listen
To the endless birdsong;
To travel and sing,
Too, like the sparrows;
To do your best
To prove you can;
To give everything
To the ones you love.*

Hope Simpson, 17

Beautiful with a Question Mark

The daisy chain dips gently over your eye
It looks like a crown
A badge of honour worn like a halo
Listen I know your country's history
Your arms yielded swords fighting for the stretch of skin over your stomach
Your legs ache from escaping the wildfire
Your thighs splashed with blood
An abandoned battlefield
The soil restless and upturned
Stretch marks are trenches where soldiers slept and prayed
Came from under the covers of your kneecaps to shoot bullets at your shins
Bruised knees remains of fallen empires
Razor bumps protesting for peace
Paper cuts the innocent civilians
And lemon juice is the bomb
Fingernails and eyelashes give handouts on street corners
I guess acne is socialist reform
Your body is what's left after the war
There are blown up governments nestled in your brain
And your heart is a scrapyard for fighter planes and air-raid shelters
Please salute your veterans
But remember their violence wasn't pretty
Their bloodshed a romantic novel
Or a self-insert fanfiction for your flashbacks

Look I'm just worried about you
You're still beautiful
I don't really mean the question mark

Nikolina Rokic, 15

Baba's Burgers

She cups the chicken fat of her belly under her blue uniform
before stretching it down, pins back the tanned bread roll
of her earlobe with spat out gum so she can hear everything.

Then she reaches up to straighten a shelf of Coco Pops,
smiles as he walks past down the aisle brushing a hand
across her arse. She doesn't turn – she knows who it is.

Later she'll stand outside, bleach blonde and peach skin
doused in sticky vanilla, a red pimple like a fire ant on her cheek,
heels wobbling under the swell of her ankles. By ten

they'll be huddled over the counter in Baba's Burgers, giggling
as Babba flips her brown discs of meat like beetles on their backs.
They'll watch we-mouthed as white grease spits out like foam.

Right then, she'll be lightyears away from 7am, stacking tinned tuna,
wearing a name badge reading *Fait* because the *b* has peeled off.
The night is hungry, its tongue drools into the open doorway.

Georgie Woodhead, 17

Biographies

Emily Cooper

Emily S Cooper has been published in *the Stinging Fly*, *Banshee*, *Hotel* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. In 2019 she took part in Poetry Ireland Introductions and was a recipient of the Next Generation Award by the Arts Council of Ireland. Her debut pamphlet comes out with Makina Books this year.

Natalie Crick

Natalie Crick (Newcastle) has poems published in *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Moth*, *Banshee* and elsewhere. She is studying for an MPhil (Creative Writing) at Newcastle University. Natalie's poetry was commended in the Verve Poetry Festival Competition 2020. She is a creative practitioner in residence at the Wellcome Centre for Mitochondrial Research at Newcastle University.

Vanessa Lampert

Vanessa Lampert holds an MA in Writing Poetry from Newcastle University and Poetry School London. She has previously been highly commended in the Bridport and Troubadour prizes, came second in the 2019 Yeovil Prize and won the Café Writers Prize 2020. Vanessa lives in Wallingford where she works as an acupuncturist.

Charles Lang

Charles Lang is from Castlemilk in Glasgow. He lives in Belfast, where he is currently studying at the Seamus Heaney Centre. Poems have appeared in *Fly on the Wall Magazine*, *From Arthur's Seat*, *Gutter*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Luminous*, *Defiant* (Listen Softly Press), *The Open Ear* and *The Speculative Book 2019*.

Pippa Little

Pippa Little lives in Northumberland where she has been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newcastle University. Her first collection *Overwintering* (Carcenet, 2012) was shortlisted for The Seamus Heaney Centre Award; her second *Twist* (Arc, 2017) for the Saltire Society Poetry Book of the Year. A third is forthcoming.

Damen O'Brien

Damen O'Brien is an Australian poet. In 2019, he won the Welsh International Poetry Prize, the Val Vallis Prize for an Unpublished Poem and has previously won the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize and the New Guard Knightville Poetry Prize amongst many others. (www.dameno.org)

M.R. Peacocke

M.R. Peacocke has written poems since she was 4 and has been publishing since her 50s. Now at 90, she's discovering how her writing really wants to go. She has lived several lives: nurturing family, teaching, enjoying music and has 25 years' experience as a smallholder.

Claudine Toutoungi

Claudine Toutoungi's poetry is widely published in publications including *Poetry*, *PN Review*, *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman* and her plays for radio and stage include *Slipping*, *Deliverers* and *The Inheritors*. Her first poetry collection, *Smoothie*, is published by Carcanet, while her second, *Two Tongues*, also from Carcanet, is forthcoming in 2020.

INSIDE Writing

