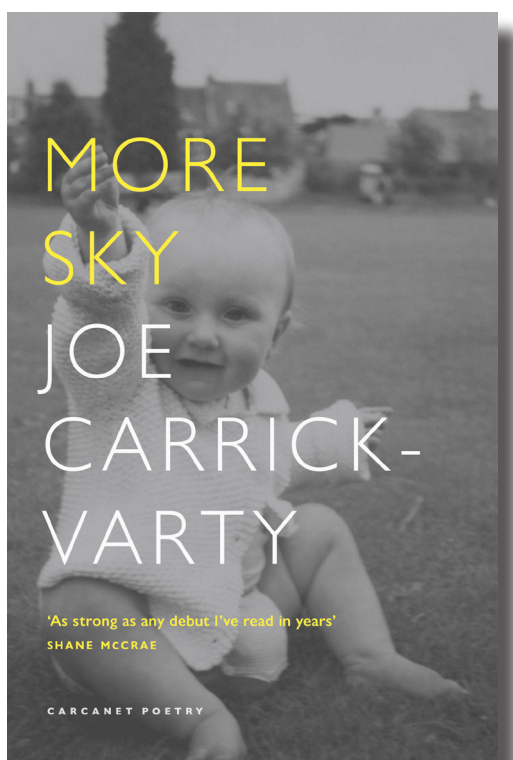


# READERS' NOTES

Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2023 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.



## *More Sky* by Joe Carrick-Varty What reviewers say



*More Sky* (Carcenet Press, 2023) by Joe Carrick-Varty.  
[carcanet.co.uk](http://carcanet.co.uk)

'Reading Joe Carrick-Varty's debut collection *More Sky* is akin to detective fiction; we are given the recurring narrative components (shotgun, father, field, pub, trainers) and must assemble them page by page, reconstructing seismic personal events, participating in an amnesiac dream sequence that gradually reveals a traumatic root.' – **Tom Branfoot, *Poetry London***

'The collection builds towards an extended sequence, 'sky doc', in which suicide itself is personified, bleeding into family life, inflecting every action with a tragic finality. These sparsely written, surreal poems address class, domesticity and cycles of violence with a lightness of touch that allows them to strike surprise blows to the solar plexus: "Once upon a time when suicide was the simplest way / of saying honey please take the bins out / like many kids the first person / to punch me in the face was my dad". In spite of these darker musings, this is a collection imbued with belief in the imagination's power to heal, and in the strength of alternate endings where, on a sister's graduation, "my dad who never gets to see this / booms her name and turns every middle class head".' – **Jessica Traynor, *The Irish Times***

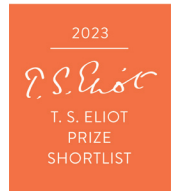
'If I had to condense Joe Carrick-Varty's complex new collection *More Sky* into just a handful of lines, I'd choose a short section from 'THE CHILDREN'. In the aftermath of his father's decision to purchase a shotgun, Carrick-Varty realises that he acquired it from a "man from the pub / someone I'll walk past for years / which means I am / existing in relation to this moment". What is encapsulated here, I think, is the action of trauma on perception of time: defying time's onward flow, trauma is eternally present, dictating the affected person's behaviour and responses for years after the event that triggered it and demanding endless re-enactment of the feelings it unleashed.' – **Stella Backhouse, *Here Comes Everyone***

## About the poet

Joe Carrick-Varty is a British-Irish poet, writer and founding editor of *bath magg*. He is the author of two pamphlets of poetry: *Somewhere Far* (The Poetry Business, 2019) and *54 Questions for the Man Who Sold a Shotgun to My Father* (Out-Spoken Press, 2020). His work has appeared in the *New Statesman*, *The Poetry Review* and *Poetry London*. He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2022. *More Sky* (Carcenet, 2023) is his debut collection.



# READERS' NOTES



## Discussion ideas

- Have you ever called your post man or woman 'Postie'? What do you understand about the speaker of the poem by his use of this address, and the length of the note that he writes?
- How does the title 'What if suicide is just taking off your headphones' relate to the poem? What do you make of the match or mis-match between the whale and the lemming? Is this a version of a Rudyard Kipling 'Just So' story?
- Can you read 'More Sky' out loud as it's written, with no full stops? What does reading it out loud do to you bodily? How does it make your body feel?

## Writing prompt

- Write a poem that involves the way your body feels. If you feel breathless, how does your poem's punctuation match? What poem matches your heartbeat or pattern of walking, wheeling or (not) moving? What if you've got one good eye and one bad eye, how does what you look at change? What poetic technique matches the tension and release of stretching then relaxing? The topic of the poem matters less than the physicality that you're trying to replicate.

## Find out more

### Other books by Joe Carrick-Varty

*54 Questions for the Man Who Sold a Shotgun to My Father* (Out-Spoken Press, 2020)

*Somewhere Far* (The Poetry Business, 2019)

### Listen

Hear Joe Carrick-Varty on two Carcanet videocasts: talking about *More Sky* at [bit.ly/carcanetcarrickvarty](https://bit.ly/carcanetcarrickvarty), and at the online launch, in conversation with Anthony Anaxagorou, at [bit.ly/carrickvartylaunch](https://bit.ly/carrickvartylaunch)

See also: [jocarrickvarty.com](https://jocarrickvarty.com)

### If you like this poet's work, try...

- Shane McCrae
- Yomi Şode
- Emily Berry

## About the T. S. Eliot Prize

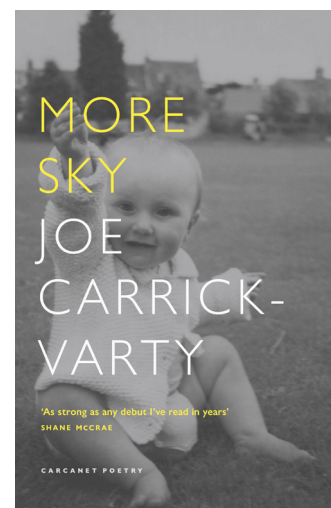
The T. S. Eliot Prize celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2023. Awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland, the Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. It has been run by The T. S. 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 2023 Prize are Paul Muldoon (Chair), Sasha Dugdale and Denise Saul. For more information, visit [tseliot.com/prize](https://tseliot.com/prize)

## T. S. Eliot Prize 2023: join in

- Look out for **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](https://bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube)
- Join the poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Shortlist Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 14 January 2024. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book at [bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive](https://bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive)
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at [bit.ly/eliot23reviews](https://bit.ly/eliot23reviews)
- **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 **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**

## Dear Postie

If no answer please leave parcel behind rhododendron—  
if storm hits and rhododendron blows away  
please leave parcel inside wheelie bin with brick on top—  
if crying baby can be heard on approach  
tap three times on bottom-left panel of shed window—  
DO NOT ring doorbell—if rainbow windmill  
spins slower than usual open phone and call alcoholic father—  
if rainbow windmill stops spinning at any moment  
come back in month with picture of alcoholic father  
eating fish and chips in park—if phone rings out  
wait for nesting swallows to return from Africa  
then call again—DO NOT mention alcoholic father  
to friends colleagues woman you love—DO NOT  
kiss woman you love—DO NOT eat sleep  
shit watch TV until alcoholic father is spotted  
leaving Tesco with Guinness and Hula Hoops—  
DO NOT I repeat DO NOT drive to 24-hour Shell garage  
spend following afternoon outside alcoholic father's flat  
old ladies watching—bay windows blue with Countdown



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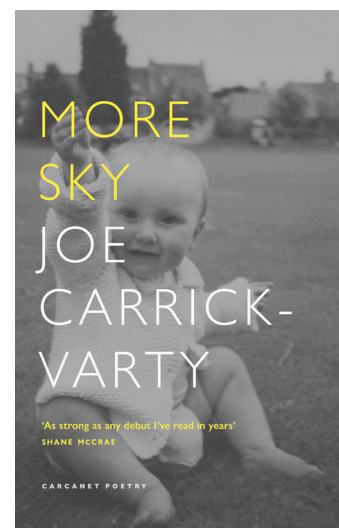
2023

*T. S. Eliot*

T. S. ELIOT  
PRIZE  
SHORTLIST

## More Sky

Have you ever had that thing when a building  
gets demolished, a building you walk past every day,  
a big but inconspicuous building,  
a building you've never properly looked at,  
couldn't draw from memory, guess  
its number of windows, the impression of a building,  
the colour of sandstone in your periphery  
as you hurry into afternoons, interviews,  
wedding receptions and all of a sudden it's gone,  
there's sky where that building used to be  
and you're a mess with your child's bike helmet?

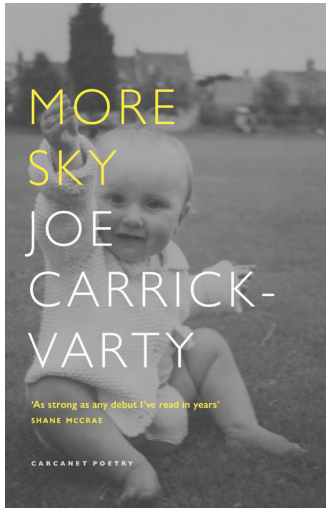


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# READERS' NOTES POEMS

## What if suicide is just taking off your headphones

After *Gboyega Odubanjo*



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said the blue whale to the lemming  
I think you need to take a walk said the lemming

but I've been walking all year  
last week I was in the Arctic watching an ice shelf

the lemming regarded the blue whale  
did you know glacier water is blue

because it contains no oxygen  
stop trying to change the subject

glacier water contains no oxygen because  
in glaciers the pressure causes air to be squeezed out

increasing the density of the ice  
the blue whale creaked like a train

a glacier lake appears blue because  
it absorbs other colours more efficiently than blue

that doesn't really explain anything said the blue whale  
the lemming sucked teeth

I'm only trying to gee you up  
the blue whale remembered being a chubby year 7

asking Emmy Strachan out over text  
my arms are T-Rex arms my hands are open peaches

the lemming considered telling the blue whale the anecdote  
about its family who jumped off a cliff

in a Disney documentary but instead  
the lemming cupped its palm to the blue whale's nose

and held it there for a few seconds  
then the lemming kissed the blue whale's cheek

which for reference was the size of a church window  
so the lemming had to stand on tip toes

and like that the pair became best friends  
and the blue whale promised to carry the lemming

on its back wherever they wanted to go  
and this is how islands were made

2023

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT  
PRIZE  
SHORTLIST