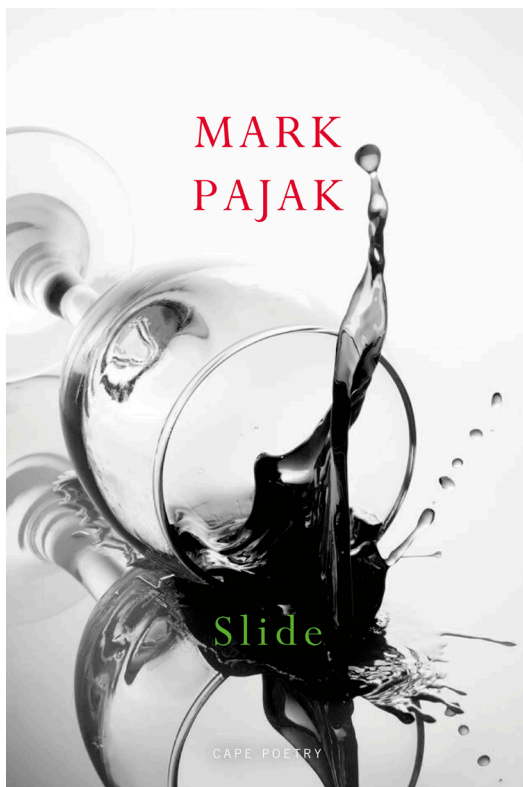


READERS' NOTES

Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2022 Readers' Notes**, in which we present the ten exciting collections shortlisted for this year's prize. The Readers' Notes offer introductions to some key poems, with reviews and biographies of the poets, and suggest creative writing prompts. Take the notes to your book group or poetry workshop, or respond individually to them in your own time. English teachers – if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, hone their skills on this year's list.



Slide by Mark Pajak What reviewers say



Slide (Cape Poetry, 2022) by Mark Pajak.
penguin.co.uk (search Pajak)

'This poised and visceral debut offers the reader suffering and respite as it mingles quotidian tragedies with moments of subtle yet unmistakable beauty. In a poem about queer discovery and adolescent desire, violence is the prelude to tenderness as a knife is brandished, a boy blindfolded, followed by a kiss and a revelation: "He pulls his blindfold. Looks // the older boy full in his up-close face. And sees / that he's bleeding, everywhere, under his skin." Pajak's writing pulses with a rhythmic intensity which compels the reader not to look away. In 'Spitting Distance', "a live rifle shell" is described as "a gold seed in the earth", one that ends up in the speaker's mouth: "I suck hard // on the blunt bud, drawing out / its deeper flavour" [...] These poems don't shy away from our shared complicity, instead encouraging us to take a long look at the hard world we live in.' – **Mary Jean Chan**, *The Guardian*

'[Mark Pajak's] elegant, unflinchingly controlled imagination is detained by victims from whom others might look away (having said that, the word "victim" would never disgrace his pen). Imagination, in Pajak's case, involves access and his "what ifs" are in fighting form. In 'The Tilt', compassion is also extended lightly to himself (I assume the poem to be autobiographical) and what makes it beguiling is not only its crisp imagery but the timing of the line he casually drops two-thirds of the way through: "I was only four and couldn't read." And here, as elsewhere, he uses his lyric gift to deliver endings that make unifying sense, in the same way that a comic might land a great punchline.' – **Kate Kellaway**, *The Observer*

Mark Pajak

Mark Pajak was born in Merseyside in 1987 and currently lives in Scotland. His work has received a Northern Writers' Award, a Society of Authors' Grant, an Eric Gregory Award and a UNESCO international writing residency. He is a past recipient of the Bridport Prize and has three times been included in the National Poetry Competition winners list. As the winner of The Poetry Society's Peggy Poole Award, he was mentored by Michael Symmons Roberts. *Slide* is Mark's debut collection. *Mark Pajak photo: Robert Peet*



READERS' NOTES



Discussion ideas

- In the context of 'After Closing Time', what does the world consider 'men'? Why the quotation marks?
- 'Like so many of us' – what does 'The Scream' assume about 'us', or – and this may depend on your reading – about Virginia Woolf? Is this a beautiful poem?
- What's the effect of all that white space in 'Minimum Wage'? How would it read if it were relineated – five couplets instead of its ten four and five line stanzas?
- What role does water play in all three of these poems?

Writing prompt

- Writing prompt: do you have or can you conjure a relationship that goes way back into youth, like that in 'After Closing Time'? Write about it, making use of water in one of its forms – steam, liquid or ice.

Find out more

Other books by Mark Pajak

Spitting Distance (Smith|Doorstop, 2016)

See also: www.penguin.co.uk/authors/240189/mark-pajak

If you liked Mark Pajak's work, try...

- Paul Farley
- James Sheard
- Tim Liardet

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, awarded annually to the author of the best new collection of poetry published in the UK and Ireland, was inaugurated in 1993 to celebrate the Poetry Book Society's 40th birthday and honour its founding poet. Since 2016, the Prize has been supported and run by the T. S. Eliot Foundation. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. It is also the most valuable in British poetry. The judges for the 2022 Prize are Jean Sprackland (Chair), Hannah Lowe and Roger Robinson. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2022: join in

- Look out for the **video recordings of interviews and poems** by all ten of the shortlisted poets, as well as past winning and shortlisted poets, on our YouTube channel: bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube
- Join us and the poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 15 January 2023. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book at bit.ly/eliotprize22sbcreadings
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at bit.ly/eliot22reviews
- **Sign up to our weekly e-newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. To stay up to date with Prize news, subscribe at bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**: @tseliotprize
- Who is your pick for this year's T. S. Eliot Prize? Share ideas at **T. S. Eliot Prize shortlist shared reading events** such as the one run by the Poetry School at Southbank Centre, London, held on the day of the Eliot Prize Readings (see poetryschool.com) – or you could set up your own!

After Closing Time

We head to the edge of town,
to the black river and old stone bridge.

Two boys full of vodka,
tipping side to side like flames.

And for a laugh, we climb
the railing and hang from our arms.

Below in the deep, two boys
peer up at us over their feet.

Like drops of water
we are gathering ourselves to fall.

One of us says, *You go first*,
and we echo this back and forth.

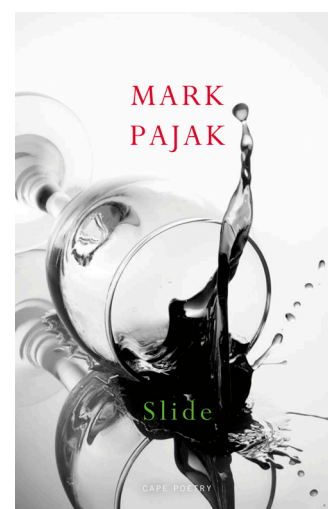
We are here for a very long time.
Years in fact. I marry. Divorce.

You skip all that, become a father.
We see less and less of each other.

Now we are what the world
considers 'men'. Which is to say

we've learnt that falling is inevitable.
Yet here we are still, side by side,

two boys way past closing time,
holding on until the other lets go.



from *Slide* (Cape Poetry, 2022)
by Mark Pajak. penguin.co.uk
(search Pajak)



The Scream

Like so many of us it has kettled in her chest
all her life. She takes it to the River Ouse.

Through the shallows her footsteps smoke
in the silt. The pockets of her overcoat fat

with the rattle of small stones. She walks
her head under. In the green dust of deeper water

riverweed ribbons downstream. A shoal
of minnows circles slow as a mirror-ball.

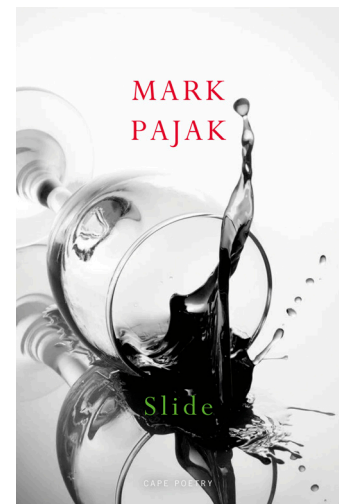
She stands in the loose orbit of her long skirt.
Head fluent with hair. When finally she lets it

out: a glow through her throat. But the sound
dulls in water and she only overhears her

distant self. And then the scream is in little
flickery pieces above her. Like drops of solder

these rising bubbles melt together. On the surface,
flat water blisters into four floating globes.

Before, one by one, the scream delicately stops.



from *Slide* (Cape Poetry, 2022)
by Mark Pajak. penguin.co.uk
(search Pajak)



Minimum Wage

Chef has gone.
Again
I am handleless
in the dishwasher,

the weightless
clack of plates.
Soap suds
frittering into nothing.

And just these
two blue bars
in the Fly-killer.
One day

I mean to leave.
To sit
on a riverbank
where the shallows are so clean

a carp
hovers over his own shadow.
And the water
only becomes visible

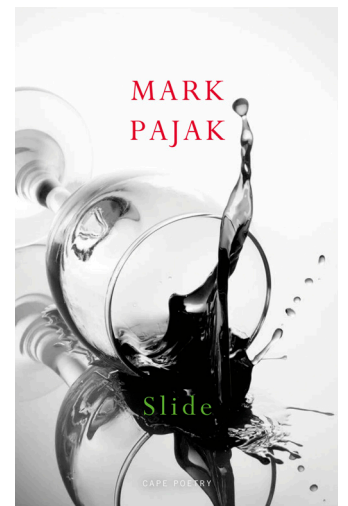
behind the slow shake
of his tail,
where the surface breaks into an eddy
and spins.

Some things are so fast
they seem still,
this little whirlpool
like the stem of a wineglass.

Until the swirl
becomes
a plughole
and the sink has drained.

Again
that whiff like singed hair
as the blue light winces
on a sizzling moth.

I am stacking plates,
thinking
how neatly
one emptiness
fits into the next.



from *Slide* (Cape Poetry, 2022)
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(search Pajak)