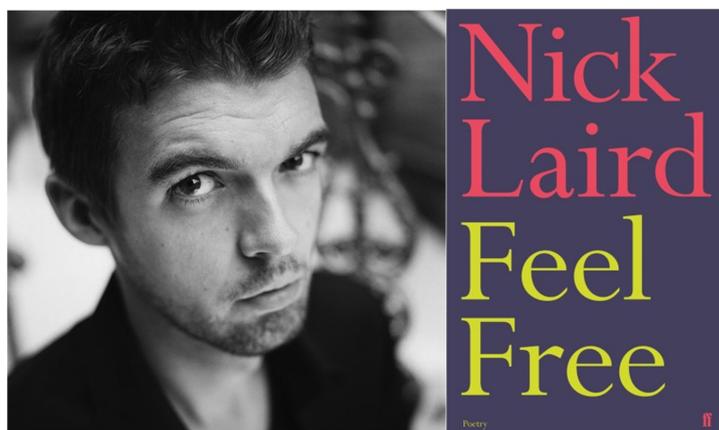


Feel Free

by Nick Laird

(Faber & Faber)



Born in County Tyrone in 1975, Nick Laird studied English at the University of Cambridge. He is a poet, novelist, screenwriter, and former lawyer. His poetry collections (all Faber) are *To a Fault*, which won the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize, *On Purpose*, which won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and Somerset Maugham Prize, *Go Giants and Feel Free*. He has published three novels, *Utterly Monkey*, *Glover's Mistake* and *Modern Gods*. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he co-edited the poetry anthology *The Zoo of the New* with Don Paterson, and is currently a Writer-in-Residence at New York University.

Reviews

'Throughout this outstanding collection, there is the sense of an elsewhere, at once tantalisingly close and unreachable. The opening poem, 'Glitch', describes a fall and the unshakable sense that follows, "of being wanted somewhere else". It recalls Emily Dickinson's line: "Life is over there – Behind the shelf..." Yet Dickinson's lonely oddity could not be more different from Laird's family scene (described with subtle, self-disparaging wit in *Fathers*). In the title poem, he aspires to a "neutral buoyancy" and appreciates the "steady disruption" of a stream. But life does not do steady for long.' (*The Guardian*)

'Laird's interest in restriction also operates on a larger scale. Primarily known as a poet, he has written three novels as well, and has a certain novelistic vision for the collection's arrangement. In each of three numbered sections of the book, we encounter an enigmatic multipart meditation entitled "The Good Son." "La Méditerranée," in section two, begins with the line, "In the midst of our lifelike life," while "The Folding," in section three, echoes it by beginning "In the midst of this lifelike grief". Across the collection Laird scatters pieces of a story about a son losing his mother, including the memorable repeated image of a sick mother coughing up black liquid, which offers a visceral companion to Laird's more cerebral

setups Thus, across each of these formally playful moments, we wash up against the collection's driving concern—is it possible to feel free when hemmed in by mortality? Laird's poetry offers a tentative "yes" by way of skillful fluidity in the face of captivity.' (*The London Magazine*)

Fathers

We set a saucerful of water on the kitchen sill
and check it before breakfast for three days straight
until it's all evaporated. I think it's more like that.

But don't you understand that Jesus lives in the sky?
I think the moon is blown out, and the trees plucked
off the birthday cake and put back with the batteries,

and all the country of you divided up into the tiniest
of slices. But what I've got is microwave popcorn
and this ability to whistle every number one single

from 1987 onwards. There's no use getting all het
up: I give you a bed for your tiredness: I give you
some bread I have toasted and buttered: I give you

a stretch of the earth, baked hard, where we follow
the shiny beetle hauling the shield of himself into noon.
I can tuck a cloud under your chin. If it's an advert

the product is love. If it's an element, water. If it's
not consistent, that's part of its charm. If it's a bomb,
it's a beautiful dud, and I love you, she says, this much.

Silk Cut

I was five and stood beside my dad
at a junction somewhere in Dublin
when I slipped my hand in his
and met the red end of a cigarette

but now our hearts are broken
we walk down to the Braeside
where we can get a proper pint
and his voice tears up a bit

about the emptiness in the house
and we are going home, waiting
at the turn for traffic, when I find
I have to stop my hand from taking his

To His Soul

Old ghost, my one guest,
heckler, cajoler, soft-soaper
drifting like smoke down
the windowless corridor,

the jailer is shaking his keys out,

and you will soon depart for
lodgings that lack colour
and where no one will know
how to take your jokes.

After Hadrian

Discussion Ideas

- What's the beetle doing in 'Fathers'? What sort of beetle, what might it symbolise? How does a (possibly sacred) beetle relate to Jesus, who also features in the poem?
- Why is the poem called 'Silk Cut' and not 'Benson & Hedges' or 'Marlboro Red'? Are you convinced that Silk Cut is the brand that the father in the poem smokes? Is there poetry in brand names? Is there a literary equivalent of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup cans?
- Several of the key poems in Nick Laird's and Zaffar Kunial's books are about fatherhood – from the perspectives of both parent and child. How do these poems speak to your experience of fatherhood? How do they relate to other favourite fatherhood poems of yours?
- [Emperor Hadrian's 'To His Soul' deathbed poem](#) has been translated dozens of times – [here are a few more versions](#). Is Nick Laird's translation the last that ever needs to be written?
- 'To His Soul' appears last in *Feel Free*, and there's one blank page between the main body of the collection and it. When you discover a hidden track on a CD listing, what effect does that have on you? Can you achieve the same effect in book form?

Other books by Nick Laird

To a Fault (Faber & Faber, 2005)

On Purpose (Faber & Faber, 2007)

Go Giants (Faber & Faber, 2015)

If you liked Nick Laird, try ...

- Jack Underwood
- Sinéad Morrissey
- Matthew Welton

Nick Laird online

[Nick at the British Council](#)