

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2021 Manchester Poetry Prize
Short List

2021 Poetry Prize Finalists

Courtney Conrad

Courtney Conrad is a Jamaican poet. She is an alumna of The London Library Emerging Writers Programme, Malika's Poetry Kitchen, Barbican Young Poets, Obsidian Foundation and Roundhouse Poetry Collective. She is a Bridport Prize Young Writers Award recipient. She has been shortlisted for *The White Review* Poet's Prize, Oxford Brookes International Poetry Competition and Poetry Wales Pamphlet Competition and longlisted for the Rebecca Swift Women Poets' Prize and *The Rialto* Nature and Place Competition. Her poems have appeared in *Magma Poetry*, *Poetry Wales*, *The White Review*, *Bath Magg*, *Stand Magazine* and *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal*.

Laura Paul Watson

Laura Paul Watson lives and writes in Pine, Colorado. She is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Florida. When not writing, she works as a General Contractor in Denver, Colorado, remodelling homes with her husband. She has placed second in the Bridport Poetry Prize and her work has also appeared in *Agni*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, among others.

Peter Ramm

Peter Ramm is a poet who writes on the Gundungarra lands of the New South Wales Southern Highlands. His work appears in *Cordite*, *Westerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, *The Rialto*, *Eureka Street Journal* and the *Red Room Company*. His poems have won the South Coast Writers Centre Poetry Award and the Harri Jones Memorial Award, and have shortlisted in the Bridport, ACU, Blake, and Newcastle Poetry Prizes. In 2021 he placed 3rd in *The Rialto's* Nature and Place Competition and was awarded residencies at the Wollongong Botanic Gardens and WestWord's Daffodil Cottage. His debut poetry collection *Waterlines* is forthcoming in 2022 with Vagabond Press.

Alyza Taguilaso

Alyza Taguilaso is a resident doctor training in General Surgery at Ospital ng Muntinlupa in the Philippines. Her poems have been shortlisted for the Bridport Poetry Prize and published in several publications, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *ANMLY*, *High Chair*, *Stone Telling*, and *Kritika Kultura*. She is working on her forthcoming book, *Juggernaut*. You can find her at wordpress (@alyzataguilastorm) or instagram (@ventral).

Jane Wilkinson

Jane Wilkinson currently lives in Norwich. In 2021 she won the Poetry Society's Hamish Canham Prize and in 2020 received 1st and 2nd place in the Guernsey International Poetry Prize; 1st place in the Stokestown International Poetry Prize and Norfolk Prize: Café Writers competition. She won the Against the Grain Press competition and was shortlisted in Alpine Fellowship Prize in 2019. She is published (or forthcoming) in magazines including *Under the Radar*, *Magma*, *The Alchemy Spoon*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Envoi*, *Finished Creatures*, *Lighthouse Journal*, *Fenland Reed* and is in anthologies from *Emma Press*, *Live Canon* and *Dempsey & Windle*.

April Yee

April Yee is a writer and translator published in *Salon*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *Ploughshares* online. She reported in more than a dozen countries before moving to London, where she is a National Book Critics Circle Fellow, Ledbury Poetry Critic, Refugee Journalism Project mentor, and the University of East Anglia's Malcolm Bradbury Memorial Scholar. In 2021, she was editor-in-residence at *The Georgia Review*, the Community of Writers' Lucille Clifton Memorial Scholar, and listed for the Fitzcarraldo Essay Prize, the Alpine Fellowship, the Women's Prize Trust's Discoveries, and the Deborah Rogers Foundation Writers Award. She tweets at @apriyee.

Courtney Conrad

Community Breeds Miracle

CCTV catches a 9-year-old girl walking hand in hand with a 32-year-old man clenching a knife. Courtyard roosters send for five hundred mesh marinas, jeans shorts and flip flops. They comb through bushes with cutlasses, *funeral parlour a wait fi yuh bwoy*. Prayerful women circle her mother like helicopters. Her mother's face stiffens as regret injects it, *a wah di fada God, mi jus run guh a shop fi buy likkle flour and corned beef*. Her father's eyes are red. His mouth wide and earsplitting, *if yuh even rape her, send her home still*. The 9-year-old's belly hushes field crickets while she feeds mosquitoes for three nights. She shivers. Leaves rustle, and she thinks of her granny's sweetie wrappers. Tiny footprints lead to tarpaulin hut. Any longer it would've been her unmarked grave. She emerges a muddy dolly. Reunion hugs stifle her traumatised squeal, *don't kill him*. 32-year-old man tingles at the tender touch of low hanging leaves while he's on the run. Fire swallows his home. His girlfriend flees without panties and documents. Luck scratches palms. The community marches to the nearest shop for Cash Pot tickets. *Mi a buy 3 (dead), 16 (young girl) and 27 (big fire)*. The 32-year-old man's urges interrupt clinking Red Stripe bottles. He snatches a 13-year-old-girl feeding her father's pigs. He drags her into a vegetated area and bashes her head with a stone as if opening a coconut. Weary feet and hoarse voices hunt again. The 13-year-old girl waits for rescue and winces as shrubs pinch her hair like her mother's braiding technique. Her uncle finds her in a pit and carries her like a bare laundry basket. Her fingers hold a white sheet around her. The 32-year-old man escapes into nearby bushes. Community says, *wi glad wi get di girls dem, but him wi di want*.

They Called Us the Cursed Year

1

Lipsy

We never cared about backwash. Lipsy's igloo carried holy water that rescued us from heatwaves. His backpack was a supermarket with a payment plan. A clipped curb turned our friendship group into a shattered windshield, we brought our own igloos and surrendered to our mother's cursings, *yuh know how much pickney a road wah food?* Stew peas tasted better stale, anyways.

2

Chubba

Chubba and I demolished our bun and cheese. Bolted up and down the corridor. Found an empty classroom. Slapped window blades shut. Signalled to our friends. We guarded the door. His obnoxious cackle and fake cough muffled our friends' moans. After school, he drove to football training. His Honda wrapped around a light post, the way our tongues did with liquorice during our shift, just minutes before.

3

Mackerel

In another world, we would have gone to the club you would've eaten birthday cake from a stranger's cleavage.

Instead, we went to church sat beside the demon posed as bredren as they sounded their dreadful trumpet.

Bullet pressing into your forehead. The altar was deep red. Could falling short of God's glory have saved your life?

4

Speedy

Did you see us?
The stadium's silent standing ovation for every race, you would have won.
During cooldown, we dove into grief sat at the bottom of the pool

imagined our lungs full
held our breaths until your broad shoulders
and eight pack made a blurred appearance.
When you vanished, we resurfaced, inhaled and went again.

5

Pigtail

At her desk, she could see her mother
parked waiting for the school bell to ring
with a box of beef patties and an icy Pepsi.

She didn't know her empty desk would be a tombstone
I didn't know it was her head and not the patty
when my wheels started rolling, says the car.
I'm used to killing your friends when they're inside me, says the car.
Why couldn't I pull up my handbrake? asked the car.
The car asks, was it my fault or her mother's?
Pigtail you were 4ft of good manners and brains.

Death Archive

I learned how to make room for death
from my mother. She slept with the dead

under her mattress, funeral programmes
of grandparents, aunts and uncles swept up

by diabetes, cancer, and asthma. Changing sheets
and lifting her mattress was a mausoleum opening.

I did the same for the friends I lost.
Mommy irritated, *yuh see how pickney ungrateful?*

*Memba seh yuh family a di ones weh did clean yuh
dutty batty and feed yuh,*

but it was my friends who kept me
from roaming the streets like an empty soda bottle in the wind.

Maybe I do have something against life

my death began slow
at the first funeral I attended.
I knew the meaning of death
before I knew the meaning of death.
The next time it came around
I reserved August 25th for my own.
Double checked it wasn't anyone's
birthday, public or bank holiday.
Razors slid smooth across my wrists
like lotion. At the train station,
I hoped for a hooded commuter's push.
Whenever I started loving myself again
but had a bad day or month,
I had to wait for August 25th to return,
wondered if my friends thought I was ungrateful.

Holey Ground

Sundays were spent crowded around like crows over ground holes.
Madas draped up Pastors for Lazarus miracles, the life in their eyes buried
as they whispered, *mi will send gunman fi yuh.*

Relatives bawled. Heaved. Passed out.
Some friends leaned into coffins to kiss stiff foreheads;
while others reached in to tief di likkle jewellery fi di money owed.

Meanwhile, baby madas, bastard pickney dem and girlfriends
became acquainted for the first time—
brawls left hands holding each other's hair like seaweed;

mouths bawled out, *gweh from yasso, a mi dem di love more.*
When shoes sunk into the grass, our dead tried to take us.
Sometimes, we left extra roses on tombstones for street yutes

who lingered and became florists under traffic lights for a warm meal.
Other times, retaliation gunshots rang out like percussions.
We abandoned our dead, scampering towards nearby bushes.

At our dead's childhood home, in the street,
we stacked boom boxes like Legos, gospel cued
in between Disney and gun tunes.

Testimonials paired with Celine Dion soundtracks.
Confusion flavoured mannish water. Curry goat stained
unforgiveness. Regret chased rum shots.

Relatives darted around scouring the house—
their car boots swallowed the dead's TVs, stereos
and kitchen appliances. Safes broken into and wills torn.

We all returned to our homes with graveyard dirt
in the groves of rings and shoes, placed
them in plastic bags to remember our dead.

Laura Paul Watson

STATUE OF SAINT ANTHONY WITH HIS BACK TURNED

They did him up white. All white.
And smaller than a man,
which tempers the expectation
of a miracle. They did him up
with the usual halo.
He stands splendid in the courtyard,
robed and frozen still,
a spray of lilies stuck in bloom
past his left shoulder.
What is he made of
that he can abide,
that he can overwinter,
here, at the hospital.
He stands untensured,
a full head of hair,
facing what, facing whom, if not us
on the other side
of the infusion room windows.
Finder of lost things—
I've lost enough.
Sickness is the new vow
of poverty. His robe billows
in the day's no-wind. A staff
sprouts from his right hand
so that even from here
I can tell
he's not in the position
of prayer. Only one of us
is praying.

I INVITE MYSELF TO A DINNER PARTY

after Chen Chen

In the invitation, I tell myself,
using the words my therapist would say

I can say, *I am welcome here, I can take up space.*
I give myself a list of permitted conversations.

The Decameron, it says. *Harry Potter*.
It says, *Illness, As a Way to Mark Time*.

In the invitation, I include a photograph
so I have something

to talk about when I talk about *Loss*.
I ask for the courtesy of my reply.

When I arrive, I wave through my reflection
in the sidelight.

When I sit down to dinner
(nothing I don't like),

I go to speak, but the words say
Sick, No Thank You, they set myself apart.

I start again. I ask me about my favorite movie,
my favorite metaphor. I say, *Pass the salt*.

Cancer is not a metaphor, I say.
Everything's a metaphor.

Cancer is the self. Except when I say *Cancer*,
I hear *Cancel*, the *l* and the *r* exchanging,

Cancel, the way my seven-year-old self
would say it, the way I say it, still, whenever I'm afraid.

In this argument, I'm both Dumbledore and Harry
talking over a spot of sickness

inside me, sickness that is me. *How does one
save the self?* I know more than I am saying.

I am exceedingly myself, waiting for
and withholding my answer

even though the invitation stated clearly
No obfuscation.

Again, I'm Harry. There's not nothing
inside me, but for the evening

I pretend what's there is nothing,
The Big C, Cancel,

The Spot That Shall Not Be Named.
I'm fine, I say, I'm fine. I know

more than I am saying.

TWO WEEKS INTO CHEMOTHERAPY, I RECEIVE A SELF-HELP BOOK IN THE MAIL

Oh me—my life is unfolding
beautifully—bright
as a fish, oil slick, and a sun
flooding me with newness.

I am a nerve,
lit, iridescent. I am my most
primitive self. Strands
of light drop into my vision,

bolts of lightning,
locks of hair.
Oh body—
Oh proximity—

This anticrepuscular light—
I am, this evening, my opposite.
I am better by a cell
and splitting,

drifting, radiant,
a cattail coming apart.

REMODELING

I've been taken down
to the studs

once before.
I've been gutted.

I have a set of brand-new nipples
that would make John Ruskin blush.

I'm standing outside a brick Colonial,
its entry flat-faced and formal,

pointing to what, soon, we'll take down
and what, a little later, will go up.

I gesture vertically to mean columns and a portico.
My hands make a suitable roof.

And what about the maple? the clients ask.
The home rises gray above us.

I'm hairless as a Gothic statue
and chilled against the weather.

When we build, says Ruskin,
let us think that we build forever.

Ruskin, afraid of the body,
afraid of his wife.

I put my body in the air before me
like a castle—

two new breasts,
a stand of shrinking lesions,

my skin stretching pink
and into ribbons.

Inside, we turn to what
and how much we can re-use—

wood floors, balusters, trim
and dentils.

My hands arch
to mean a doorway.

They lift to mean a ceiling.
Soon, even the body

turns to peacocks and lilies.

NUTHATCHES

My hand curves, turns up,
guessing at the nuthatch,

to catch its nothingness that
you lower from the attic.

Round still and still
feathered, perched

now perfect in my hand,
each foot delicate

as a spider.
And then you send

down another.
They loved nothing

except for each other.
One fits into the other

into the small nest
of my hand

I made for them.
What was it

about the wound
and the arrow—

that one fitting the other
is enough? Love bends us

to the shape of the other.
They sit stiff,

dead-winged,
together

in my upturned hand.
They, who never thought

of leaving. The attic
shot through with light.

Peter Ramm

Landfall

The Rainforest in Winter

I used to imagine...

That language could lead us inextricably to

Grace. As though it were geographical.

I used to think these things when I was young.

I still do.

—Charles Wright

Today, the wind has set in like dew that won't dry,

bone deep

And damp with all the world's worry. It blows hard, midnight cold

At midday. The boys don't feel it though, their bare legs barrel

The grass along the sloped bank of Caalong Creek. The water

Below runs winter's way

—dark funnels in the eddies, slow

And glacial among the rushes. Autumn is in the ground

And our gum boots tell the season, thick with mud and mush, moss

And wood fibres from a fallen branch of blueskin wattle.

We're out

of the house—for now. The breeze beats our oilskin jackets

Like old boxers' gloves and we walk punch drunk down the sloughed edge

Of the path,

the dirt slippery like sweat covered canvas.

But, there's nothing more determined than two boys on the loose

And I'm the kite they carry and flit in each draught—scribbling

Their whim across the remnant paddocks. The weeping grass bends

To our knees and falls uneven in tufts

like a mind bowed

Low by life—animal trails scrawled with time's unsteady hand,

The slow migration of dairy cows that once sheltered

Under the blackwoods and peppermints. A little raven

Stalks us through the branches

like a bag of all my mistakes,

The *kar karr* of his call forming hieroglyphs of sound.

I'm pulled on. I leave the stones to the river—rosettas

Of algae and lichen. Interpretation

is patience,

But my two have none of it in the flush of July air

That ripens our faces and tears the tops of ribbon gums

To shreds. We cross the soccer fields,

emptied like aerodromes

For a bombing raid—the maple leaves, convulsing windsocks

At the far end. In the cutting, the tracks are endless trains

Of thought, translated in ballast and steel—eastward and west

In equal measure. All afternoon the sky

chain-smokes

The clouds and grits the corners of its tobacco stained teeth

As the rainforest exhales in front of us and we plunge

Between the vine twisted ribs.

In here under the great skin

Of canopy the whipbirds are making aviaries

Of the pencil cedars and I wonder if the weather

Wears birds the same or if Miss(ed) Flite keeps them, like me—hope

And ruin. The forest forms a digression

from the gale,

An oracle of calmness and slow to judge. There's refuge

Behind the coachwood walls and coolness like an old god

Breathing on our necks—hushed dampness and restoration.

The trim light slakes the soul

like the hand of a great verdant

Colossus. By now, the boys have blown out the bluster of youth

And we bramble the shaded and rooted path. Through the litter

Of leaves I walk myself back,

while they point at sickle ferns

And splay their fingers through. Life in a fine balance. These days

Clarity comes recalcitrant as little ones in an evening

Fury—Philistines on the war path.

And I'm with Sampson

At the mill. Yet, the quietness here beguiles us, the light

Slackens the solicitude and the penwork of wonga

Vines on possumwood is a newness written in the gusts.

Phaethon in Three Parts

They bolted bright and brought him low

But high were his spirit and daring

—Ovid

I

Night, first weekend in December, wind; the world

Hanging on by its fingernails.

We pass the Tuena junction—you're asleep my son

But there are soft moans on your lips and your mother reaches

Over car seats; cool river of her eyes,

Hesperian hands

On the burning banks of your brow. The country in summer fever

Thirty-nine and falling,

the Hume hardens its way south.

Rye grass like ashes underfoot, the air anneals all.

Earthbound Dawnsteed;

Phoebus' brumbies trample the ranges these days and nightly

The news tells of the billows over Batlow. Three millennia

Of warnings forgotten,

Black summer—a conflagration of the spirit.

We are brought dirt poor like the Murrumbidgee,

Like a bastard's birthright,

Like policy written for the polls.

II

In the eighties, we spent Christmas lining the Abercrombie

With the smell of calico tents.

Three to a room, wallaby grass and sand for our floor

—The cosmos of the river, it's pebbles and rocks

Skipping through the days.

The she-oaks saw us,

Standing there, wise men with wire beards. But now,

The white-browed wood swallow

Is Apollo's scorched headed messenger

—Singing soft arrows in the air.

The river wrung out; the bulrushes withered

Like lost legions in the desert drought.

Curled on rock walls, diamond pythons were black figure

Masterpieces; their heads the Tiber,

Euphrates and springs of Pirene,

—All ancient echoes. Now, reins loose as promises,

Drop like the dams; rapids run dry as the paddocks

And every creek's a tribute we forgot to carry.

III

You shiver a shallow dream, river red gums shadow your skin

And we strip you down—sweat beads

On your temple. In the fields, quail rise

In the night sky like overweight stars,

And the moon sends her smoke stained tears

over Goulburn Valley. In memory,

I walk the stringy bark forest in snowfall, Crookwell in winter;

Or the smell of summer rains

On the back porch—wet jasmine

On the trellis. Tonight, the anger of the old gods,

Thunder and the threat of rain

—Jupiter blusters in the back hills

Like a southerly. Delirious, you wave at the turbines over Pejar,

Faceless clocks,

Apocalyptic stop watches on the countdown.

What world is left for your spirit,

My boy, when the firmament smoulders

And all on Olympus fall silent.

—evening matinee

Of eel, wood duck, and ibis

—we throw peas and take our place.

Notes: *The Rainforest in Winter*

- Blueskin is another common name for Green Wattle.
- A bag full of my mistakes, riffs on the ideas in Plath's daddy, a bag full of God
- Miss Flite from Charles Dickens Bleak House keeps her bird caged in her room until the end of her court case in the Chancery. At the novels end, they are set free.
- Delphic verse was often quite obscure and ambiguous. In the case of the wars with Persia, some historians believed it had taken favour with the invading force and was offering dire oracles for the Greek city-states.
- The Athenians were so dejected by the first oracle of Xerxes invasion that they approached the pythia a second time and asked for another, which referenced some saving grace 'a wooden wall shall stand.' (Herodotus 7.141) Themistocles, one of the prominent leaders of the time, determined this 'wooden wall' referred to their triremes and thus set about building up the navy. It was the Athenian fleet that would win a decisive victory over Xerxes at Salamis in 480.
- Samson was blinded at chained to a stone mill after the deception by Delila and capture at the hands of the Philistines.

Alyza Taguilaso

Suwerte

Sp n. luck, good luck, good fortune

Born around poverty but not in it, I am called fortunate. Suwerte. Educated but not bright enough to be a scholar. Rooted in the motherland but not morena enough to warrant standard sympathies. Suwerteng mestiza. Hardship is measured by the shade of your skin, by how many vowels in your surname remains of your ancestors. I am expected to migrate overseas because that's what Filipinas are bred for in the 21st century, says the gospel according to the internet. I made a mistake picking to be a doctor instead of a nurse, or someone's wife – so that meant everything became ten times harder and more expensive. Good fortune is in your palms if you *just* work hard – but this trick only works had your family agreed to deal with politicians when the opportunity was fresh as a pearl. Napakasuwerte! The hectares of land my forefathers farmed now consumed by warring relatives. The shape of their greed a map I've memorized in the dome of my pale skull. My father almost pawned off my education in place of the latest Mercedes Benz when I was five. My people are born to be subservient. Those who dared fight the galleons in those early centuries were either charred into clumps of ash like their anitos or maimed with Christian names. I was named after a flower that meant joy, and really I do not mean to be this unhappy. What I mean to say is: I bear no ills for being born in these isles. My name is a constellation of defiant letters – offering mouthfuls for tongues to wrestle with. I don't regret the witchcraft swimming in my veins. I can name the makings of a body good enough as any surgeon. These small hands have resected and re sewn organs. These eyes have seen people impaled with arrows and live. Miracles. Madness. Sobrang suwerte naman. But you know things are bad when they exhumed a dead dictator's remains and reimplanted it where we laid our heroes to rest. "Learn to move on," they echo through faceless screens. Calling evidence of human torture fake news. Roomfuls of data discredited by Tiktok and vloggers. An archipelago splintered by algorithms and hunger, sold off to foreign buyers a single island at a time. When they decided to erase the faces of the heroes in our currency and replace it with a cute eagle nearing extinction. When they required face shields and curfews to combat a virus while hospitals swelled up like obstructed bowels. Healthcare workers who choose to remain are told how lucky we are. Underpaid, but alive. Lucky to breathe the poisoned air. To walk the hard earth

our gods no longer recognize. Resilience
the national talisman used again and again.
Its edges blunt and dull. Its sides stained
with too much blood to clean. Napakasuwerte.

Agustina During the Last Week of October

I am sent an email of another failing
grade the day of my youngest sister's
fourth attempt
to kill herself. The first
reoccurrence of sadness
in a year or so. Thankfully
she failed – taking
capsules long-acting enough
that the emergency room
could still administer lifesaving doses
of charcoal. I am twenty-seven

kilometers away, working
in another hospital when mother breaks
the news. My baby sister saved
from kidney failure
and don't ever make the mistake
of telling *anyone* because they will *think*
we are crazy. I stopped believing
in God when I was ten. My father driving
full speed in spite, windows rolled
down, his voice cursing the good lord our savior
Jesus Christ! all the way to the heavens.

Unfortunately, gods feed
on prayer. My mother never stopped pulling
me to church on Sundays. The many-armed,
many-eyed god of my great-grandfather sighs
another prophecy from the muddy waters
of the Ganges. Another serpent gnaws
the moon in its jaws, another relic
unearthed in gray sand, promises
miracles for thousands of years,
another shrapnel of loneliness blooms
in someone else's damp heart. After resecting

another tumor, we inform the patient's relative
and he is brought to his knees
by tears and all endearments
for the lord our god – how he works
in ways, in us, et cetera. Elsewhere, turtles
topple over in space, stars dance
like bullets, a holy hedgehog drops quills
into the mouth of a black hole, a wayward missile rises
to the heavens but is melted
by the quiet coming
of rain. A god's teeth

grow sharp like faith, edges

smooth as deliverance
offered by knives. Tell me
What do you believe?

Cactus Potato

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing. – Archilochus (7th century BC)

They're not the easiest to care for. Prickly
quills that poke my fingers
every now and then – enough
to stun but never enough to wound.
They're known to withstand falls
high as twenty feet: body inflating
into a balloon lined with thorns. Pure
instinct and fear distilled
into a tiny, shivering ball. Born blind,
they navigate the world through scent and sound –
snout huffing at an unfamiliar visitor, the accidental slamming
of the door loud as an atomic bomb. This one fits
in the palm of my hand, his belly soft as a marshmallow,
barely two months old – eager to devour worms
as treats for good behavior, whatever that means.
As for its voice, they only ever make a noise when in pain – shrill
like glass scraping on glass. I've heard it twice – one from each
that I've tried to tame. It's a feat if they last five years.
On the palm of my hand, lies this mammal, fat and asleep.
Sometimes what you need is the absence
of sound. Sometimes you learn love
by caring for something immeasurably smaller
than yourself, without a single chance
of ever outliving you.

Jane Wilkinson

The Dead

In Morrisons café – well, there’s room for prams – I see him.
My long-gone father, still a magnet, lands at the next table, turns
to me, twists round in the shiny moulded chair and doesn’t turn away.
As a stranger he questions my son’s name. *O Cormac, is it?*
You give the boy some kisses. Am I really rendered indignant
by the queries of the dead? His darkness makes everything else seem
bright. This memory will not polish to myth. I have become unbearably
aware of how the green plastic chairs are fixed to the floor. How close.
No, I do not want coffee cake. Nevermore.

My recently-was-alive
father-in-law makes mute visitations in hacked emails, just white light –
pure message – by way of address. In very low voices across
our pillows, we talk this over; you say, *I get them too.* This morning,
under the sprawl of bucketed canes, a liquorice of damp soil,
wormwood, feverfew, thyme, I’m counting edible strawberries
on one hand and mulling over the balance of the damage
as the church bell’s two notes rise up vaporous: first, a metallic
contact, followed by the resonant, ever still surprising O –

I know where to find my father

if that is what is required

It will be a luminous summer's day. From the bus stop
at the crossroads I will look south to a sea, unseen

below the cliff. A black lane threads down the valley,
on each side sheep graze on thin grass over chalk. I will stop

where the hamlet starts, at the neat 1930's cottage,
look up at the charming external brick steps leading to

where I had slept in the spare, to where he is still
sitting in the last photograph, unlikely beatific,

most likely very ill, returned from ICU. Someone will
have told me Grayson Perry has a cottage there now.

If a figure looked from the kitchen window
they'd have seen me walking through the view

of the dry-stone wall my father loudly admired. It maps
the mild undulations of the land. I was cold in the field,

wind bundling over the line of stacked stones.
His heavy dust and small hard bits we cast as seed,

the cloud of him left the jar as if the verdict
could be reversed like flies shooed from a carcass.

Notes on the Dead

I hand him a clean tissue and water bottle
to wipe off the dust and grass cuttings
from the polished granite. We come ill-prepared –
from a *1 in 3* hike straight up the valley wall.
Barely coaxed down the zip-wire path,
now I anchor at the graveside, as if about
to say *grace, old man your son cannot be still,*
he is off, down the rows, is restlessly calling out
the stone register of your friends. I note the ground
has levelled, the grave is merry with grass.
Has the poor soil-tomb collapsed, does a corpse
need to tuck in warm earth, to replace
the soft body, so soon? We all pause
around his imaginary length, see the funeral buffet
still cling-filmed, when a slight figure
who was facelessly scything the vacant lots
to hay, appears quietly. Talk turns to The Clough,
the track we climbed, *tarmacked for half a million –*
making it the steepest road in Britain.
This conversation really is your father's
natural terrain. I am sure he will take it further.
Did muffled laughter confuse those in the garden
at Golgotha? Dogs are maddened by the smell
of the dead. I regret not planting a rose,
then withdraw regret as I notice I'm stroking
the grave, scythe slow. May they grow stronger
after every cut – the ghosts living in the grass.

°C

after Lee Herrick

What can I tell you of the temperature the moment before prayer became necessary? I have to lower my voice, below spade cold, cold as subsequent phone calls, hands left out overnight – stiffening – hands forgetful of balled gloves, just there in a pocket, cold as teeth, cold as aircraft at altitude, cold as need, cold as the need to go outside in any weather to smoke, and the green colour under stones in the clogged pond; your constant cold smile ceaseless as the demolition of water over our mill weir and the first of the twin chapels – *for once*, you had called out, racing to get to it before me, vapour clouds spinning from your mouth – a chapel left idle with unlit windows, a hole in the roof, the roof still in bits on the organist's stool. The room I can't describe was colder than all these things.

Mr. Charles Pardon

I sobbed through the entire film, released like a marsh sluice, confused by the mystery of grief, a churning mill wheel and its watery verbiage. Its empty boxes. And still incomplete. What had been switched on? What forgotten loss had not been forgiven? Untilled. Until visited by the old gardener's tomato-and-bitter-lemon scent lifting off the screen. How the actor's sun-raw face – dry lips, labouring skin reddened under the flat hot day, gentle spell of the odd murmured word full of sponge-slow vowels, a worker's stoop under his working shirt and tie, rolled-up sleeves – had delivered him back to me: a long-distance letter finally reaching its destination. I was flooded. Held in a deluge.

Our flat above the house and garden, *a tied-cottage*, had come, unquestionably, tied to him. The gardener was quiet-lived. I tailed him in the cool safeguard of his penumbra, up and down the greenhouse flags, soil-grit shushing under my plimsolls. I was a bean-picker, I was a knee-high raspberry gleaner, resolute down the scratchy rows, I motored the rattling red trike round tight intersections and cambered lanes of his kitchen-garden grid, believed he was old as his ancient asparagus fields, a magical repeated number; *one hundred one hundred*. It occurs to me now, as a gardener of sorts, here is how I know what to do, not naturally as I'd thought, Mr. Pardon planted it in me and it survives. That week I watched the film five times.

April Yee

First-Trimester Terza Rima

Safe as apricots and oatmeal, she slips
a syringe in my good arm—*little pinch*—
and in the barrel my red begins to eclipse

the empty. In this clinic, I am the linchpin
of the business called survival
of some species. Satiated, she winches

my arm in black Velcro, all
my measurements regular as Cheerios
but this, 130 over 87, archetypal

crisis. *Is the baby wanted?* I compose
my answer as, outside her door, infants
screech and a tune repeats, repeats. Low,

I whisper that my six months' distant
dream is to lie on my back and raise my
lemongrass legs without the hindrance,

the pressure. *Let's try again*, and she vices
me while I count my mistakes: touching
Donald Judd's aluminum shapes, unty-

ing my belly from my mother's, falsifying
half my statements. But also: the neon lights
in the water slide, the dough solidifying

in ridged peanut cookies, the trite
cards from the fetus's father. I tell
her wanting is like confusing pyrite

for gold. We watch the gauge swell.
I tell her my most vital stat is my
hairs no longer split. The infants yell.

She lets go. My heart's glossy, a buckeye.

Hungry Duplex

The nutritionist opens her notebook.
I can't stop thinking of grapes, I say.

*I can't stop it with the grapes. I weigh
digestion, how it brings hunger. My sick*

digestion, its ringing hunger. I stick
a stem in a grape's umbilical gap.

I swim in the great umbilical gap
to mẹ mẹ mẹ mẹ mẹ mẹ mẹ mother

of me, this grape embryo, this other.
Some nights I eat her meals too, too hungry.

At night we eat paths to the old country.
Creatures in captivity, food-driven.

Reach us in captivity. Fools. Riven.
The nutritionist opens her notebook.

In Vietnamese, *mẹ* is *mother*.

Son-nette

The stranger circles her flush stomach, asks
me when I'm due. My deadline weighs on bone.
She deems my belly *neat, no fat*, a home
for a *boy*. Her word yo-yos in me, a crass
kid's toy: late readers, blond bullies, those mass
events with mugshots on the news, those lon-
ely shooters. Foreign dictators on thrones.
The stranger smiles. The fetus kicks. My casket's
soon to open. (Later, I'll recall
the years I soaked in anger at my girl-
ness, fear inscribed on every stupid curve.)
This thing emerging clean as alcohol.
This plastic toy, its fragile string unfur-
ling, furling back to me, my bursting nerves.

Knives' Villanelle

Wrong's first signal: I cannot pronounce
this word wrenched from 19th century—*midwifery*—
the *if* a knife I can't move around.

I need a doctor. I'm conferred a midwife pounding
rosemary and fox musk to slurry.
The longest signal I cannot pronounce

is a jeans and tee and white bread noun.
In my mouth, his name's blurry.
His *if*s are knives I can't move around.

The midwife jams her poultice down
my throat, says, *Swallow the worry*.
A few wrong signals, but I pronounce

his name! For her, my mind's uncrowned.
In her vellum cloak, she buries
his glyphs, knives' edges smoothed. Around

my hips she lays sloth fur, swan down,
small live creatures that scurry.
Was I wrong? She signals. I pronounce
all my *if*s. These knives prove I'm around.

Caesarean Pantoum

I wear the hospital's gown in my home,
a ghost drifting from bed to toilet bowl,
the hours diagrammed in monochrome
like at the clinic I toured back in Seoul—

its ghosts drifting from beds to toilet bowls,
its bleach blasting meconium and piss
out of the clinic I toured back in Seoul
where dead were carved from gashes, kissed,

then bleach-blasted of meconium and piss
and swaddled in the arms of the mothers
(almost dead, all carved, all gashed) who kissed
for the first time their most other others.

Swaddled in the arms of the mothers
the dead looked live as magpies, glittered eyes.
For the last time these most other others
were weighed. Quietly, the mothers amortised.

The dead, the magpies, the glittered eyes
looked at me, my notebook wadding in pills.
I caved. Like the mothers, I amortised
the others. To write off costs is a skill

I practise in my notebook. My gown. My pills.
My hours diagrammed in monochrome.
My others. To write off costs is to kill.
I wear the hospital's gown in my home.

The Manchester Writing Competition was established in 2008 and celebrates Manchester as an international city of writers, finding diverse new voices and creating opportunities for writer development. The Competition offers the UK's biggest literary awards for unpublished work, has attracted more than 25,000 submissions from over 80 countries and has awarded more than £200,000 to writers. Designed to encourage and celebrate new writing across the globe, the competition is open internationally to new and established writers.

The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Carol Ann Duffy (UK Poet Laureate 2009-2019) and is run the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: mmu.ac.uk/english/mcr-writing-school/

The 2021 Manchester Poetry Prize was judged by Malika Booker, Romalyn Ante and Zaffar Kunial. The Manchester Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Hilaire and Simon Okotie. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be announced on 26 May.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact: writingschool@mmu.ac.uk.

Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

The Manchester Writing Competition will return in 2022.