

Insistence

by Ailbhe Darcy
(Bloodaxe Books)



Ailbhe Darcy was born in Dublin in 1981 and grew up there before studying at the University of Notre Dame in the US, and teaching there and at the University of Münster in Germany. Her work was included in the Bloodaxe anthologies *Identity Parade* and *Voice Recognition*, and in her pamphlet *A Fictional Dress* (tall-lighthouse, 2009). *Imaginary Menagerie* (Bloodaxe Books, 2011), her first book-length collection, was shortlisted for Ireland's dlr Strong Award at Poetry Now / Mountains to Sea. Her second collection, *Insistence*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2018. She lectures in Creative Writing at Cardiff University.

Reviews

Darcy situates our human “enclosures” in a particular ecological context: silverfish, cockroaches, stinkbugs, jellyfish, mushrooms are the subjects of curious, interesting poems. The prism through which she records encounters with these creatures is also her subject, noticing the odd light that words cast on the world (“Mushrooms could grow on a person”, she writes, with unnatural relish). In a terrific poem, *Still*, she writes with some irony, “some things are unnameable – / or some names are unspeakable – but we / are well capable of words –”. (*The Irish Times*)

A new child should mean new hope. But what if that's no longer so? Ailbhe Darcy's second collection unfolds in an intimate world, in which the words *home* and *love* dominate. But the private world is threatened by a public one. Written in the American Rust Belt, in an era of climate change and upheaval, *Insistence* takes stock of the parent's responsibility to her child, the poet's responsibility to the reader, and the vulnerability of the person in the face of global crisis. (*The Poetry Book Society*)

Postcards from Europe 1

1

Our paper lanterns are not flares but sparks
off some imagined bonfire while somewhere

Europe dreams of burning, dreams of bombs
that will be sent off here and there, piercing

light, their history a history of staring
into fire. Europe dreams of burning,

dreams of bombs. A bomb is made, in part,
of light, of visits to the cinema, where Paris,

made of light, must be annihilated first.
Our lanterns are not flares but sparks.

Here the harvest's in, the children witness
to corn's absence in the field, the quince trees

stripped of all their quinces. Europe dreams of
burning, dreams of bombs. We sing and see

St Martin on his horse, a vision of the strangeness
little children swim in, beneath the light of stars.

Beneath the stars, the light of us. Our paper lanterns,
swinging as we walk, are not flares but sparks

off some imagined bonfire while somewhere
Europe dreams of burning, dreams of bombs.

Umbrella

Look at this couple scooting round the grass;
you can see that he's spoken the rain
so they can hold the umbrella together.

It's not an umbrella, it's a silken manifestation
of something they've talked over and over.

So they parade it before guided tours,

the man with two croissants, the official lovers.

In their slipstream sunshine floats across
blind brick faces, puddles where I stop to cross

the road. It's a creature they're minding, a parallel
universe.

Later they'll shelve its sinuous objections

and carry the umbrella upstairs to its aquarium.
Kiss it, wish it goodnight, godspeed, slán abhaile.

I love how it moves, so queerly eely through
that briny otherworld in which we can only splash.

After My Son Was Born

I'd a snip cut in his tongue.
Blood scissored down his chin.
At every squall I'd been unsnibbing
myself and starving him. He knocked
me so my nose coughed blood,
punched a finger through my cornea.
Blood blubbed on my nipple
where his gums met. On the radio
somebody was saying something about Syria.
My son jerked knots of hair from my head,
tears dashed off his fontanelle. He'd fixed
my hips so my clothes didn't fit. I blundered
him once against the door-jamb:
blood. I'd bit his father
when we were younger, drinking harder,
made blood come then. Twice I tried to leave
him screaming, twenty minutes at a time,
but couldn't keep schtum.
One breakfast I broke the mug that insisted
'Don't Mess With Texas.'
Smashed it. And all the time
I smiled so much my teeth dried.
He made everything heavy.
Like they say the bomb did for a while,
so that Americans swam
through their homes, eyes peeled,
picking up everyday things and dropping them
as though they were violated with light and pain.
As though blood hadn't always been there, waiting.

Discussion Ideas

- Who is St Martin? There are a few of them; who is the one most likely to be featuring in 'Postcards from Europe'? Do you need to know who he is to appreciate the poem? There's no footnote about him in the book – what assumptions of shared knowledge are poet and publisher making about their readership?
- The 'Postcards from Europe' sequence of three poems ends with the lines 'How we might insist on going around again, / on none of this business of history / having anything to do with itself'. What does it mean for an Irish poet to be publishing 'Postcards from Europe' with an English publishing house at this moment in history? Who is Ailbhe Darcy talking to, and from what perspective? Is that information which can be authentically gleaned from the poem?
- Ailbhe Darcy is not the only artist to work with the metaphorical potential of the umbrella – [Rihanna did similar!](#) How does the relationship in the poem differ from the relationship in Rihanna's song? Where do the pair in the poem stand in relation to 'official lovers'? What do the 'I' and 'we' in the final stanza think of the world under the umbrella?
- A newborn baby compared to a nuclear bomb (in 'After My Son Was Born'). What do the parents in your group think of that analogy? What about the non-parents?
- What other poems about early motherhood would you recommend to new parents? Try the work of Kate Clanchy, Liz Berry and Fiona Benson to begin with.

Other books by Ailbhe Darcy

A Fictional Dress (tall-lighthouse, 2009)

Imaginary Menagerie (Bloodaxe, 2011)

If you liked Ailbhe Darcy, try ...

- Martina Evans
- Liz Berry
- Tara Bergin

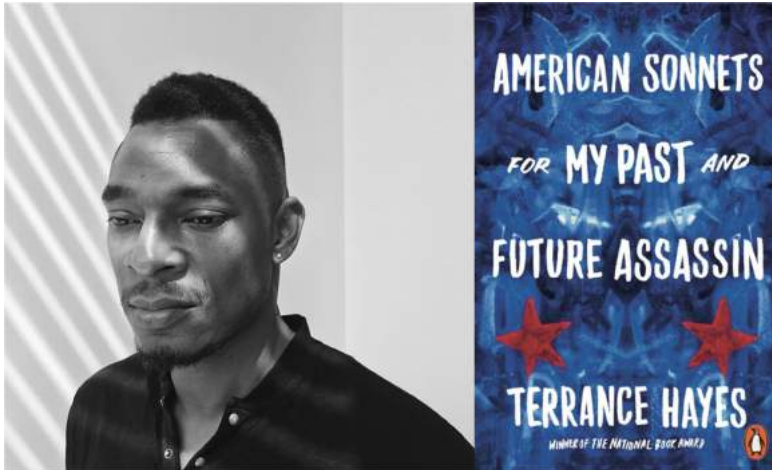
Ailbhe Darcy online

[Ailbhe Darcy at the Poetry Foundation](#)

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassins

by Terrance Hayes

(Penguin)



Terrance Hayes is the author of *Lighthead*, winner of the 2010 National Book Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His other books are *Wind in a Box*, *Hip Logic* and *Muscular Music*. *How To Be Drawn*, his most recent collection of poems, was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award. *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* was published in 2018 by Penguin. He is co-director of the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics and a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and also poetry editor at *The New York Times Magazine*. <http://terrancehayes.com/>

Reviews

Hayes revisits lifelong obsessions: the cage of masculinity, the gulf between fathers and sons (“Christianity is a religion built around a father/Who does not rescue his son. It is the story/of a son whose father is a ghost”). There are paeans to the beauty of Jimi Hendrix and Prince. One sonnet addresses “Seven of the ten things I love in the face/of James Baldwin.” But his inquiry also deepens and turns more daring. One narrator addresses the president: “Trumpet I can’t speak for you but men like me/Who have never made love to a man will always be/Somewhere in the folds of our longing ashamed of it.” (*The New York Times*)

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin does not just condemn oppression and hatred, it also makes space for celebrating joy. It celebrates figures like James Baldwin and Maxine Waters. It celebrates the body, dancing, sex. It celebrates writing and the “poetry weirdos & worriers & warriors, / Poetry whiners & winos falling from ship bows.” And while there is an abundance of love and loving in this collection, it is never lost on the speaker that it is among a backdrop of American assassins. Even if one does find love, they “Must be willing to raise orchids / Or kids in a land of assassins.” (*The Chicago Review of Books*)

Page 10

Are you not the color of this country’s current threat
Advisory? And of pompoms at a school whose mascot
Is the clementine? Color of the quartered cantaloupe
Beside the tiers of easily bruised bananas cowering
In towers of yellow skin? And of Caligula’s copper-toned
Jabber-jaw jammed with grapes shaped like the eyeballs
Of blind people? Light as a featherweight monarch,
Viceroy, goldfish. Pomp & pumpkin pompadour,
Are you not a flame of hollow *Hellos & Hell Nos*,
A wild, tattered spirit versus what? Enemy to Foe of
Those Opposed to Upholding the Laws Against What?
I know your shade. You are the colour of a sucker punch,
The mix of flag blood & surprise blurring the eyes, a flare
Of confusion, a contusion before it swells & darkens.

Page 15

Even the most kindhearted white woman,
Dragging herself through traffic with her nails
On the wheel & her head in a chamber of black
Modern American music may begin, almost
Carelessly, to breathe *n*-words. Yes, even the most
Bespectacled hallucination cruising the lanes
Of America may find her tongue curled inward,
Entangling her windpipe, her vents, toes & pedals
When she drives alone. Even the most made up
Layers of persona in a two- or four-door vehicle
Sealed in a fountain of bass & black boys
Chanting *n*-words may begin to chant inwardly
Softly before she can catch herself. Of course,
After that, what is inward, is absorbed.

Page 77

In a parallel world where all Dr. Who's
Are black, I'm the doctor who knows no god
Is more powerful than Time. In a parallel world
Where all the doctors who are black see cops
Box black boys in cop cars & caskets, I'm
The doctor who blacks out whenever he sees
A police box. In a parallel world where doctors
Who box cops in caskets cry doing their jobs,
I disappear inside a skull that's larger on the inside.
Question: if, in a parallel world where every Dr.
Who was black, you were the complex Time Lord,
When & where would you explore? My answer is,
A brother has to know how to time travel & doctor
Himself when a knee or shoe stalls against his neck.

Discussion Ideas

- Page 10 sonnet: Who is asking all these questions? To whom are they addressed? Who is answering? Are the answers satisfactory? What does the poem teach you about political rhetoric?
- Page 15 sonnet: how does the description of the white woman develop through the first three sentences of the poem? What is happening to her?
- Page 77 sonnet: nearly nine million people in the UK watched the first episode of the first series of *Dr Who* to feature a female Doctor; more than a thousand people commented on the online *Guardian* review of it. Why is this kids' tv character so important to us, to you, to Terrance Hayes?
- Since the 1960s, many Presidential inauguration ceremonies have featured poetry readings. In what combination do you like your poetry and politics mixed?
- Wikipedia's page on the sonnet mentions Italian, French, English, German, Dutch, Indian, Russian, Polish, Czech and Slovenian versions. What is an American sonnet?

Other books by Terrance Hayes

- (1999) *Muscular music* (Tia Chucha Press)
- (2002) *Hip Logic* (Penguin Books US)
- (2006) *Muscular Music* (Carnegie Mellon University Press)
- (2006) *Wind in a Box* (Penguin Books US)

- (2010) *Lighthouse* (Penguin Books US)
- (2015) *How to Be Drawn* (Penguin Books US)

If you liked Terrance Hayes, try ...

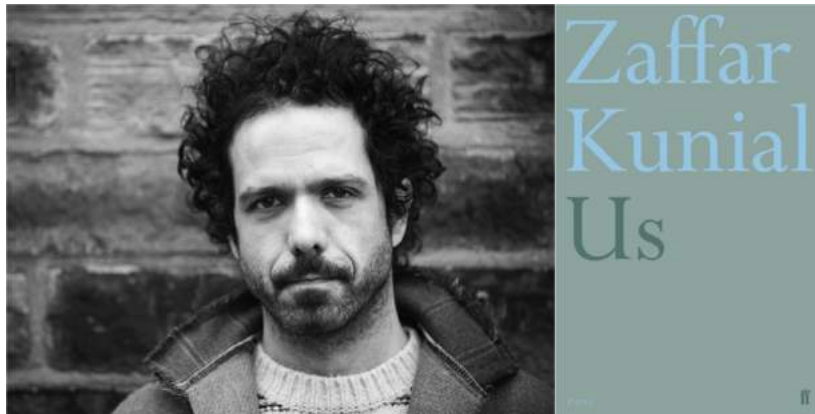
- Danez Smith
- Jericho Brown
- Claudia Rankine

Terrance Hayes online

[Terrance's website](#)

Us

by Zaffar Kunial
(Faber & Faber)



Zaffar Kunial was born in Birmingham to an English mother and a Kashmiri father. He now lives in Hebden Bridge. In 2014 he was the Wordsworth Trust Poet-in-Residence and published a pamphlet in the Faber New Poets series. Since his first public reading, of 'Hill Speak' at the 2011 National Poetry Competition awards, he has spoken at various literature festivals and in programmes for BBC radio, and won the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize for his poem 'The Word'. He was Poet-in-Residence at the 2018 Ledbury Poetry Festival. *Us* (Faber, 2018) is his first collection.

Reviews

"Prayer," for example, is a painfully specific account of the poet's last hours with his mother as she lay dying of cancer ("so spread / by midnight her rings were off") but it is also a meditation on the universal cycle of life and death. Similarly "The Word" recalls an incident from the poet's childhood when, as he sulked in his room, his father instructed him to come out and "enjoy the life". The poet's discomfort at his father's grammatically inaccurate use of "the" is consequence of his desire to fit in, to show "I'm native here." At the end of the poem, however, there's also the realisation that Kunial senior's use of the definite article was actually (albeit inadvertently) "half right, half wrong" – right in the sense that his life – and all our lives – are "the life" singular; the only ones we're going to get. (*The Scotsman*)

The relaxed vernacular of Zaffar Kunial's newly published first collection, *Us*, may at first conceal the precision with which his poems search the vexations of identity. The reaches of

the search are exposed most plainly in the knowingly titled *Self-Portrait as Bottom*. Like the title poem, the self-portrait references Tony Harrison's 40-year-old sonnet diptych 'Them and [uz]', in which the sneering literature teacher told the working-class pupil Harrison, "You're one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!"

Kunial's speaker, unlike Harrison's, doesn't spit up furious "glottals": more subtle and contemporary, he dispatches his gobs of spit "to a lab across the Irish sea" for the DNA ancestry test. The simply complex equation that he first announces, "50% Europe. / 50% Asia," demands sub-divisions genetic and linguistic, leading to a surprising, tenuous ethnic link between the poet's Kashmiri father and Midlands-born mother. (*The Guardian*)

Prayer

First heard words, delivered to this right ear
Allah hu Akbar – God is great – by my father
in the Queen Elizabeth maternity ward.
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
says Herbert, is prayer. If I continued

his lines from there, from birth – a break Herbert
chimes with heav'n and earth – I'd keep in thought
my mum on a Hereford hospital bed
and say what prayer couldn't end. I'd say
I made an animal noise, hurled language's hurt

at midday, when word had come. Cancer. Now, so spread
by midnight her rings were off.

I stayed on. At her bed.

Earlier, time and rhythm flatlining, I whispered
Thank you I love you thank you

mouth at her ear.

She stared on, ahead. I won't know if she heard.

Us

If you ask me, us takes in undulations –
each wave in the sea, all insides compressed –
as if, from one coast, you could reach out to

the next; and maybe it's a Midlands thing
but when I was young, us equally meant me,
says the one, 'Oi, you, tell us where yer from';

and the way supporters share the one fate –

I, being one, am Liverpool no less –
cresting the Mexican wave of we or us,

a shore-like state, two places at once, God
knows what's in it; and, at opposite ends
my heart's sunk at separations of us.

When it comes to us, colour me unsure.
Something in me, or it, has failed the course.
I'd love to think I could stretch to it – us –

but the waves therein are too wide for words.
I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from.
I hope you're with me on this – between love

and loss – where I'd give myself away, stranded
as if the universe is a matter of one stress.
Us. I hope, from here on, I can say it

and though far-fetched, it won't be too far wrong.

The Lyric Eye

Methinks I see these things with parted eye
– William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I've stood at your portrait at different times.
Scanned my own face, on and off, in the glass.
A cloud, eclipsed. Vaguely before, or behind you.
Half cast, at a loss.

Even the gloss
back then, at school, left me looking this blank.
In the dark. Not on the same page as you.

But when I stand, here, almost in a blink
I can place my eyes – glazed over your stare;
let you lend me your ear, your famous cheek;
let the flare of your nostril stretch thin air;
even try on your earring, from five feet, four
centuries apart. I swear by this lapse the light
on your mouth seems cast

half on mine
when I borrow the line between your lips

Discussion Ideas

- [Here's the George Herbert referred to in 'Prayer'](#). How do the two poems speak to each other?
- Does poetry have a place at the beginning and end of life for you? Why? Are there any particular poems which have done for you what the speaker of 'Prayer' is wanting to do for his mother?
- [Here is the Tony Harrison poem The Guardian reviewer refers to](#). How do the two poems argue with one another?
- Is 'The Lyric Eye' a poem about confidence or anxiety?
- Herbert, Shakespeare, Harrison: how does a reader find room for him or herself in this conversation between writers? Are assumptions being made about a shared or unshared literary heritage? Do you feel included or excluded by those assumptions?

Other books by Zaffar Kunial

Faber New Poets 11 a pamphlet (Faber & Faber, 2014)

If you liked Zaffar Kunial, try ...

- Tony Harrison
- Hannah Lowe
- Raymond Antrobus

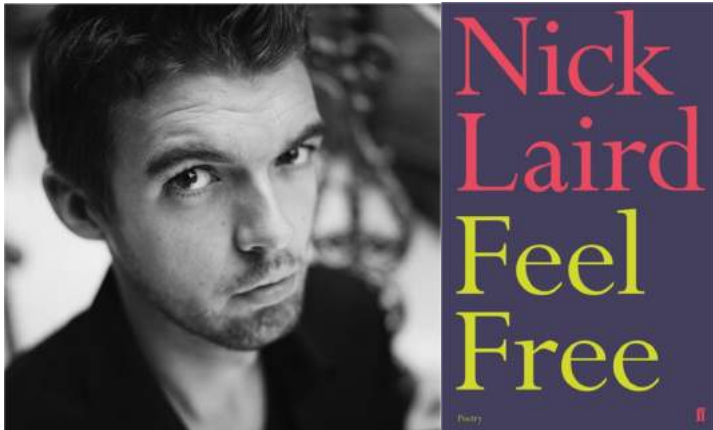
Zaffar Kunial online

[Zaffar at the Poetry Foundation](#)

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](#)

The Distal Point by Fiona Moore (HappenStance)



Fiona Moore lives in Greenwich, London. In 2004 she left her career in the Foreign Office to write and work part-time for a sustainable development NGO. She reviews poetry, was an assistant editor at *The Rialto* and is currently on the editorial board of *Magma*. The first of her two HappenStance pamphlets, *The Only Reason for Time*, was a *Guardian* poetry book of the year and the second, *Night Letter*, was shortlisted for the Michael Marks Award for Poetry Pamphlets. *The Distal Point* (HappenStance 2018) is her first collection. It is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for Autumn 2018.

Reviews

'This collection is split into three sections "Overwinter", "Exclave" and "The Rose, the Stars". The first builds a portrait of love and bereavement, mostly by exploring memories, some of which become more poignant and foreshadowed by hindsight. "Tower" starts "You'd never climb those worn stone/ spirals up the tower of a church/ or castle" and ends,

Once in France a church tower was so
high and you so far away
in the square under plane trees
standing among wavy green
shadows not of water but some
unknown element that I
was afraid of losing you
until I climbed down, found you
and gave you a kiss

to prove myself wrong.

The gentle rhythm and long vowels remind readers that there's no urgency because this is a memory and the poem's 'you' is already lost to the narrator. This is further underlined by the "s" consonance and internal sound echoes (e.g. "shadows"/"unknown", "prove"/"wrong"). The skill of the poem's craft is worn lightly.' (*The London Grip*)

'Fiona Moore has published two pamphlets with *HappenStance*, both long sold out. At last here is a debut book-length collection, in which she confronts personal loss and irretrievable change, as well as wider, more public themes—recent European history and the politics of power. To such concerns she brings creativity, humour and intelligence. Her poems emerge from huge pressure like diamonds.' (Happenstance blog)

The Shirt

I didn't find it for months, your shirt
bundled into a corner of the airing cupboard.
I shook it out. It had been cut
with long cuts all the way up the sleeves
and up the front, so it looked like a plan
of something about to be put together.
They must have had to work so fast to
save you there was no time to unbutton it.
An office shirt, because that's where
it happened. The thin stripes slashed through—
terrifying, unprecedented—a reminder
of everything I wanted to forget.
I'd washed it afterwards, not knowing what to do
with it, or that in three weeks the same thing
would happen to another shirt, a favourite,
dull cotton whose thick weave made it look
as if all the pink shell-grains of sand
had come together on one beach,
a shirt for a gentle hug; and from then on
nothing happened that we would forget.

Unknown

She'd have been eight now, that lovely age
when the mind, still deep in childhood,
starts to reach out beyond it.
The age you were when your father died.
I picture her with the red hair
of both grandmothers.

Why a girl, I don't know.

A boy might have reminded me better—
that photo of you on your parents' lawn.
Strange to think, after so much, how young
she'd still be, how this would mark
the slowness of years.

Would she have carried
an early memory of you, maybe one
like mine of our last embrace when you
could still stand up, with the bed
behind you for safety?

If you're a ghost that walks
beside me, she is doubly so. But she
grows older with time
whereas you don't—soon
the gap between you and me will show.

Waking Up in a Basement

Even when I feel the stone weight of the house
and the earth of the hill it's built into
I don't really believe in my death—
not even when I sniff the draught that yesterday
was tainted by the smell of a small animal
decaying in the thistles and tangled grass
under the olive trees whose leaves fall
past the window like elegant rain.
This morning the smell isn't there.
At one time in the past I did, I think,
believe—I certainly lived day after day
in repeatedly unfolding horror.
The sun's come out sideways and is breaking up
orange across the folds of the duvet.
There's a blaze at the corner of my eye
that I need to not look at, partially veiled
though it is by these showers of leaves and
tree-trunks that knot and angle their way skywards.
The bell-tower strikes a half-hour.
The evidence of all the deaths it has tolled
is against me. The dead should crowd
my mind, as do the sweet chestnut and pine trees
that cloak this circular chain of hills.
A pair of shots ring out and the deep valley
moves the noise around: something, perhaps
a deer or wild boar or (heaven forbid) a

small bird may have died now, or be dying—
tasting its own blood amid a sense of
what panic or numb astonishment.

Discussion Ideas

- An office shirt and a favourite pink shirt: outfits separated by three weeks. What is the poet's choice of shirt demonstrating? Do you think the shirt choice is a factual record of events or a true one? What would be the difference?
- *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Great Gatsby*, *American Psycho* – a short story, a novella and a novel in which shirts play key roles. What are your favourite clothes-in-literature moments, and why?
- 'Unknown' – does this poem seek to comfort the writer? Does it succeed? What comfort might it offer to a reader?
- How might the [imaginary, unwritten] poem 'Waking Up in An Attic' differ from 'Waking Up in a Basement'?
- 'The dead should crowd / my mind' – should they? Do they? What if they don't? How might the poet answer these questions? How would you?

Other books by Fiona Moore

- *Night Letter*, HappenStance, 2015
- *The Only Reason for Time*, HappenStance, 2013

If you liked Fiona Moore, try ...

- Jaqueline Saphra
- Dorothea Smartt
- Maura Dooley

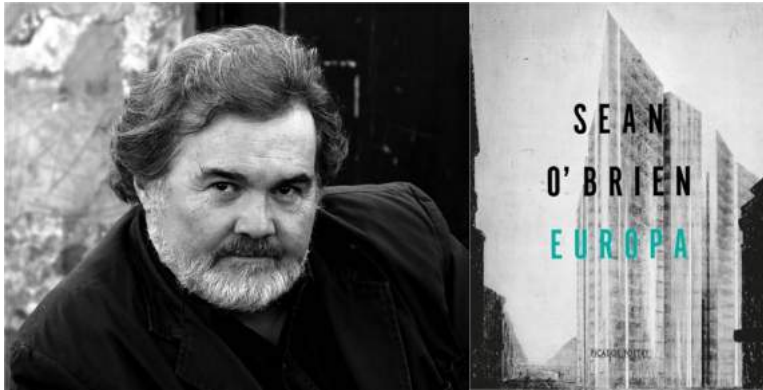
Fiona Moore online

[HappenStance](#)

Europa

by Sean O'Brien

(Picador)



Sean O'Brien was born in London in 1952 but grew up in Hull and now lives in Newcastle. His nine poetry collections include *The Indoor Park*, *The Frighteners* (both Bloodaxe) and *HMS Glasshouse and Ghost Train* (both OUP). With *Downriver* (2001) he then moved to Picador for his subsequent collections. [The Drowned Book](#) (2007) won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection for the third time. [November](#) (2011) was shortlisted for both the T S Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best Collection. His *Collected Poems* appeared in 2012. [The Beautiful Librarians](#) (2015), was a Poetry Book Society Choice. *Europa* is his ninth collection. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University.

Reviews

Europa, Sean O'Brien's ninth collection of poems, is a timely and necessary book. Europe is not a place we can choose to leave: it is also a shared heritage and an age-old state of being, a place where our common dreams, visions and nightmares recur and mutate. In placing our present crises in the context of an imaginative past, O'Brien show how our futures will be determined by what we choose to understand of our own European identity – as well as what we remember and forget of our shared history. *Europa* is a magisterial, grave and lyric work of from one of the finest poets of the age: it shows not just a Europe haunted by disaster and the threat of apocalypse, but an England where the shadows lengthen and multiply even in its most familiar and domestic corners. *Europa*, the poet reminds us, shapes the fate of everyone in these islands – even those of us who insist that they live elsewhere. (*The Poetry Book Society*)

The generation born from 1945 to the early 1960's had it all. State-paid-for Liberal Humanities education; The Beatles, Tamla Motown, David Bowie and T. Rex, all the amusement of the cranky avant-garde; the most incredible sense of entitlement and progress being made. And we blew it. Maybe it was circumstances beyond our control but it happened on our watch and we blew it. And it is too late to complain now. Poetry is a very unlikely instrument to use to set it right but it can be a powerful way of resigning oneself to a game that has been played out and gone. (*David Green books blog*)

Zorn

Somewhere in the house, I howl.
Of this much I am certain, though
These days I no longer hear.
It's only me again. Meanwhile
I watch and do not watch
The evening freight trains pull away
In almost perfect silence, gliding
At the low, inexorable speed
It's tempting if not yet compulsory
To think is that of history,
A word we'd long supposed
Was exiled to the snowfield of itself,
When all the time the patient trains
Were overhauling us to fill
This yard as big as Luxembourg,
Locked down in night and fog.
But what do I know? Only that
They roll into the tunnel, after which
No further reference is made.
There is a pause. It's me again,
There in the attic, the cellar,
Sealed between the walls, a howling
Absence of the sort you often find
In older houses such as this.
If I were me I shouldn't dwell on it
But learn to count my blessings,
Carefully and often, just in case.

Goddess

Just you and me, then, but mainly you,
In the overgrown archway of ivy and jasmine,
One hand gathering your skirt above the dewy grass,
And your crown of white roses afloat on the air
At six a.m., when my breath clouds with frost
And the burnt gold leaves of the silver birch
Are chattery and slick from last night's storm,
And always there is something I desire
But cannot name.

It would not be true if I said
You are walking away, since I am less present to you
Than the stones you glide over. Goodbye then.
How long has this been going on? Time and again
I wake and watch you passing by
In that invulnerable privacy, the sight of which
I used to believe was a gift you bestowed,
While inside the gift was a promise
That all should be well in the garden,
And the garden be shown as the sum of all things.

For all that other girls I've known resemble you,
Those quiet prefects placing flowers
On a speech-day stage or on a grave,
Or knowing the steps of the dances, taking hands
Or turning Fury to denounce and freeze the blood,
You are here anyway, here in the first place,
Unknowable, not to advise or console,
Seen from afar at less than arm's length, the dear
Inhuman girl-goddess you are, without rancour or pity.
I do know the rules. And yet I need
Your absolution: failing that, the power
Of your pure unseeing gaze to do
As you have done to me, and to forget.

Friday the Thirteenth

Full-skirted lime-trees here, and the lilac,
That was late beginning, burnt to popcorn.
Storm coming, the authorities declare.
Better to be gone. Better to be nowhere.
When the host of the righteous attacks
You will wish you had never been born.

Now you reassure yourselves that yes,
You were the first of the prescient few
Who could tell where it leads, from a dust-devil
Spinning in a noon-hot market-place,
A detail seen from space as merely true
Among the infinitely lone and level
Sands where time begins and ends.
My infinitely clever friends,
If being right is its own reward
Your ironic composure will not save
Your skin from the wrath of the vengeful horde
Or your bones from an unmarked grave.

Discussion Ideas

- If any of you know what the word 'zorn' means, stay quiet for a bit and let those who don't know speculate its definition. Now reveal the meaning or look it up. How close did you get?
- What does 'night and fog' refer to in 'Zorn'? Think again about the title of the poem – is it a word or a person? Is this a war poem?
- Googling '2018 Goddess' brings up links to goddess braids hairstyles, a Goddess Festival in California and the 10k Goddess Race in Australia. Is Sean O'Brien's a modern or a timeless goddess? Why might she be leaving the scene?
- 'Friday the Thirteenth' is a slasher-with-a-hint-of-zombie movie from 1980. Does this poem share any qualities with its filmic namesake? The strapline on the movie poster read 'They were warned ... they are doomed ... and on Friday 13th, nothing will save them'. Can a poem have a strapline? What would the strapline for this poem be?
- What dead can you spot here? There are references to Coleridge, Eliot, Shelley in the poem – anybody else? Who might the 'host of the righteous' and the 'vengeful hordes' be?

Other books by Sean O'Brien

- 1983: *The Indoor Park* (Bloodaxe)
- 1987: *The Frighteners* (Bloodaxe)
- 1989: *Boundary Beach* (Ulsterman Publications)
- 1991: *HMS Glasshouse* (Oxford University Press)
- 1993: *A Rarity* (Carnivorous Arpeggio)
- 1995: *Ghost Train* (Oxford University Press)
- 1995: *Penguin Modern Poets 5* (with Simon Armitage and Tony Harrison) (Penguin)
- 1997: *The Ideology* (Smith/Doorstop)
- 2001: *Downriver* (Picador)
- 2002: *Cousin Coat: Selected Poems 1976–2001* (Picador)

- 2002: *Rivers* (with John Kinsella and Peter Porter) (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Australia)
- 2006: *Inferno: a verse version of Dante's Inferno* (Picador)
- 2007: *The Drowned Book* (Picador)
- 2009: *Night Train* (with artist Birtley Aris) (Flambard Press)^[9]
- 2011: *November* (Picador)
- 2015: *The Beautiful Librarians* (Picador)

If you liked Sean O'Brien, try ...

- Glyn Maxwell
- Kathleen Jamie
- Ben Wilkinson

Sean O'Brien online

[Sean at the Poetry Archive](#)

Shrines of Upper Austria by Phoebe Power (Carcanet)



Phoebe Power was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets in 2009, received an Eric Gregory Award in 2012 and a Northern Writers' Award in 2014. Her debut collection, *Shrines of Upper Austria*, was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and received the 2018 Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her poems have been published in journals and anthologies including *The Rialto*, *Oxford Poetry* and *The White Review*. She has recently collaborated with other artists on projects including a live performance of her pamphlet *Harp Duet* (Eyewear, 2016), and *Christl*, a video installation involving poetry, visual art and sound. She currently lives in York. phoebepowerpoetry.wordpress.com

Reviews

This brings to mind one of Vahni Capildeo's most oft-quoted lines on language in her Forward Prize award-winning collection *Measures of Expatriation* (Carcanet Press, 2016): "Language is my home, I say; not one particular language." Multilingualism is the norm in our postcolonial world, and Power sheds light on this important subject by portraying her own particular relationship to English and German in poetic form. Certainly, readers are not left entirely baffled – there is a glossary at the back of the book should the precise meaning of each German word prove to be of interest. I think this is a better way of guiding the reader towards multiple layers of understanding; first, with the foreign language simply savoured as a form of musicality within the unglossed text, then, later perhaps, as something to be precisely understood. (The Poetry School)

The poems in *Shrines of Upper Austria* take their bearings from the landscapes and local detail of Austria – where Power has travelled – sometimes incorporating and assimilating whole lines of German among the English. Several of the poems draw from the life-story of her Austrian grandmother, Christl. Power says that ‘You can never be sure how readers will engage with your work when you write it – readers are all different – so knowing that some people have connected with it is truly a joy.’ Her enthusiasm with different modes of engagement has included adapting her poems into collaborative video installations and performance pieces, featuring harps, electronica and a flood-destroyed piano. (The Forward Foundation)

children

after Egon Schiele: Stadtende

sheen and clank
snakes to this colour town
this shout! and noise –

those letterboxes squeezed
to points – faces raised
to roofs! crammed

aqua violet orange
– figures getting down
from window frames

swung open –
raised arms and bended –
scarlet and yellow trousers!

children running
verging the dark
world of tree and linelessness

calling from the roofs
and from the giant
leaves – dark-green!

Ice Rink

slippery translucent globe
lit pink, or blue, or light green.
cutting through the top

like milk or foil or egg or skin
and sliding on parallel lines, then
crisp surface, ridges raised.

plastic-covered blades. beat:
synthetic girl's voice
pops around this indoor space.

friends hold hands; littlies
shuffle in their spacesuits
hanging on to penguins;

parents loosely dance behind.
this jolly light world
of flying and seeing;

the jolly bright world

Production Line of a Small Gift for the Ladies

While she scissor-curles the ribbon
Sara knots the cellophane.

While she tightens cellophane
Eleni cuts the ribbon up.

While she snips the ribbon-lengths
Frau G. bunches up the cellophane.

While she screws up cellophane
Isis lays the shells on sand.

While she organises shells
Lucas sprinkles sand on glue.

While he spreads the gluey sand
Frau S. squeezes out the glue.

While she zigzags glue on card
Felix cuts the cellophane.

While he cuts the plastic up
Marleen cuts the sheets of card.

While she cuts around the squares

Johannes sits and sorts the shells.

Discussion Ideas

- [Here's the Schiele painting referred to in 'children'](#). Do you need the painting to appreciate the poem? Is the poem an interpretation of the poem, or a commentary on it, or something else altogether?
- Are the leaves in 'children' 'dark-green!', or does 'dark-green!' refer to the call the children are making? Is it possible to be certain? Which version do you prefer?
- Why might there be no mention of the temperature in 'Ice Rink'? Is the jolly world of the ice rink actually that jolly?
- Who are 'the ladies' mentioned in 'Production Line of a Small Gift for the Ladies', and what is their relationship to the people in the poem? Is it possible to use the poem as an instruction manual to recreate the gift? If not, why might that be?
- Would you rather receive the gift mentioned in the poem, or work on its production line?

Other books by Phoebe Power

Harp Duet (Eyewear, 2016)

If you liked Phoebe Power, try ...

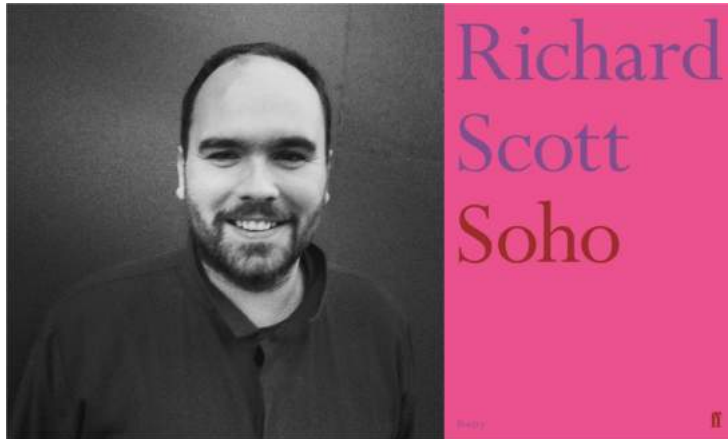
- Rachael Allen
- Emily Berry
- Chris McCabe

Phoebe Power online

[Phoebe's website](#)

Soho

by Richard Scott
(Faber & Faber)



Richard Scott was born in Wimbledon in 1981 and grew up in London. He studied to be an opera singer at the Royal College of Music and later at Goldsmiths College. He has been a winner of the Wasafiri New Writing Prize, a Jerwood/Arvon Poetry mentee, a member of the Aldeburgh 8 and an Open Spaces artist resident at Snape Maltings in Suffolk. His pamphlet *Wound* (Rialto) won the Michael Marks Poetry Award in 2016 and his poem 'crocodile' won the 2017 Poetry London Competition. *Soho* (Faber 2018) is his first collection. richardscott.info/poetry.html

Reviews

Richard Scott's debut poetry book, *Soho*, comes after his pamphlet *Wound* won the 2016 Michael Marks Award for Poetry Pamphlets. Whilst reading it on the bus, I overheard a woman tell her friend that she hopes her baby son will 'turn out gay' so they can 'watch Ru Paul's Drag Race together.' Queerness has never been more socially 'acceptable', but *Soho* is not a celebration of gay freedom or equality or acceptance per se. It leans hard into the shame that corporate, family-friendly or normatively affirmative representations of gay identity and culture often ignore or sanitise. As the speaker notes in '[you spit in my mouth and I]', 'the opposite of shame is not pride.' Between the hot-pink book covers of *Soho*, intimacy is double edged. Insecurity haunts a desire for erotic abandonment, complicity troubles memory, the intensity of delight weighs against the threat of violence. (*The Manchester Review*)

Throughout the book there is a rigorous engagement with sex, the body and desire. These

include feverish poems which celebrate the act such as 'slavic boys will tell you' whose format on the page takes on the evocative shape of a mushroom. But frequently there is a sense of sex being mixed with violence or death. One of the most striking is the poem 'you slug me and' whose startling invitation "ask the terrible questions of my flesh" describes how violence in sex can be a means towards self-discovery. Another poem 'you spit in my mouth and I' takes on a Jean Genet-like mentality to discover levels of beauty in sexual degradation. An entire section of the book includes poems focusing on shame as a complex attendant to sex, especially for gay people. Scott describes "those pre-grindr days when loneliness stung like a hunger" and how "my head's a cloud and my heart's a puddle". The triumphant final poem 'Oh My Soho!' describes the desultory sensation "I'm chock-full of shame, riven with dark man-jostling alleyways, a treasure map of buried trauma." An ever-recurring need for sexual gratification makes it seem as if we are condemned to a state where "this desperate place... is your home now". But the poem 'the presence of x' epitomises Scott's rejection of religion and "heteronormative bullshit" out of a commitment to "believe in sex the blue hours you've spent fucking me the bruises you left on my arms". This results in an individual who gazes askance at society to resolutely declare "I am the homosexual you cannot be proud of". (*Lonesome Reader* blog)

Crocodile

I know how I will die then
in a death roll scales to my
cheek claws sunk into my pale
shoulders water burning my
throat like whiskey the un-
countable rows of yellowed
teeth ringing in my scalp and
in the heat of the thrashing
river he will press his white
rawness into me like that man
who held me from behind
when I didn't know sex and
gripped my mouth like a muzzle
and unsheathed his anger
stubble grazing my neck see
I have died already and somehow
survived hauled myself up from
the river mud to taste blue air
though I was not the same I
was carrion bleeding into the silt
and didn't I wear those wounds
well pity me the boy who cried
crocodile I have these moments when I
know I wanted it asked for it even

to be special to be scarred
wading along the riverbank feet
in the brown flow flirting with
wildness the green violence in the
shallows and I know he is swimming
back to me his horned body slipping
through sediment and weed for
nothing ever really heals he can
smell the red meat of me
bait lighting up the river

Fishmonger

Every Thursday he came to call
in his blood-licked surgeon's coat
and if my parents were out
I knew to order nothing but eggs
as his prices for fish were far too dear.

Once he took me into his van –
row upon row of gleaming flanks,
the rough brick-armour of crabs,
the stopped hearts of bivalves pickled in brine,
all resting on clouds of ice.

He let me douse his catch in ammonia
a secret to keep their sparkle, he said
and as I sprayed they spluttered
back to life – mouths gurning for water,
gills rippling like Venetian blinds,

coppers and silvers flashing and lathering.
I heard the mighty roar of the sea
surround his van like traffic.
He took me into his capable arms
so I would not cry out.

He fed me prawns to calm me,
wiped the brine from my lips -
let me try my first razor clam
unzipped from its hard pale shell,
the tip – soft and white and saline.

In that battered old Transit
I took the whole ocean into my mouth
and then he sent me home
with a dozen eggs -
so no one would be any the wiser.

green

here's a plastic basket of polyester tulips
plus a heart-shaped card that sings I LOVE YOU
don't recycle them please
be happy with my pound-store presents

I stink I'm pretty sweaty I've been walking
this whole damp night to get here
let me curl around your converse cat-like
and dream of our cherry-days

Maybe I could put my head still burning
from the memory of your hubba bubba kisses
onto your broad chest just till I feel a bit better
perhaps grab some shut-eye while you doze off

Discussion Ideas

- 'pity me the boy who cried / crocodile' – is pity what you feel for the boy in the poem? Is the poem wanting to direct its readers' responses? Do you agree with or resist such direction?
- Look at the form of 'Fishmonger' – regular line and stanza lengths, most stanzas containing a single sentence, although there is one exception. Does this form match the subject matter or the tone of the poem?
- What artist would create a good interpretation of the scene in 'Fishmonger'? A painter, sculptor, musician – or some other discipline? In rendering the poem in another artform, which of the poem's features would they highlight?
- The poem after 'green' in *Soho* is called 'pastoral' and is set in the early hours of a Soho dawn. What makes 'green' a nature poem?
- Imagine a loved one sent you a photocopy of this poem inside your own singing heart-shaped card – what would it be saying to you?

Other books by Richard Scott

Wound, a pamphlet (The Rialto, 2016)

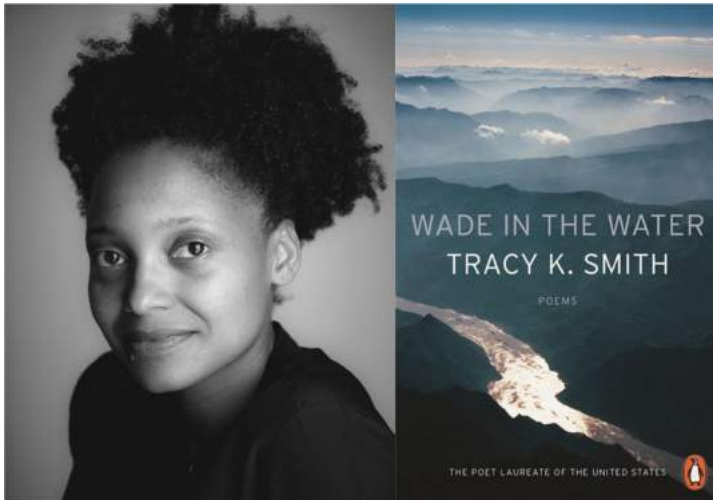
If you liked Richard Scott, try ...

- Andrew McMillan
- Danez Smith
- Daljit Nagra

Richard Scott online

[Richard's website](#)

Wade in the Water **by Tracey K Smith** **(Penguin)**



Tracey K. Smith was born in Massachusetts and raised in northern California. She earned a BA from Harvard University and an MFA in creative writing from Columbia University. Her four poetry collections are *The Body's Question* (2003), *Duende* (2007), *Life on Mars* (2011) and *Wade in the Water* (Penguin 2018). She won the Pulitzer Prize for *Life on Mars*. She is also the author of a memoir, *Ordinary Light*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2017 she was named Poet Laureate of the United States. She teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

Reviews

Tracey K Smith is the poet laureate of the United States and a winner of the Pulitzer prize. *Wade in the Water* is, inexplicably, the first of her three collections to be published in the UK. The title is from a spiritual sung on the underground railroad that carried slaves to safety in the 19th century. Its centrepiece is a gathering of what are known as “erasure poems” – a strange term as what Smith is doing is the opposite of erasure. She is making visible the words of slaves and their owners, of African Americans enlisted in the civil war – these are found poems about people who were lost. Smith has pieced their correspondence together with the love of someone making a hand-stitched quilt. (*The Guardian*)

“Our country is like a really old house,” the historian and journalist Isabel Wilkerson said in an interview barely a week after the 2016 election. “Old houses need a lot of work. And the work is never done ... Whatever you’re ignoring will be there to be reckoned with until you reckon with it. And I think that that’s what we’re called upon to do where we are right now.” Tracy K. Smith, in her current role as U.S. poet laureate and in her fourth collection of poetry, *Wade in the Water*, is rolling up her sleeves and excavating the basement of this old house.

Wade, published in April, reads like a book a laureate should write; these are poems that draw on weighty subjects and hinge on ideas of belonging. From the United States’ dark chapters of slavery to present-day acts of racial violence, Smith’s pieces consistently match the largeness of their content. Hers are poems that insist on compassion and love—poems of many voices and places across America. (*The Atlantic*)

Garden of Eden

What a profound longing
I feel, just this very instant,
For the Garden of Eden
On Montague Street
Where I seldom shopped,
Usually only after therapy,
Elbow sore at the crook
From a handbasket filled
To capacity. The glossy pastries!
Pomegranate, persimmon, quince!
Once, a bag of black beluga
Lentils spilt a trail behind me
While I labored to find
A tea they refused to carry.
It was Brooklyn. My thirties.
Everyone I knew was living
The same desolate luxury,
Each ashamed of the same things:
Innocence and privacy. I’d lug
Home the paper bags, doing
Bank-balance math and counting days.
I’d squint into it, or close my eyes
And let it slam me in the face –
The known sun setting
On the dawning century.

The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister

Seeing her as seldom as you do, it doesn't change,
The ire, the shame, the fists you must remember

To smooth flat just thinking what they did,
What they promised, then took – those men

Who offered to pay, to keep, the clan of them
Lording it over the others like high school boys

And their kids brothers. Men with interests to protect,
And mute marble wives. Men who let her

Beam into their faces, watching her shoulders rise,
Her astonishing new breasts, making her believe

It was she who gave permission.
They plundered her youth, then moved on.

Those awful, awful men. The ones
Whose wealth is a kind of filth.

Camp Nelson

Camp Nelson, Ky. November 26 1864

The morning was bitter cold.
It was freezing hard. I was
certain it would kill my sick child
to take him out in the cold. I told
the man in charge of the guard
that it would be the death of my boy.

I told him that my wife and children
had no place to go and that I
was a soldier of the United States.
He told me it did not make any difference.
He had orders to take all out of Camp.
He told my wife and family that if they

did not get up into the wagon he would
shoot the last one of them. My wife
carried her sick child in her arms.
The wind was blowing hard and cold

and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife

with her little one was poorly clad. I followed as far as the lines. At night I went in search. They were in an old meeting house belonging to the colored people. My wife and children could not get near the fire, because of the number of colored people huddling by the soldiers. They had not received a morsel of food during the whole day. My boy was dead. He died directly after getting down from the wagon. Next morning I walked to Nicholasville. I dug a grave and buried my child. I left

my family in the Meeting house – where they still remain.

Discussion Ideas

- What is the ‘desolate luxury’ referred to in ‘Garden of Eden’? ‘Everyone I know’ was living it. Do you identify with the condition, or do you resist it? When and why did the items necessary for a luxurious life switch from cars, furs and jewels to fruit, pulses and small cakes?
- Garden of Eden is a high-end US supermarket chain – ‘a culinary Mecca for savvy shoppers’ as its website describes it. Why might a supermarket be named and described in such religious terms? Is ‘Garden of Eden’ a religious poem?
- Would ‘The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister’ be as effective if the last line were ‘Whose money is a kind of dirt’? What is that ‘lth’ sound in ‘wealth’ and ‘filth’ expressing? Try reading the poem out loud to each other.
- Is ‘The World is Your Beautiful Younger Sister’ a #metoo poem?
- The extract on page 24 is from a longer sequence of poems inspired by the US Civil War, [originally published here](#). What does a poet tell us that a historian can’t?

Other books by Tracy K Smith

- *The Body’s Question*. Graywolf Press. 2003.
- *Duende*. Graywolf Press. 2007.
- *Life on Mars*. Graywolf Press. 2011.
- *Ordinary Light*. Knopf. 2015.

If you liked Tracy K Smith, try ...

- Jay Bernard
- Rita Dove
- Patricia Smith

Tracy K Smith online

[Tracy at the Poetry Foundation](#)

Three Poems

by Hannah Sullivan

(Faber & Faber)



Hannah Sullivan was born in 1979 and grew up in Ealing, in West London. She studied Classics at Cambridge, received her PhD in English from Harvard in 2008, and taught as an Assistant Professor at Stanford. Her study *The Work of Revision*, which examined how modernist approaches to rewriting shaped literary style, was published in 2013 and awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize by the British Academy. *Three Poems* (Faber, 2018) is her first poetry collection. She is an Associate Professor of English at New College, Oxford and lives in London with her husband and two sons.

Reviews

‘Hannah Sullivan is an ambidextrous writer. An associate professor of English at New College, Oxford, she recently published a book called *The Work of Revision*, in which she argued that the idea of revising as a necessary part of the creative process only began with early 20th-century modernism. Her alluring debut collection *Three Poems* (who knows how extensively reworked?) travels light, illuminated yet never shackled by scholarship, and investigates the way life does – and does not – revise itself. It is as though she were holding this Polish proverb up to the light: “Everything changes and nothing changes.” She writes freshly about everything, including sameness. She is a sensual conjurer of atmospheres – writing almost as a poet-restaurantier. On a single page: cloves, rainstorm, peanut oil, ozone, brandy, frost, freezing blood and peaches “sitting with their bruises” – each with its own tang. New York resembles a delicatessen – the food more precise than the people eating. Sullivan’s poems are as intense as Edward Hopper’s paintings (although more crowded).’ (*The Guardian*)

'The second poem in the collection, "Repeat Until Time," is subtitled "The Heraclitus Poem" (Sullivan's first degree was in classics) and it operates as an extended riff on the philosopher's much debated idea that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. For much of the poem, however, rather than perpetual novelty the focus is on repetition and the frustrating sameness of things. Sullivan boils down the life cycle of an oak tree (wonderfully) to "that eternal kernel rigmarole", and writes later of "repetition's sense of comedy". The early line "It is hard to say if there is progress in history" is echoed in the final stanzas of the poem, which recall the atom bomb test of July 1945, during which Oppenheimer famously reached for a line from the ancient Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita, "I am become Shiva, death, the shatterer of worlds.'" (*The Scotsman*)

from Three Poems (p6-7)

The consciousness of the finite, the menaced, the essentially invented state twins ever, to my perception, in the thousand glassy eyes of these giants of the mere market.

Evening comes without seeing light again. Between you and a window:
The beige Lego-maze of offices, people whose names you don't know.

You should be addressing inefficiencies in online processes,
Mastering multichannel, getting serious about small business,

You have created a spreadsheet with thirteen tabs,
The manager is giving you hell, ordering sushi, cancelling cabs.

The senior partner calls from Newark, 'Thanks team,' (his thin
Voice purrs, he is sipping something), 'let's make it a win-win.'

But in the morning, brushing his new teeth, looking out into the snow's
Huge act of world-effacement, its lethargy, he knows:

Things are illiquid, freezing up. Light is abortive
On the greyscale Park. It's time to short the fucking market.

In Chennai, meanwhile, a man is waiting for your analysis,
Eating his breakfast of microwaved dal and mini-idlis,

Checking the cricket scores on his computer, reading Thoreau,
Wondering what New York looks like at night, in snow.

He is applying to Columbia, NYU Stern, and Stanford GSB.
He thinks of going abroad as an attempt to live deliberately,

Imagining the well-stacked fires in iron-fenced Victorians,
The senior partner's grace under pressure, his Emersonian

Turn of phrase, the summers spent sailing, the long reaches
Of sand threaded with grass on Cape Cod beaches.

2.2

Yes, the hipsters crumble their kouign-amann in San Francisco,
Fog lifts away like garage doors, MacBooks get going.
A girl with drug sores rocks by a steamed-up Bikram studio.

Women pour milk on Kashi for the men from Tinder in the Mission,
Wondering if they didn't come because of the Last Words or the sertraline.
Or maybe it is just what happens when you get older or heartbroken.

And the flammers in the Castro from last night order oat pancakes,
Bacon crisp in a cross, white lozenge of butter, dispelling headaches,
While the pastry chef folds cinnamon into tres leches cakes.

Su-Yen pauses lordly before he crosses, reproving his owner
With a shake of his standard-size poodle head at each corner,
His jaw primitive and cautious (*cave!*) as the mosaic dog in Pompeii.

And you ease out behind huge Ray-Bans, counting the avenues
Of rubbery ficus trees, past ox-tongue taquerias,
Into the tangle of collapsible concrete freeways.

Grey coaches carry hooded children south to the Valley,
A coder who grew up in a car in Hawaii is drinking a Snapple,
A quant checks the calories on a granola puck and checks Facebook.

So no one sees the sparrowhawk stall in the outside lane.
And he is himself surprised by the deer in the windscreen,
The plump bunny rump, the hooves in child's pose. Balasana.

It took the car out in the early hours. On the seat
The bored drool of its jaw, the crushed pearlescent teeth
Turned to the side, like someone whimpering at sleep.

4.3

Tears and liver spots on the back of the hand,
The comfort again and again of writing something fictional down.

All cancers were once benign,
Then the DNA forgets its prosody

And cells divide interminably:
The raddled beauty of doggerel.

Stained under a microscope,
An ovary is Venice at sunset,
'Too beautiful to be painted' said Monet.
Midas-touched sperm, bulging and fanning.

Discussion Ideas

- What does the first extract suggest to you about the poet's attitude to work – in this particular office, or in general? Does it chime with your attitude? Who is the 'you' in the extract?
- Whose is the quote which introduces the extract? How do Emerson's and Thoreau's writings relate to the poem? Do you know, and does it matter if you do or don't?
- What might the poetry-readers of 2068 make of extract 2.2? What about those of 1968? In what era is the deer most at home?
- Look at extract 4.3 alongside Fiona Moore's 'Unknown'. Does an 'In the midst of life we are in death' philosophy prove helpful to you or not? What other works of art or literature prompt you to reflect in this way?
- For those of you who have read the three poems which constitute the whole collection: what does a verse memoir do that a straightforward autobiography doesn't?

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