

Top 10

UNMISSABLE POEMS OF THE LAST 5 YEARS

Selected by Nia Davies for *Poetry Wales*

P O E T R Y W A L E S

International contemporary poetry. Published in Wales.

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The ten poems in this short collection were selected by Nia Davies, editor of *Poetry Wales* (2014-19).

Nia Davies is a poet and PhD candidate at Salford University where she is undertaking practice-based research into poetry and ritual. She has co-curated and participated in several transcultural collaborations, projects and events and her work has been widely translated. Her most recent publications are *Interversions* (Poetrywala, 2018) with Mamta Sagar, *Roid Rage* (2019) with Rhys Trimble and *Ooze disco* with Amy McCauley (forthcoming).

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Harry Josephine Giles is from Orkney and lives in Edinburgh. Their latest book is *The Games* from Out-Spoken Press, shortlisted for the 2016 Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. They are studying for a PhD at Stirling, co-direct the performance platform Anatomy, are now touring the poetry-music-video show *Drone*. www.harryjosephine.com
Their poem 'Inga an Olaf' first appeared in *Poetry Wales* 52.3.

Inga an Olaf at the Lighten

by Harry Josephine Giles

Inga at the helm, watchan
fir lowes, fir shifts i the drifts o rouk;
Olaf tentan the diacles, raedeens,
airtan oot a trael o light

tae a dinger, a payday, a fill hale.
Thir crew o linesmen, halfins, bide
ready. Hid's been a gey geud while.
The yole chirks fae gowden whips.

Olaf spies a peak an merks hid.
Inga catches a chaenge i the petren
o his concentraction, an waits.
He chacks his chairter anent his ladar

anent his osc., braethes, turns
tae his skip – an thay see hid together: bleck
brakkan the gowd, than hulk looman
ower the yole. 'Wrack! Brace!'

Inga rives the yole tae,
the linesmen an Olaf grippan thir stells,
tickan the flinterkin waas atween
them an daeth in reid alerm.

Bit – a blenk – than – the yole
pous clear, skewan anunder the derk
godssend. Ilka gies the golder
o braeth winnan free, n saddles

lik this wir ordinar. They win
tae thir boonty: hid's no a goshens
o lights, but as Inga relays thir stance
thay rackon anither sort o survival.

Inga and Olaf at the Lighting

Translated from Orcadian

by Harry Josephine Giles

Inga at the helm, watching for flameglowflickerflares, for shifts in the drifts of fog; Olaf carefully watching the diacles and readings, trying to find a trail of light to a strike, a payday, a full haul. Their crew of linesmen, half-shares, waitstaylive ready. It's been a long time since a good landing. The yole creakraspcomplains from the golden gustdarttwistattacks.

Olaf spots a peak in the read-outs and quicksmartly marks it. Inga senses a change in the pattern of his concentration, and waits. He checks mapper against ladar against osc., breathes, turns to his skip – and they see it together: black breaking the gold, then full hulk looming over the yole. *'Wreck! Brace!'*

Inga wrenchripbreaks the yole to, the linesmen and Olaf gripping their braces, touching the flimsygaudysilly walls between them and death in red alarm. But – a blinkmomentglance – then – the yole pulls clear, twistskewshunning under the dark godssend. Each of them gives the laughroarcry of breath escaping, and settles down as though this were simply ordinary. They reachgain their bounty: it isn't an abundant catch of lights, but as Inga transmits their co-ordinates they are all reckoncounting another kind of survival.

Thames. Dover. Wight.

by Geraldine Monk

Northerly becoming variable.
Rough until later otherwise slight.

Channel rats scuttle intense
depressions along La Manche.
Ocean plasma. T.V. screens.
Booze cruisers. Below deck
bowels heave. Stowaways.
Canned fish teeth. Man meat.
Sardines. Specks of suspended
humanity.

Unfathomable depths.
Recipes for degrees of hurt.
Reduced stock of oxygen. On upper
deck freshly drizzled lemon air.

*'Take good care of your sailing cubes and
always make sure your door is safely pulled to'*

The above words were writ
four thousand years ago. Too late to
save the *Herald of Free Enterprise*.
Most succumbed unseeing in the
dark of hypothermia
four soft-boiled minutes from harbour.

*After four leagues the darkness was
thick and there was no
light. You could see nothing
ahead and nothing
behind.*

The faraway comes near. Sea salt.
Cracked pepper. Surface effort.
Organic granules pour delicious
paradox. Gravy boat. Best china.

Displaced Polar vortex we hear
kindled in fractious love.
Snowy owl flying through a hail of
crystal balls. Steering its
monogaze with a hint of
uncharacteristic panic.

Geraldine Monk is a veteran of British poetry being first published in the 1970's. Her major collections include *Interregnum* (Creation Books) and *Escafeld Hangings* (West House Books). Her *Selected Poems* was published by Salt Publishing. In 2012 she devised and edited the collective autobiography *Cusp: Recollections of Poetry in Transition* (Shearman Books). In 2019 she wrote and performed the text for the film *A Soft Rebellion in Paradise Square*, directed by Chloe Brown. She is a founding member of the antichoir Juxtavoices and an affiliated poet to The Centre for Poetry and Poetics, University of Sheffield. Her poem 'Thames. Dover. Wight.' was published in *Poetry Wales* Volume 51 Number 2 and appears in *They Who Saw The Deep* (Parlor Press, 2016).

Chrissy Williams is the author of *BEAR* (Bloodaxe, 2017), which featured in the Telegraph's 50 Best Books of the Year, and various poetry pamphlets. Her pamphlet *Flying into the Bear* was published in 2013 by HappenStance Press and was shortlisted for the Michael Marks Awards. She edits the online journal *PERVERSE*. Her poem 'Bobbie Gentry, Shangri-Las, Sonic Youth' was first published in *Poetry Wales* 51.3.

Bobbie Gentry, Shangri-Las, Sonic Youth

by Chrissy Williams

i

Bobbie Gentry was twenty-five when she wrote 'Fancy'. Fancy is a girl whose mother buys her a red dress, a red dancing dress, and sends her out to sell her body. This work turns out to be something Fancy enjoys but her enjoyment is measured against her sense of obligation.

"Here's your one chance, Fancy, don't let me down"

ii

At sixteen The Shangri-Las sang 'Give Him A Great Big Kiss' and the kiss was represented with sound <mwa> and a gesture. "Is he bad?" asks the song, "Hmm, he's goodbad. He's not evil." There are no mothers in this song. It's just the girls and Mary's description of dancing with a boy is rapture:

"We were close . . . very very . . . close"

iii

Kim Gordon sings with Kim Deal on *Washing Machine*, Sonic Youth's album-as-machine for early sexualisation. This sexualisation is at its best in 'Little Trouble Girl' where the Shangri Las' line is poached and sung by women (if there are bad girls, so there must be bad women):

"Close . . . very very . . . close"

iv

I listened to these songs a long time after puberty,
around the time I started having sex. Urgent, always fumbling,
never planning . . . DESIRE . . . to be . . . collapsing . . . DESIRE . . .
fuelling further DESIRE, and more, both before & after.
Quiet now. Something is getting broken.

“Close . . . very very . . . close”

v

In the Sonic Youth, Kim transforms the Shangri-Las’ line,
acknowledging the way things really change, and how mother
and a sense of obligation to win her love are not the aim.
How past intimacy can be replaced. Fight DESIRE with fire.
How past intimacy can never really be replaced.

“Remember mother? We were close . . . very very . . . close”

vi

I allowed my lust to deprioritise her and I ask forgiveness.
I never wanted to be killed with kindness. I was afraid of love.
I think you will love me only if I am good. *The girls sing.*
I think you will love me only if I am good. *And if I’m bad?*
The long kiss. The pull of any part of any body. *And if I’m goodbad?*

“Close . . . very very . . . close”

vii

This is the DESIRE I backed myself into,
the DESIRE I have always been running away from
& all I am now, heart, is DESIRE and soon there will be nothing,
ash & DESIRE, DESIRE & bones & nothing, *so . . .*
close . . . this DESIRE
to be good

Extract from

Alphabet

For Inger Christensen

by Ailbhe Darcy

1

apricot trees insist; apricot trees insist

2

but brand-names insist; and battlefields, battlefields;
bombs still insist; and blackface, and blackface

3

concrete insists; cappuccinos, cathedrals;
cancer-treatment centres, electric cigarettes,
corn syrup, cattle prods, automated cash machines

4

dams insist, dreamcatchers, and dolls,
drones insist, and daybeds, and daybeds;
drills, derricks, and data; data
insists, data and death squads; dwellings
insist; dwellings, online dating sites, data

5

early morning insists, eely hour, evilling hour;
Einsamkeit und Engeln, uaigneas agus aingil;
dreams of widowhood and elk, half fled, insist;

Europe nestling in an elbow's crook, too abstract
at this hour; eider feathers insist; every
possibility insists, each future history,
here beneath our eiderdowns with earnest breath
earth insists its way into our future

'Alphabet' appeared in *Poetry Wales* 52.3. The full poem is published in Ailbhe Darcy's award-winning *Insistence* (Bloodaxe, 2011). Ailbhe Darcy is from Dublin and lives in Cardiff, where she lectures in creative writing at Cardiff University. She is the author of *Imaginary Menagerie* (Bloodaxe 2011) and *Subcritical Tests*, in collaboration with S.J. Fowler (Gorse Editions 2017). Her most recent collection, *Insistence* (Bloodaxe 2018) won Wales Book of the Year, the Roland Mathias Poetry Award and the Pigott Prize in association with Listowel Writers' Week, and was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. She is co-editor, with David Wheatley, of a forthcoming *History of Irish Women's Poetry*.

6

flashmobs insist, with their fleeting
raid on community, the flash a fire
that frees through them and fades;
in cities they insist, in what we flatter
public space; foreplay insists, and forecourts, foreclosures;
flatbreads, flatmates, and flatpack furniture;
flowcharts and the funds of financial advisors;
errors insist: instrumental, random,
systemic; flexitime insists, and fuchsia;
and fruit still insists, fruit here in the supermarket where
somewhere apricot trees exist, apricot trees still exist;
the weight of fuzzed flesh forthright in a palm;
the five-finger discount still insists

7

given prickles insist, yellow-gemmed, grizzly
going where the ground gives itself
generously, greedily, giddily
geometries ginnelling into galaxies,
the gambrels made by generation, elbows
of the giving shrub insist,
the grimoire hatching woody riddles,
the darkening thatch of glossary
growing in our wildernesses;
gadabouts seeking getaways,
for whom given limits don't insist;
we inherit only what we generate;
grief insists on itself, grief moves by whim,
grief would be a fire break,
but fire fans grief; and grief feeds caterpillars,
homes stonechat, yellowhammer, linnet;
low-growing where the ground is bare
enigmatic as the gun I give
my child to gloss, grip right, handle,
little goose, blonde gonsel;
when grief's out of blossom, kissing's out of fashion

8

human remains insist, human remains insist
on whispering a last hyacinth, one last honeyed hiss
sinking back into their own hollows and hidey-holes,
their own holy places, softnesses and hardnesses,
hummocks losing height, hips unhanding a half-life
here in places where there once sprung hair,
happened wetnesses, quick havings, slow hallelujahs;
where a man labored on pleasure with his two hands;
how it dawned on us what the happenings in my body meant;
how we lay and waited to know what to say;
how at last we confessed we wanted this;
how little more we could say about it;
how the heat of other humans made me want to heave;
how my boss said that when his pregnant wife went to the obstetrician he wanted to
hit the obstetrician;
how the pain only let up when I crawled on the sitting-room floor;
how the pain only let up when I swam in the town pool;
how the happening was a cat on my lap I could never throw off;
how the obstetrician said first thing Monday he would hoist the human out;
how he said no breakfast but I scarfed nectarines and coffee;
how we listened to TC love his honeybear in the car;
how the receptionist said I was ready to pop;
how we hardly had to wait for the nurse to hook me up;
and Pitocin insists, Pitocin insists
on hypnotizing the body, synthetic hysteria,
Charcot's hands making the drawing passes
hexing away my objections to any of this;
and hospitals insist, charts hang their insistence
on the ends of hospitable beds, hospital gowns insist
and hospital breakfasts; a little yellow card insists
I'll feed him x times before they'll bathe him, a nurse insists
I try placing this small contraption; they dress him before I can insist
on his nakedness; the hospital hat doesn't fit him; I insist
on more ice before I'll sit another minute; they bathe him screamily insisting;
he screams like this all night long but it seems only I hear him

Fairouz and French Toast

by Hanan Issa

You always write my name in barbecue sauce on the plate
And now I can't hear a Fairouz song without seeing
your beautiful back flipping egg-soaked bread, pouring my coffee.
She's singing about Beirut: *She tastes like fire and smoke.*
I chew the warm soggy bread, the salty toast and sweet sauce.
You hum along with her: *You are mine, you are mine.*

The coffee tastes strong, a bit ashy. I picture the fire
and smoke of all the places where they love Fairouz.
'Another piece?' You take my plate and replenish my name.
The coffee leaves debris on my tongue. I want to hold it all -
the breakfast, the music, your back. Even the coffee.
Please, don't stop humming: *You are mine, you are mine.*

Hanan Issa is a mixed-race poet from Wales. She has been featured on both ITV Wales and BBC Radio Wales and worked in partnership with National Museum Wales, Artes Mundi, Swansea Fringe, and Seren. Her work has been published in *Banat Collective*, *Sukoon mag*, *Lumin*, *Poetry Wales*, *sister-hood* magazine and *MuslimGirl.com.*, and by Hedgehog Press and Parthian. Her winning monologue was featured at Bush Theatre's Hijabi Monologues. She is the co-founder of Cardiff's first BAME open mic series 'Where I'm Coming From'. Her debut poetry pamphlet *My Body Can House Two Hearts* will be published by BurningEye Books in October 2019. Her poem 'Fairouz and French Toast' appeared in *Poetry Wales* Volume 54 Number 3.

no. 5

When I Was Still a Poet

by Tishani Doshi

When I was still a poet
I used to dream of rivers.
Flowers had names and
purpose. Small birds
the shape of scars
made nests in braziers
of sky. Now that I
have given up,
afternoons dry
as raisin skins scrub
by. Thieves approach.
Dogs bark. Love springs
from dirt like carrots.

'When I Was Still a Poet' by Tishani Doshi first appeared in *Poetry Wales* Volume 52 Number 3 from her collection *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (Bloodaxe Books). Tishani Doshi is an award-winning poet, novelist and dancer. She has published five books of fiction and poetry. Her most recent book is *The Adulterous Citizen* (poems, stories, essays). Since 2001 she has worked with the Chandralekha dance troupe. She lives on a beach in Tamil Nadu.

Moat

by Sarah Kelly

place around everything a
line. Lines social or scented, historic
& laden, we'll chew your specks to
a castle shaped mess

The sand can scribe and
guard, all our exits stand
waiting and steady

This is real land, real stakes,
real hearts
the risk of it.

And as daughters you
repeat, they become
your repeat, resplendent.

This is real land, real stakes,
real sink, the risk,
the moat, all heart.

'Moat' first appeared in *Poetry Wales* Volume 54 Number 3. Sarah Elisa Kelly is a poet and artist currently completing a TECHNE funded PhD at the Royal College of Art. Her poetry publications include the chapbooks *locklines* and *Ways of Describing Cuts* both with KFS press and anthologies *Better than Language* (Ganzfeld) and *Dear World and Everyone In It* (Bloodaxe). She was 2015 poet in resident at the university of Loughborough and a recipient of a Stationers Fund award and Francis Mathew Scholarship alongside several residency and development grants. She lives and works in London.

'The Wish' by Megan Watkins was first published in *Poetry Wales* Volume 51 Number 3 in 2016. Megan Watkins grew up in Powys and has lived in London for 15 years. Her work appears in *Transom*, *Magma*, *the Morning Star*, *the Echo Room*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Brittle Star*, *Smiths Knoll* and the *Emma Press Anthology of Motherhood*.

The Wish

by Megan Watkins

She was the funny one, she cried a lot too. Half-Australian.
We sat at the edge of the fields, ten years old. Always busy with our hands,
with grass or hair or sand, looking out across the town
like runaways (there was no town).

She was scared of her step-brother when her step-Dad was out.
He called me Shadow, like a dog. She wrote
that she remembers my mum in a dress, narrow stairs. A lovely house,
printing presses, a yard (there is no house).

They took her with them and I never saw her again.
We are meeting for a drink before Christmas,
it will be as if nothing happened, not Fremantle, not Oswestry.
None of that has to be currency (there is only a coin).

I won't be like this in the pub. She will make me laugh, we might dance.
I remember making marbled paper together, the thick water, a comb.
You felt that you could make any pattern
but somehow the pattern just made and re-made itself (there is only a well).

Florrie

by Fran Lock

I know what you think. You think my silence slabby and witless. You, who sit at my kitchen table, kneading your cityish face into a reverie of smug love. I know what you think, my ghost is the wrung hand, the stinging whiff of tar, carbolic and starch; that I slouch, all priggish, slack and bombazine, garlanding grievances. You compose the snide homilies of the young, faulting my hunkering care for never enough. You think him yours, my brimming boy, the boy who shrugged my huffy mothering, fled in a vaulting rage. He raged, yes, but he returned. And what is The Bay if not the homely bulk of me? Ah, but I know what you think. You think me ignorant, pig-literal. You think me needy, heaving yeast and vast; I carry within me the rank, damp smell of the smothered hearth. You have the lethal sarcasm of the young. You are a scholar of moist rejoinders, of drunks, of men, their promiscuous tyrannies. You will say that my affection held more *chide* than *nurse*, but you have never reckoned on a curdled hurt, deep enough to drown. I am no *muse* in heap of sour flounces. I am the home where the heart is roused and suppered. I shelter him, in all his mad, trancy bemoaning. I shelter him when he is roaring out his spellbound blotto. I shelter the dire child, the difficult boy, the staggered man in all his stages. I am *Florrie* and I am angling into song. I am Swansea, her plunder of voices. I am his mother, and you think you know me. I know what you think. But this is fine. I shift my shape and rise like steam. I am a crow, a slanting cat, creeping through the purple strokes of dusk, and you and you, and you, and you do not see me.

Fran Lock's 'Florrie' first appeared in *Poetry Wales* Volume 50 Number 4 in 2015. Fran Lock's debut collection *Flatrock* (Little Episodes) was launched in May 2011. Her second collection is *The Mystic and the Pig Thief* (Salt, 2014).

Extract from

Poems for Eliot

by Sascha Aurora Akhtar

Your body melded with my body and we made a blueprint
For an earlobe. Her earlobe. The smallest, little
Structure hanging attached to a structure also
Small.

YOUR EARS

MY EARS = HER e/A/R/S

knees, we made knees – a structure, we
made a blueprint for a structure contained in
a smallest of all structures – it's called D.N.A & it's
like under a microscope only visible and it's some
kind of fucking helix – we, you & me created
this helix – that's what she is – a wonder
helix containing all the information of the
universe – the stillness, the motion, the speed,
the temporal explanations of all things,
like you and me, our mystery. Our mystery
is drastically embedded, on an invisible
structure – unseen by Naked Eyes –

She is Unseen &
Yet I see her.
I see your D.N.A
I see my D.N.A
She is a wonder helix
She is a wonder helix

Sascha A. Akhtar's poem was first published in *Poetry Wales* Volume 54 Number 2. The full poem can be read in Akhtar's upcoming collection *#LoveLikeBlood* (Knives Forks and Spoons Press). Akhtar writes fiction and poetry and is a healer specialising in Meditative practice & Sound Healing.

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