

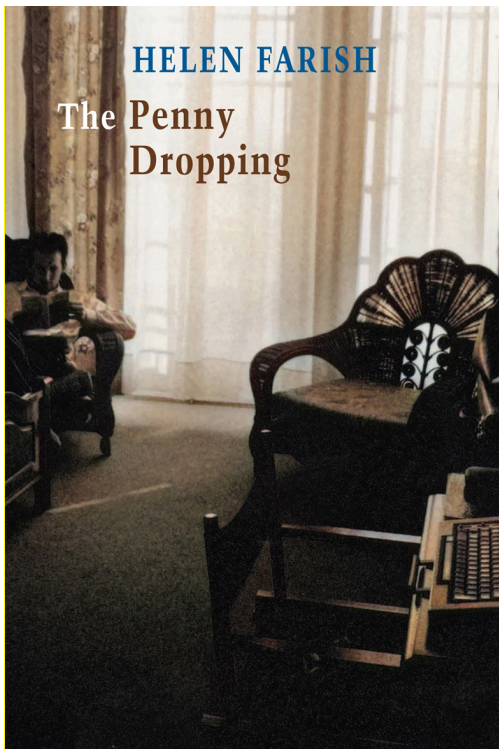
# T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2024 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2024 Readers' Notes offer a selection of poems from each of the ten exciting collections on our Shortlist, plus reviews, reading suggestions, and a writing prompt or two for those inspired to respond creatively. We hope the Readers' Notes will aid your deeper reading as an individual, with friends, or within a book group or writing workshop. English teachers: if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, why not hone their skills on this year's Shortlist? And don't forget to check out the T. S. Eliot Prize Young Critics Scheme.

2024

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT  
PRIZE



*The Penny Dropping*  
(Bloodaxe Books,  
2024) by  
Helen Farish.  
[bit.ly/farishpenny](http://bit.ly/farishpenny)

their own argument that the penny has dropped years too late, for in the process of re-evaluating the past a new and altered value is bestowed upon it. In 'Films We Saw at The Phoenix', the speaker recalls the lovers in one film whose relationship is also at an end, but who look back and 'spread it out tenderly, the tapestry / of their love which they alone could see'. The immediate power of these poems is such that much is at stake on every page.' – **Publisher blurb**

'There is regret, rueful anger, a sense of loss and longing, together with a genuine feeling of tender gratitude for having experienced so intense a relationship in all its moods. What is fascinating is that these poems show such energy and luminosity from emotions first felt over 30 years ago [...] A remarkable collection from an excellent poet.'  
– **David Harmer, *Orbis***

## About the poet

Helen Farish is the author of four books of poems: *Intimates* (Cape Poetry, 2005); *Nocturnes at Nohant: The Decade of Chopin and Sand* (Bloodaxe Books, 2012); *The Dog of Memory* (Bloodaxe Books, 2016); and *The Penny Dropping* (Bloodaxe Books, 2024). *Intimates*, a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. *The Dog of Memory* was shortlisted for the Lakeland Book of the Year 2017. Farish was also a Writer of the Year Finalist in the *Cumbria Life Culture Awards* 2017. Her PhD thesis explored the work of Louise Glück and Sharon Olds. She has taught at Sheffield Hallam University and Lancaster University. Born near Wigton in Cumbria, she now lives in Cumbria.



Photo © Phyllis Christopher

## Perspectives: *The Penny Dropping*

'*The Penny Dropping*, Helen Farish's verse-sequence about a love relationship, could be called a page-turner if it weren't for the fact that every page is a lyric poem of such compulsion that it unfailingly and hauntingly detains the reader's attention. As a whole, it has all the coherence of a novel; but there is so much more to this beautifully realised lyric collection of the kind that she is a recognised master of. It is a masterpiece in both forms to a very unusual degree.'

– **Bernard O'Donoghue**

'*The Penny Dropping* offers an account of a cherished relationship from first meeting to eventual break-up. Distance gives the writer a retrospective clarity from which she does not flinch despite its challenges ('Look at me,' laments the speaker in 'Pretty Woman', 'stepping back into the dress, / pulling up the side zip, smoothing it down, / as though that's all it took.').

But ultimately poems such as 'No Point Now' undo

# T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2024 READERS' NOTES

## What do you think?

- Read 'The Eve of St Agnes' by John Keats, for reference. How many timelines are at play in Farish's poem? What unites them, what separates them? What lasts across past(s), present and future? The 'full-blown roses the park / had none of': are the memories in this poem real or dreamed up?
- Does 'That Route' suggest the possibility of a life lived without 'tears and fights'? What's the significance to the poem of the timing of the late November incident? And what about the one two weeks later? Read 'My Exit' – do you think it connects to 'That Route'?
- What role does the teddy bear play in a child's life? What about in an adult's life? How does 'The Waste Land' relate to this item? What does it mean for a poet to name a cuddly polar bear after T. S. Eliot himself?
- Is there anything 'elitist / and complicated' about this poem? What is the 'complicated' in the last line referring to?

## Reply in writing

Begin a poem with Helen Farish's line 'I remember that time we were driving back home' but continue with the approach, style and subject matter that is exclusive to you as a poet. If you publish your poem, remember to credit Helen Farish.

## Find out more

### Other books by Helen Farish

*The Dog of Memory* (Bloodaxe, 2016)

*Nocturnes at Nohant: The Decade of Chopin and Sand*  
(Bloodaxe, 2012)

*Intimates* (Cape Poetry, 2005)

### Something to watch

View Helen Farish reading online, alongside Ellen Cranitch and Brenda Shaughnessy, at the Bloodaxe Books launch of their books at [bit.ly/farishreading](https://bit.ly/farishreading)

### Visit [helenfarish.co.uk](https://helenfarish.co.uk)

### If you like Helen Farish's work, try...

- Sharon Olds
- Julia Copus
- Penelope Shuttle

## About the T. S. Eliot Prize

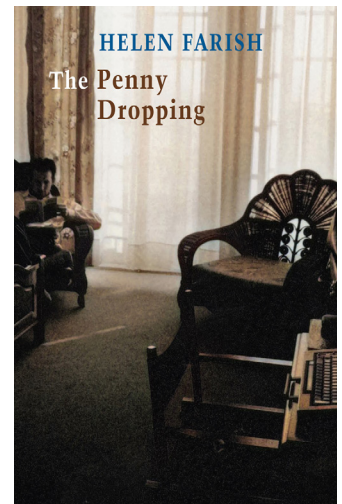
The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary last year, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. It has been run by The T. S. Eliot Foundation since 2016. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2024 Prize are Mimi Khalvati (Chair), Anthony Joseph and Hannah Sullivan. For more information, visit [tseliot.com/prize](https://tseliot.com/prize)

## T. S. Eliot Prize 2024: join in

- Hear our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 12 January 2025. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book for in-person tickets at [bit.ly/eliot24reading](https://bit.ly/eliot24reading) or for the live stream at [bit.ly/eliot24livestream](https://bit.ly/eliot24livestream)
- Look out for the latest additions to our amazing **video archive of interviews and poems** with Eliot Prize poets on our YouTube channel: [bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube](https://bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube)
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at [bit.ly/eliot24reviews](https://bit.ly/eliot24reviews)
- **Sign up to our weekly e-newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at [bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews](https://bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews)
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram, X** and **Facebook**: @tseliotprize

## ‘The Eve of St Agnes’

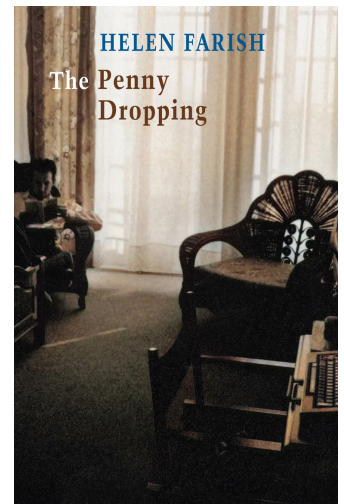
And if we weren't in Fez, we weren't far off,  
just a bus ride, and therefore just a bus ride  
from where Keats' manna and dates had grown.  
Fez – succulent in his imagination  
and planted in mine in a northern classroom  
aged fifteen. And here I was sharing the fruits  
of his poem with you in an ungreen park  
amid date palms and leathery flowers in shades  
of lemony cream. There were no fountains,  
no ponds or pools, but still it was an oasis  
in the city we'd shortened to 'Casa'.  
And if I'm thinking of the park and reading Keats  
aloud to one another like dreamy lovers,  
we must have been dreamy lovers and therefore  
it was May or June, July, the honeyed time  
when I was living more at yours than mine.  
I'd found it somehow in that brick-dusty city  
with its shops where the owners stood outside –  
the school-uniform-navy hard-backed Keats  
which was plain but for his name written  
in silver on the spine. And when the joys  
of all my life are said and sung, and when  
I have mickle time to grieve, and when  
my passing-bell may ere the midnight toll,  
and when what we were to each other has fled,  
ay, ages long ago, let it come once more,  
sudden, like the full-blown roses the park  
had none of, that morning when we discovered  
that the delicates of the language were  
one more thing that we could pass between us.



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## That Route

I remember that time we were driving back home  
after visiting friends who had young children and I said  
how glad I was we hadn't gone down that route,  
adding a rhetorical 'Aren't you?' I was at the wheel.  
Did I make some manoeuvre, switch lanes perhaps,  
as a way to breeze past the reply I hadn't expected?  
We were on the M40 on a late November  
late afternoon, waning light, rain turning to sleet,  
and the weather had been no doubt partly to blame  
for why keeping small children happy in a cheerless  
south London park had seemed like a fate anyone  
would be relieved to have escaped. Tears on the seesaw,  
fights on the swings, injuries on the slide, more tears.  
But you had smiled through it all, volunteering  
piggybacks and peek-a-boo and pushes on the swings.  
High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Thornhill Park and Ride.  
There were never any tears or fights in our house  
until the night, two weeks later, you wept like a child.

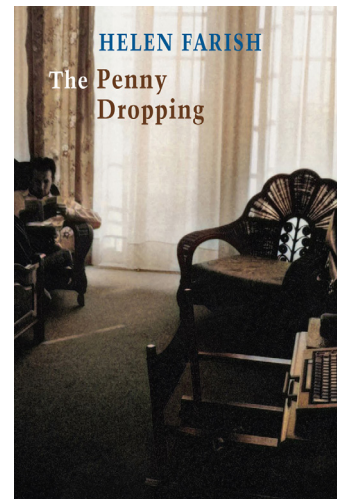


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## The Waste Land

Eliot, the popular and sizeable polar bear  
who'd refused to fit into the overhead lockers,  
was sitting on my knee drawing oohs and aahs  
from the hostesses as though I'd given birth.  
I'd christened him following a staffroom argument  
at the school we'd just left: poetry so elitist  
and complicated – why teach it now?  
Soft toys and teddy bears, I'd never seen the point,  
yet Eliot accompanied you and me from address  
to address, until, when I was living alone,  
a friend's child couldn't stop sobbing  
when the time came to part from him.  
'Take him,' I said, 'he wants to be with you now.'  
How I missed that polar bear!  
But for a long time after you left I was like that,  
performing regular small acts of self-harm.  
Cast off, sent out into the cold  
without so much as a word of thanks  
for all the fun, all the years –  
not even a wave from the doorstep.  
*Why push me away when you love me?*  
It's complicated, I said.



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