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P O E T R Y W A L E S

# WALES POETRY AWARD

**Winning Poems 2020**  
Selected by Pascale Petit

**HIGHLY COMMENDED**

# OLIVER JONES

## My Love for You

Last night I read 'Meditations in an Emergency' by Frank O'Hara  
Then I read 'Mirror Traps' by Hera Lindsay Bird

Then I read 'The Glass Essay' by Anne Carson  
Then I read '[Trying to see the proportional relation]' by Ariana Reines

Then I read 'Why I Left You' by Selima Hill  
Then I read 'Meditations in an Emergency' by Frank O'Hara again

In short I read all the break-up poems you sent me  
Thinking I'd write one for you in return

I wanted my poem to be about breaking up with  
Food or life or parents or something

But I couldn't sustain the conceit  
Because strawberries were raining all over

The patio again big red sweet dollops  
And I found myself writing about how

My love for you was a burning elephant  
Which was very embarrassing

Because my love for you is actually more like  
A petite-but-deadly slasher film monster killer

Or a cavernous stadium where twenty-two  
Footballers kick around a tiny footballer

Or a lion who lives in the stem of a tornado

Flying his heart round and round on a string

As a child I didn't act out much and I regret it  
I didn't dye my hair or flirt with my teachers

I didn't cut myself or steal my parents' prescriptions  
I rebelled in silent ways, with my thoughts

Loving you has been an opportunity to misbehave  
Loving you has been a chance to indulge this feeling I've always had

I miss you like cheese misses cow  
I miss you like Neruda misses being alive

Every time the sun eats another night  
I want you to choke me with your thin warm hands

I want you to choke me with your thin  
Simulation of affection

Sorry to go on like this  
It's just you were perfect in every way

Horses were leaping through French windows  
I was eating mangoes straight off the tree

Now you crop up between me and everything  
Like an angry cactus

I lie in a heap thinking about you  
*Good heavens, I'm just like a pile of leaves*

Did I mention I stopped eating recently?

# **ANNA FORBES**

## **Blackbirds and Wolves**

And sometimes, when everyone else is sleeping  
I lie alone and feel myself return

to the image of a gelding  
rounding the corner of Park Street.

The trap, although most definitely a part of things  
was out of sight

so that the animal seemed, for a few brief seconds  
to be entirely in charge of itself.

I was so beautiful then  
that I could barely stand it.

In seminars, we were talking about the significance of wolves  
in the sonnets of Petrarch.

The answer, as was usually the case  
was something about empire.

In an additional class  
on the value of prestige items in sixteenth century France

I noticed a blackbird  
in the corner of a tapestry

and I thought about it all the time.  
Was that what we were supposed to be doing?

Whenever I wasn't thinking about the blackbird  
I was thinking about the wolves

and what they might have looked like.  
But I'm not sure what else my parents might have expected

dealing in grease, wool bales and foremen  
and leaving t'lass to deal with Dostoyevsky.

Of course, it wasn't anything really like that.  
Now that I think about it, the carefully embroidered bird that I remember  
was probably a different species  
from the one I assumed it was.

And my father had certainly never held a job  
for more than a month or two. The pride on his face

as he waved me off  
with the sort of guilelessness

that could only be embodied  
by someone with no real acquaintance with Capitoline Hill

or the sobering trajectory  
of a sparrowhawk, angling down

with lethal precision  
into the exact centre of a courtyard.

## From Above

Somewhere around Hvalba  
a whale is being flayed.

Listen—the neat zip  
of its hide, tougher than blue tarpaulin  
coming apart  
along the spine.

And later, the inner explosion  
of fingers, tapping against an eye  
which does not move.

--

Yes, I can hear it  
even from the waterless heights  
of a sixth floor apartment.

The breathless fragility  
of perfectly balanced systems—lenses and ducts  
crumpling like glass.

--

Outwardly, the sound  
is undetectable.  
Still it resounds  
like the vibrations of a bowl—  
spiralling up

to trouble the course of the gulls  
who linger in stubborn hope  
over a pebbled slew  
of pinks and reds.

ii)

In an entirely different country  
people pass in droves

before a painting of a girl  
flanked by two leopards

both of which regard her  
with impossible docility.

The girl is wearing wings  
which may or may not be a part of her own flesh

and one of the leopards  
carries a chain in its mouth.



## ROWLAND BAGNALL

### Feeling and Painting

When you look closely at the hunters  
in *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565)  
you can see the slight translucent aspect  
of the central figure's head, which seems to let an outline  
of the deep-set winter tree trunk through.

It makes me think he's fading very slowly from the scene,  
that in another five hundred years or so  
only his footprints will be left, that his companions  
won't have clocked he's gone or even recognise his name  
when later questioned of his whereabouts.

I like to imagine him materialising into the stable world  
of other paintings, phasing into contexts that he doesn't have  
the knowledge or the language to describe. Lately I've seen him  
in *The Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689), walking alone  
between the not quite parallel lines of the trees

beneath a sky that seems both day and night,  
as if time in the picture were somehow getting ahead of itself.  
And between the paintings I imagine | warping and assimilating  
lights, the | microbial jungling of | colours  
| splintering the tide | like foliage

| leaving an image there | like foliage behind your  
| crashing down behind your  
| eyes  
| then shifting | yes, but no rain  
| and a slight | bend in the

| superimposition  
| of the trees | an entirely mosaicked  
| planetary light  
| pushing the | cloudy, yes, but no rain  
| into | drastically foreshortened

| life | which lets an outline of  
| both day and night  
| into the stable | not  
| mosaicked | lines of | slight translucent  
| fading | sky | cloudy, yes, but no rain, though it's coming,

| crashing down behind your | image there  
of | footprints | phasing into | snow  
| getting ahead of itself | to let an outline  
of | his whereabouts | appear like foliage  
beneath the trees. Back in the Breughel painting,

beyond the black cross of a bird preserved  
in low mid-flight – the only thing existing in the deep space  
of the painting's frame – the villagers are skating  
in the valley on the frozen lakes. In the distance  
is another village or the same village

repeated with its own returning hunters looking  
back across the view to us: another pack of hungry  
dogs, another bonfire kicking in the wind, another  
oblivious community, making the most of it,  
another disappearing man. I've been here,

somehow, to this other place. I have been that bird,  
suspended in a weightless life, witnessing a scene  
that both rejects you and invites you in,  
repeating to myself along an avenue of trees:  
*Under the skates: ice. Under the ice: apparently the sky.*

# The Hare

I wake into the morning

and find unanimous spring

and the windows are pale with filtered light

and the day asks, *How shall I survive myself?*

and read a poem which ends, let it be small enough

and my throat feels dry

and the new rains have defanged the night

and the blackthorn is over, or its blossom is

and the lights burn blue

and imagine a harvest and dry stacks of wheat

and answer my e-mails in record time

and feel deep currents of understanding

to find a living mosaic, polished and repetitive

smothering the yellow dawn

and the white sky is canoeing south

and have certain phrases in my head, including *silent stroboscopic waves*

and see ghosts and know that one of them is Robert Frost

and consume a pear from Argentina

and take in the general feel of the place

fading like a set of tracks

and write, *I wake into the morning | and find unanimous spring*

and pass my hand through my own body

and feel omnipresent cloaks of rain

and the oceans appear silvery

which is stabbing into months of ice

and think, *what kind of poet writes, 'I wake into the morning | and find unanimous spring'?*

and the harvesters are lying down, taking a rest

and its knowable sequence

and it caverns

and it opens like an eyelid

and it stalks us as you stalk a hare

## KATHY MILES

### Recipe for Rook

I'm plucked and stuffed now, simmered  
until tender. Seasoned with salt and pepper,  
layered with gravy, the umbles of a deer.  
The whole encased in pastry. I'm tasty,  
I'm told, when served with new potatoes,  
garnished with parsley and apple.

At five am I ripped the sky apart, clouds falling  
from my beak, night blenching in the slowly-  
lengthening hours. No lark, rising at light  
to hang an aubade on the meadow, but a rook,  
heavy in my feathers, bearing not beauty  
or nuanced music, coarse in my early calling.

We were snared at dawn. Beaten from  
the trees, a motley bunch of troubadours;  
branchers in the main, their wings not fledged  
enough to fly. But my fleshy breast was hard  
to resist, and the meaty jewel of me  
a prize deemed worthy for an evening meal.

My bitter backbone was removed.  
And as they opened up my breast, it was  
not my dissonant blood that spilled  
its truculent notes like a crumhorn's whine,  
but the old refrain of a madrigal  
that filled the air with a descant of song.

## HELEN KAY

### It was never about the kingfisher

~~Halcyon~~. A bird made for poems,  
that breath-stealing iridescent streak  
across a brown-green smudge of river  
lets me glimpse the sudden thrill  
of a Roses Chocolate Caramel  
being tossed to me at Xmas.

I was cross-legged on the window seat,  
Dad's *Reader's Digest Book of the Road*  
perched between sloped knees. I tried  
to memorise every bird picture and name,  
not expecting ever to know real birds,  
beyond pigeons, park-ducks or sparrows.

After fifty years of kingfisher photos  
a first cataract-blurry sighting.  
I do not need detail. That wand beak  
and shamanic eye have lived inside me.  
The thrill is that new things still happen,  
that its thin call threads me over icy waves.

# DOMINIC FISHER

## Foam Trails

*“Wayfarer, there is no way – only foam trails in the sea.”*

Antonio Machado, trans. Alan S Trueblood

How we are like Icarus, all feathers wrecked upon the waves  
like Midas, wine and water at his lips turning into gold  
or like sirens singing songs only salt-crazed oarsmen notice

like cartographers doodling in the margins of an ocean  
or children listening at night to the sea which is their breathing  
like sea-trout flicking down a river in the summer darkness.

Or how we are an outing to the coast in a charabanc  
and the driver has been drinking, has lost control, or the brakes  
have failed just as the sing-song has started turning nasty

or like nineteen-fifties children by a rosy fireside  
listening to imperial fables who will be woken someday  
decades later, grey and angry about what might wade ashore.

And how we are like reflected shadows in plate-glass windows  
like figures sheltering behind a wall who may be sleeping  
or may be nodding on a sea where all of us are sailing.

Then we are like galley slaves rowing hard across that mirror  
a child has crashed the sun, some fool has turned the skyline gold  
the sirens' songs have become the feathers falling round our heads.

For the most part though, we are not really sailors. All the same  
wandering along a foreshore, the foam trails at our feet  
we might feel that we were walking out beyond the breakers.

# NATALIE CRICK

## Sisters

I

Our hands make shadow-sisters  
on the wall. I wonder how Sister sleeps  
unclothed even in winter.

When I close my eyes at night  
my hands feel for the small  
of Sister's back. I open my fingers,  
fill the warm space between  
the cut curve of her shoulder blades, kiss  
the light, slender bones of Sister's hips.

We grew from the same motes of dust,  
but I want a new sister.

A sister made mostly of silver.  
A sister who is mostly silent.

II

Sister is quiet in our attic bedroom.  
I left her a shallow bowl of milk,  
a dab of blood, a trail of salt.

The smell of Sister is homely and rotten,  
like good, soft cheese. I take her  
dead-girl blanket for the cool nights.

### III

On Wednesday I find Sister white-winged,  
dreaming where I slept some hours ago,  
and cup her into the vast dark in one palm.  
I stand by the window with a black bell.  
When Sister falls, I will jump.



## **THIRD PRIZE**

# JOHN DAVIES

## Caliban

The rogue ranges out sweaty, rank,  
stepping, explores the ground, this  
unfriended zone, from his den, head  
first, headlong, eyeing near and far  
shrubs bushes bramble oak hazel  
briar silver birch grass hummocks  
fox run rat hole dark earth spilling  
dark course trotting through clumps  
of couch first woodland and scrub  
then heath, nature reserve, scraped  
back to flint, then a grassy sward  
newly mown meadow, all raised  
above the playing fields, the college  
buildings stepping away to the far  
streets layered on the sloping denes  
the coastal city, the wind turbines  
the distant sea and sky the wide  
open horizon from east to west and  
high on the rising hill rooks sway in  
in the tall-masted, beetle-blasted elms.

Part dog-breath, part-man, part-rabbit,  
nose 50 cm from the ground tracing  
the scent network mid-morning on a  
Sunday a kaleidoscope of smelling  
this manimal ranges out territorial  
wanting to mark the land mark out  
this zone of ragged nature from here  
to here to here to here this replete  
with trees bramble saplings bushes

scraped ground (the butterfly reserve)  
level grassy area hedgerow yes  
just this thank you it may not seem  
much to you but to me and my kind  
my kin my family my lifelong friends  
this is all that's left so how dare you  
how dare you steal this patch from us.

Night. His slumping lurch is slow  
and silent weary head swaying  
dull eyes miss nothing every  
change sensed and registered  
the light in the bedroom window  
disappears a curtain pulled back  
he prowls this nocturnal sentry  
follows the deep fox run on its  
dark path through the hummocks  
weaving this way then that toward  
the earthworks the rough ridges  
where the butterflies brilliant blue  
in summer daylight flutter pause  
winter now his nose leads him on  
his nostrils flared he nudges the  
empty can of Red Bull the broken  
glass the defleshed neck the pack  
of Durex the ripped sport sock  
coltsfoot thistle rosehips harebell  
the distance between desire and  
goal the cobwebs the ivy the elm  
marked for eradication the water  
droplets on the blades of grass  
the smell of decaying animal of  
decaying vegetation of decaying  
belief and faith decaying leaves  
what's left to believe in but earth.

## **SECOND PRIZE**

# ROY MCFARLANE

## The House that Lilith Made

*Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too  
Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest.*

Isaiah 34:14 NRSV

The door slides open –  
an aroma so light  
suffuses my senses,  
a burgundy sweetness.

Doors are never closed but they may slide silently  
for moments of healing because god can be found  
in the still small voice of a woman crying.  
Here, walls are soft soaking up the tears of yesterday.

In the inner courtyard there are no ceilings,  
women will stretch and not be deformed  
by their own excellence and existence  
women will not stoop or bend, dusting debris

of men's insecurities off their shoulders.  
Women will reach their tired limbs to the sky,  
glove their hands in silk clouds and reach beyond,  
plucking stars from the velvet womb of the universe.

Women run from room  
to room, laughing, heads  
flung back. The music  
in the walls responds to touch

In the house that Lilith made, there'll be dancing,  
some having danced on the bones of men,  
heels in eye sockets, jaw bones becoming maracas  
whilst cavorting in a whirlwind of red dust  
and in the settling of the storm, women will rise,  
wrap themselves in robes of their own making and rise.

and I move unnoticed amongst  
these women of all shades  
from magnolia to blackberry,  
carrying their size and shapes  
without burden of gaze.

Here, the addiction for love is a cold place –  
bare walls, floors filmed with dust particles  
of a thousand broken hearts. However, many times  
this floor is cleaned with the sweeping arms  
of sisters, washed with the tears of mothers,  
dust will always come back again.

There will be vomiting and screaming  
a projection of images will cover the walls,  
a shadow of yesterday will follow you into the corner  
as you stare at the ceiling and mourn the madness  
of love. There'll be fevers and convulsions,  
bodies covered in sweat and tears,

nights when the body bends and breaks,  
nights when the body bares its heart  
to the elements and only wise women  
of the old ways will sing and watch over you.  
They'll muse and inflect that *it won't always hurt,*  
*so bad* knowing the addiction for love is a cold place.

A woman purposefully  
strides to me and asks  
*Have you just arrived?*  
I stutter confused.  
She says *walk with me.*  
*There are not many*  
*that are not born of this house,*  
*gain access through these doors.*

She walks me through a room where Judith  
beheading Holofernes hangs on the wall.

Bleeding will be found in the gardens, the beginning  
and ending, where lakes will draw women across time.

In the gardens of Lilith there will be babies,  
because babies know the scent of unwantedness.

Babies who were born in misfortune, incubated  
in the beating and bruising of suffering mothers.

Under the light of the moon, they will crawl  
and play with wildcats, laughing with hyenas.

## **FIRST PRIZE**



## MAGGIE HARRIS

### and the thing is

if there had been a Brixton in the Home Counties  
or a Cardiff in the Valleys  
a Toxteth or a Chapeltown

where we could have dropped our Georgie bundles  
where my mother could keep her church hat  
and her accent  
where she didn't have to always explain where she came from  
where she could have kept her doilies and her Jesus  
and slipped into familiar ways like others from the sun

if her laughter could have broken on backsteps  
and carried upwards to the telephone wires  
loud and raucous like parakeets  
if carnival was not something to watch online  
or remember from 1969  
we could have cauterized some of the wounds  
we acquired whilst migrating

south of the river in 1973 you couldn't get a plantain  
you couldn't find an eddoe, saltfish or geera  
sweet potato bird pepper callaloo  
casyreep only come in somebody grip  
travelling back from home

when the body have to force itself to dumb down  
your forceripe self and your chiffon dress  
too flighty for the worship  
when no hymns bursting no tambourine  
reverberating and the smiles are few over the pew

you are not easily identifiable the colour of your skin  
mystifies

because the thing is we didn't have no tribe  
when you're half in half out      which half to throw out is the thing  
which half can you reconcile as you watch tv the boys dem get stop  
over and over but nobody don't shove you  
on the bus or cross the road or move house  
that is the razorblade of misconception the shame you have to beat  
yourself  
to belong at the extent of denying half of you quarter of you two cents  
of you  
five shillings of you from Madeira to the Ivory Coast to Edinburrow

but her Jesus come with my mother who thank him for all he had done  
bringing her and her children out of the wilderness  
not understanding was a different kind of wilderness

while letters from home full of murder and gangsta and riots  
the Portuguese quarter where she born now a no go  
and even sugar you can't get even tho you grow up right there  
nex the canefield our granddaddy breaking his back for forty years  
we have to be thankful we have to be thankful we have to be thank

so we swimming in a different world and i not saying it all bad  
the people did not massacre us with hate no dog  
shit by the front door tho once i got call a white nigger  
my mother got call 'love' found work amongst those  
whose hand was the colour of work  
still they say we never knew people like you grew there

two generations later  
across a pebbled beach in Kent brok  
-en families are walking out of the sea  
in wet shoes  
their children and their mobile phones held high  
above their heads  
surrendering their bodies to the Dover Patrol  
i  
n their wake another broken trail  
a human chain  
from places formerly known as home

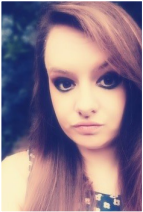
## SHORTLISTED POETS

### ROWLAND BAGNALL



Rowland Bagnall is a poet and writer based in Oxford. His poems, reviews, and essays have recently appeared in *PAIN*, *PROTOTYPE*, and *The Manchester Review*. His debut collection, *A Few Interiors*, was published by Carcanet in 2019. He is currently enrolled as a postgraduate research student in Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham. A selection of his work can be found at [www.rowlandbagnall.com](http://www.rowlandbagnall.com)

### NATALIE CRICK



Natalie Crick (Newcastle) has poems published in *Stand*, *Agenda*, *The Moth* and elsewhere. She is studying for an MPhil in Creative Writing at Newcastle University. Her poem 'Girlfriend-Watch' was awarded second prize in the Newcastle Poetry Competition 2020. She is currently a creative-practitioner-in-residence at the Wellcome Centre for Mitochondrial Research at Newcastle University and poetry editor for *Fragmented Voices* small press.

### JOHN DAVIES



Born and raised in Birmingham, John Davies now lives in Brighton. His *New & Selected Poems* was recently published by Kingston University Press in the UK and by Red Hen Press in the USA. His poems have been published by *London Grip*, *Irish Post*, *A New Ulster* and *The Guardian*, and in the eco poetry anthology *Poemish and Other Languages*, amongst others.

### DOMINIC FISHER



Dominic Fisher is from Bristol. His poems have been published widely in magazines and broadcast on radio, and he has been successful in a number of competitions. His first collection *The Ladies and Gentlemen of the Dead* was published by The Blue Nib in 2019. He is a co-editor of *Raceme* magazine, a member of poetry performance group the IsamBards, and he has a second collection in preparation.

## ANNA FORBES



Anna Forbes is from Edinburgh. She studied at King's College London, where she obtained a degree in Comparative Literature. Her poetry has featured in a range of publications including *Antiphon*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, and *The Fortnightly Review*. She is a recent winner of the Jane Martin Prize for poetry.

## MAGGIE HARRIS



Maggie Harris is a Guyanese writer living in the UK. She lived in Wales for more than 10 years before returning to Kent. Twice winner of the Guyana Prize and a Commonwealth Short Story and Wales International Poetry Comp 2017 prize winner, she's published six collections of poetry, three short story collections and a memoir, *Kiskadee Girl*. She was International Teaching Fellow at Southampton University and Creative Writing tutor at Kent and has performed her work internationally.

## OLIVER JONES



Oliver Sedano-Jones is a British-Peruvian poet. His work has appeared in *FLAR*, *The Northridge Review* and *Marathon*. He was shortlisted for the Yeats Prize in 2018 and the University of Hertfordshire Single Poem Prize in 2019.

## HELEN KAY



Helen lives in Cheshire. Her poems have appeared in a range of magazines. She has an MA in Creative Writing from MMU. She curates a project to support dyslexic poets: *Dyslexia and Poetry*. Her second pamphlet, *This Lexia & Other Languages* was published by V. Press in July 2020. She is on twitter at @HelenKay166. She has a sidekick hen puppet called Nigella.

## ROY MCFARLANE



Roy McFarlane is a poet born in Birmingham of Jamaican parentage and spent most of his years living in Wolverhampton and the surrounding Black Country and former Birmingham's Poet Laureate. Roy is the author of *Beginning With Your Last Breath* (Nine Arches Press 2016) followed by *The Healing Next Time* (2018), nominated for Ted Hughes award, Jhalak prize, Poetry Book Society recommendation and one of the Guardians best poetry titles of 2018. Roy's presently working on his third collection due Spring 2022.

## KATHY MILES



Kathy Miles' fourth poetry collection, *Bone House*, was published by Indigo Dreams in October 2020, and a pamphlet, *Inside the Animal House*, by Rack Press in 2018. She is a co-editor of *The Lampeter Review*, and a previous winner of the Wells Literature Festival Poetry Competition and the Bridport Prize.

After 55 years of publishing contemporary poetry in 212 issues (and counting) of its magazine, *Poetry Wales* launched Wales Poetry Award, a national competition to discover the very best international contemporary poetry. Wales Poetry Award opened to single poem entries from new and established poets from Wales and beyond.

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