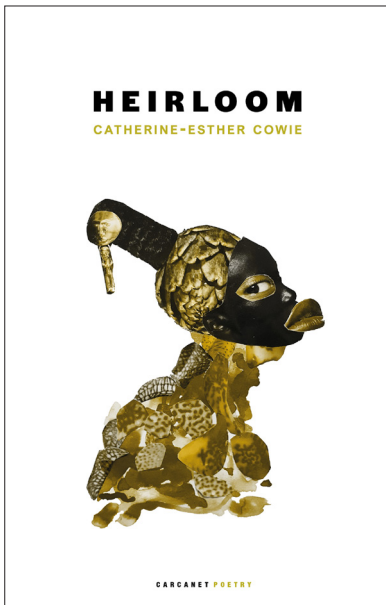


T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2025 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2025 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.



Heirloom (Carcanet Press, 2025)
by Catherine-Esther Cowie.
Search Catherine-Esther Cowie
at www.carcanet.co.uk

us to trace a family narrative, to move forwards along a linear chronology whilst recurring to and unfolding that still bruising story of origin, a story which is not simply a personal heritage but also a representation of colonial and post-colonial history. [...] Cowie's language incorporates Kwéyòl, the St Lucian creole, which in its mixture of English, French and African languages, exemplifies the intricacy of this past.' – Kathleen McPhilemy, *The High Window*

'What elevates this collection is Cowie's use of language. The colloquial elements and cultural traditions woven throughout add a spiritual depth, grounding the narrative in a sense of place and heritage. *Heirloom* examines the ways trauma can be inherited and resisted, yet Cowie reminds us that survival is not just about endurance; it is about transformation and pulling through when feeling the weight of it all. [...] A remarkable debut from Catherine-Esther Cowie that's worth reading and discussing afterwards.' – Yomi Şode, *Poetry Book Society Summer Bulletin*

On *Heirloom*

'Moving from colonial to post-colonial St Lucia, this debut collection brings to light the inheritances of four generations of women, developing monologues, lyrics and narrative poems which enable us to see how past dysfunction, tyranny and terror structure the shapes of women's lives, and what they hand down to one another. Uneasy inheritances are just the starting point for this debut's remarkable meditations: Should the stories of the past be told? Do they bring redemption or ruin? What are the costs of saying what happened? Beguiling and cathartic, Catherine-Esther Cowie's powerful, formally inventive poems reckon with the past even as they elegise and celebrate her subjects.' – **Carcanet Press**

'Catherine-Esther Cowie's powerful first collection is tightly structured around her own origin story, tracing the history of her family through the female line from the rape of her great-grandmother by a white landowner in St Lucia. After the three 'Prelude' poems, there are four sections, one for each of the four generations, finishing with 'Catherine', the poet. The first epigraph, from Julia Bouwsma, asserts "Because this is how you mark a child, make her yours forever. Press your story like a blessing into her still-bruised forehead." Cowie's book invites

About the poet

Catherine-Esther Cowie was born in St Lucia to a Tobagonian father and a St Lucian mother. She migrated with her family to Canada and then to the USA. Her poems have been published in *PN Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *West Branch Journal*, *The Common*, *SWWIM*, *Rhino Poetry* and other journals. She is a Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop fellow. Her debut collection, *Heirloom* (Carcanet Press), is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and was also shortlisted for the Forward Jerwood Prize for Best First Collection



Photo © Catherine-Esther Cowie

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What do you think?

- There is more information about the writing of 'Mimorian' on the **Poetry School website**. 'Only a little of me remains' – is that true? How little is too little a memory of a person?
- Find the Mark Strand translation of Carlos Drummond's 'Resíduo' on **allpoetry.com**. How does it compare to 'Mimorian'? How does the original inspire the 'after' poem? What's carried over or altered or discarded?
- Is 'The Outside Child' a poem of defiance or self-soothing? What do you notice about the alliteration in this poem – the d-, b-, p- sounds, and the f-, m-, sh-sounds? What effect do they have on you?
- Have you read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*? Have you seen the recent Guillermo del Toro film version of the novel, or any of the other adaptations or treatments of the original that have been published or performed since the first film came out in 1910? How does 'Mother: Frankenstein' add to this body of responses to Shelley?

Reply in writing

'I wanted the speaker of the poem to speak back to this memory of herself' says Catherine-Esther Cowie of 'Mimorian'. Have you an ancestor for whom you might like to write similarly? Someone within living memory, or maybe someone further back? What happens when you write their poem?

Find out more

Other work by Catherine-Esther Cowie

Heirloom is Catherine-Esther Cowie's debut collection. Her work has previously appeared in *PN Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *West Branch Journal*, *The Common*, *SWWIM* and elsewhere.

On screen

Catherine-Esther Cowie features in two excellent Carcanet videos: in the **'Meet the Author' series** and the **online launch of *Heirloom***, hosted by previous Eliot Prize shortlistee Victoria Kennefick. Search 'heirloom' at **carcanet.co.uk**. Hear Catherine-Esther on the **Poetry Foundation's Poetry Off the Shelf series** and interviewed for **BBC Radio London's Poetry Corner**.

If you like Catherine-Esther Cowie's work, try...

- **Kwame Dawes**
- **Malika Booker**
- **Victoria Kennefick**

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, 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. The T. S. Eliot estate has provided the prize money since the Prize's inception, and the T. S. Eliot Foundation took over the running of the Prize in 2016, following Inpress Books' acquisition of the PBS. 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 2025 Prize are Michael Hofmann (Chair), Patience Agbabi and Niall Campbell. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

T. S. Eliot Prize 2025: join in

- Join our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 18 January 2026. 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/eliot25readings or for the live stream at bit.ly/eliot25livestream
- 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
- **John Field's authoritative reviews** of all the shortlisted titles will be published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website over the coming months. Read them online at bit.ly/eliot25shortlist
- Browse the brilliant **Writers' Notes series**, devised by our partner the Poetry School, in which Eliot Prize shortlisted poets reflect on the writing of their nominated collections. Visit poetryschool.com and search 'writer's notes'
- **Sign up to our weekly newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at tseliot.com/prize
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram, Bluesky, X and Facebook**: @tseliotprize

Mimorian

after Carlos Drummond's 'Resíduo'

Only a little of me remains, a fixture,
Madwoman locked in a downstairs room,
four-walled gag, muffler. Of my ravings,
the upstairs hear nothing, nothing.
But still a little of me will stay, the stink of me
in the sheets, on the walls, on their tongues,
wagging, wagging all night long about
my bad romances – chupid woman,
sad woman

object lesson.

Of my illness, they talk too much,
I am spectacle, spectre, fire-lover
wandering off into the bush, the market square.
My early morning peep shows, the breaking
day, someone forgot to lock my room, again,
the music loud in my head, how I shook,
shook the neighbourhood awake with my naked breasts,
my grandchildren cried, their friends can't come over.
And of those things I remember
so little
so little
why can't they *do* the same?

Of the things I enjoy,
they won't remember, the mourning doves
nesting in the monstrous breadfruit tree,
rum thrown back, going deep
down, deep down between my legs,
my hair brushed and slick and smoothed
into a bun, my yellow satin ribbon.

Of God, am I against, for
or indifferent, they've never asked
or cared to know. My mother,
father, their names...
already they've forgotten.
Of my love of white, they'll remember
cotton dresses bleached in a blinding sun,
my men, always, always fair.

Of me so little will remain, stripped
and pared down to a fear,
bright and blossoming in the back
of a young girl's head: ou fou ou fou
ou fou

ou fou.

HEIRLOOM
CATHERINE-ESTHER COWIE



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by Catherine-Esther Cowie.
Search Catherine-Esther Cowie
at www.carcanet.co.uk

The Outside Child

I will not disappear, dead myself
in a bush somewhere.
The freak lives, sucks air.
I have a face that is not so unlike hers.
Perhaps that's what troubles,
I am the final blow. The betrayal,
so close, under her roof, in her bed.
The man she so loved, loved me,
raised me in her house, unnatural thing that I am,
a sin, offspring of a predator and a prey,
that grows and grows, has a mammalian face,
hands, feet, a voice like the blackbird's,
high-pitched and singing.

In my wildest dreams, I hug her
children, my cousins.
They are my brothers and sisters.
How they insult, *mother-killer*,
daughter of a sketel.
I blossom bright, draw nearer still,
allow their biting, bites. The sharp of their teeth,
the only intimacy:
my flesh an epiphany.
I am, love me.

HEIRLOOM CATHERINE-ESTHER COWIE



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Mother: Frankenstein

Raise the dead. The cross-stitched
face. Her eye-less eye. My long
longings brighten, like tinsel, the three-fingered
hand. Ashen lip. To exist in fragments.
To exist at all. A comfort.
A gutting. String her up then,
figurine on the cot mobile.
And I am the restless infant transfixed.
Her full skirt, a plume of white feathers,
blots out the light.

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