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P O E T R Y W A L E S

WALE POETRY AWARD

Shortlist 2021

Selected by
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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.

“Wales Poetry Award,
a national competition
to discover the very
best international
contemporary poetry”

Shortlist

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A Father Hanged for Poaching

Afterwards, they conveyed me from the laundry
to the darkish hall, much oak upon the walls and portraits.
A mug of water brought. They said
I was of Weak Constitution for my fainting. One picture
had a brass plate with the name S Harkins, Painted by.

Afterwards again I could not stand and they said I was
No Use till Recovered
so I stayed by the kitchen stove. They gave me buttons
In a green-glass jar, hundreds, for sorting. And paper, so I
fashioned drawings of Ladies with braided hair,
like in S Harkins picture
 also the rope I drew like the braided hair
I shewed the light and the dark
 the two twines like loving snakes
Though this was not depicted anywhere in S Harkins as I recall
I drew a Neck-tie also it was like my father's it was
 knotted loosely not like the rope in that
the Neck-tie is purposed for decorating the throat
Whereas
 the rope was Certainly Not Useful for this
But more for tethering or hauling in my opinion.
 the skin caught up and pinched
You could near reach out and burst S Harkins buttons
through their stitched eyes so neat were they drawn and
coloured.
 the surprise of death like the sudden retching
 of a poison mushroom
I got a hand fouled in the jar
buttons lodged between my fingers or
scattered and cook condemning with a stare
then informing me there was little to choose
between my skin and the whitewashed walls
of the ice-house.

I put myself in the green brocade gown of S Harkins
Beautiful Lady so excellently portrayed. When all done
I was Someone Else Entirely and
did not lack for a father nor rot with shame.

They offered lightish duties, but I said no,
the Kindness already done was enough and
so I returned to the Laundry.

Tess Biddington

Outsider

Didn't get the prediction of the job.
 Didn't get the seat on the bus.
 Didn't get the smile the others got.
 Wouldn't mind but I was being kind.
 Didn't understand the jokes, Written on graffiti walls.
 Didn't know the rituals for passing signals of wickedness.
 Didn't care for eyes that forewarned me as foreigner.
 It did not matter my mistake of misunderstanding the quenelle.
 It was not my face they didn't know.
 Who could see their intent?
 Who could see their fuelling hatred?
 Who could feel their laughter?
 Why they didn't favour binding diversity is offensive.
 Why I didn't know it was funny beats me.
 Why I consider them equals, subtracts my intellect to theirs.
 Why do they beat chests and hollow, out their primal aims?
 To prevent me being who and what I' am.
 To consider the unknown.
 To believe in me.
 To reason with my equality.
 To find me affable.
 It did not make sense.
 Why it was it to them the forbidden colour of my pigmentation?

Robert Bodman

Single Man, With Dog

I.

We meet at the fashion museum. You descend from the heavens in the lobby through a layer of cotton clouds taped to the ceiling, painted grey by a visiting school group that they get to do the creative labour for free. You said you liked my dog and you want to get to know his likes and dislikes. I said he likes, you know, mostly normal dog stuff. Long walks in the mud. Chicken and cheese. Pop-punk. Movies where sad stylish people in their 30s meet at parties and make each other feel a little less alone for a while before there's some logistical reason they can't keep seeing each other, or else maybe there's one of those endings that seems like it has nothing to do with the preceding 95 minutes but after you think about it for a few days and you realise it was probably saying something about mortality and the limits of human connection. He really likes those, you ask. I say yes, he loves them, but they make me sad so I need someone else to watch them with us who can hold my hand in the dark. Doesn't he hold your hand, you ask. I think he probably would if he could.

II.

We walk through a long hall documenting changes in dress, 1930 - 1980. There's a series of cardboard cut outs posed in party scenes, good parties, not all the way showbiz but at least a little showbiz. "Say showbiz again". We drink milkshakes from large styrofoam cups, consider spiking them with liquor, get sidetracked thinking about styrofoam, how you rarely get those anymore, how they always make me think of leisure centre cafes, sitting on the edge of a swimming pool in fake tropical heat surrounded by plastic plants, cursing my young body, assuming it would get better eventually. I was afraid of everything. You notice I've stopped walking. The air doesn't move for a moment. We realise the dog is running wild through the 30s and I worry he's going to take out a flapper.

III.

Your favourite outfit is the most comfortable thing you own - not physically but the set of clothes that makes the you in the room look the most like the you in your head. Your favourite outfit is a costume, an armour, they all are, but your favourite is the one that the cartoon character of you would wear in every single episode and there would never be a cute joke acknowledging that you only ever wear one outfit because it's not that kind of show. Your favourite outfit does ok for shopping, for browsing, for lunching, for coffee, for fast-casual dining, for exploration, for train journeys, for moviegoing, for spring, for fall, for dog walks, for libraries and galleries and museums, obviously.

Miles Bradley

Us

Pride, proud, lost, found.

Why do you need pride anyway?
Spits a woman on the bus,
Not too far away,
Not too far away from Lucy and Jess,
Grasping each other's hands suppressing the stress.

We need pride for those little boys locked in their room.
For those hundreds and thousands who've been taken too soon...
Because their bodies don't look the like the way that they feel
For that stomach-clenching moment that is all too real...
To so many of us when their best friend says,
A reply of "I do love you just not in that way"...
When you should like Snow White but prefer Prince Charming, and Aladdin and
Buzz and it's all so disarming.

But pride is more than the way that we feel,
It's for Stonewall and Marsha that moment too real...
When the Police slammed their heads to the dirt, into the ground,
For that abuse, they thrust into us when no one was around,
For our brothers and sisters who are dying at the hands...
of Police and Russians and in closer lands,
In London where girls are forced to kiss on a bus,
For the amusement of children
What will happen to us?

Pride to Protect us, help us, save us, unite us.

Black lives matter, queer lives matter, OUR LIVES MATTER.

It's for our brothers and sisters a long time passed,
Marching our streets, rainbows tide to their mast
"Homes for the homeless, food for the poor!"
To want to love who they love, that's who they did it for:
For the Butch and the Twink, for the Trans for the Bi,
For the allies beside you,
Asking why, you can't marry who you love,
Or kiss in the street
So we took to the towns and we vote
With our feet,
And with love, and our actions,

And our hearts, and our care,

Pride until Equality
Surely that's fair?

So why do you need Pride?
The woman asks on the bus.
Because it's you and it's them
We need Pride, 'til it's 'US'

Faith MW Buckley

Poem in which my dad knows Great Britain like the back of his hand

Whilst other dads had their own particular superpowers, such as building entire model railway villages in their lofts, skippering scout groups to underground caves in the Peaks, or else the ability to miraculously produce coins from behind ears, my dad wowed with his in-built sense of perfect direction. He stunned lost motorists with his navigational wizardry, his detailed knowledge of town centres, his confidence in exclaiming Cathedral Road? Oh, yes, of course, now... Adopting the fixed surety of a World Cup football referee, he'd poker straight his arm, flatten his hand, point towards a distant T junction. He'd rescue drivers from frustrated loops of one-way systems and bedazzle bikers with his verbal cartography of city suburbs. Kids in back seats watched closely for the sleight of hand, the give-away road atlas up his sleeve, but I could have told them that he didn't rely on maps, or if he did, it was a glance before a journey, just for show, like a famous pianist briefly flicking through sheet music, then playing Chopin's Nocturne no.2 in E flat without once looking up from the keys. On summer holidays to the coast, we never doubted we'd get there, as planned, on time, no wrong turns or arguments over best possible routes. My dad had the migratory instinct of a bird, travelling south from his winter nest in Belper to spend the warmer months wading in the paddling pools of various caravan parks. Now, he has no time for Google maps, tries to outwit Sat Nav by cutting across country, driving along narrow lanes, back roads, arriving at that little chequered flag at least ten minutes early. Despite a lack of evidence to show I've inherited this superpower, he holds out hope that it will emerge, tests me with the bare minimum of directions: Go to the top of the road, turn right and then follow your nose. It hasn't worked out so far. I'm still clueless, still reliant on technology. I suspect, though, that his patience will be rewarded. One day, when I'm far away from here, when I find myself searching for a way back, I'll only need these words to guide me safely towards home.

Jeanette Burton

Farouk

But, I asked my mum, *how could he have eaten*
40 quail at one sitting, he being the King she'd
 Revered.

Tous comprendre ... she'd laugh, they were tiny,
Skewered in fire, crunched in one go, her teeth
 Remembered,

I winced at the silenced birds, imagined their
 Feathers, chickened like at the butcher, then
 Somehow sizzled

Edible, swalloweable, felt sick, as the mist that
 Took her away from us, gathered, over her eyes
 To somewhere

We could never go because of time but it
 Had given her a wonderful youth, picnics au
 Claire

De la Lune with her brothers as chaperones, She
 blushed coy but wilful well into old age, Always

Popular, loved, beautiful, her appeal's range,
 Like Om Kalthom's, beyond politics, geography,

She told their exodus story as a comedy, so You
 laughed and cried at the bit when Roger

Hid everything they had from the business in
 Port Säid, in an airport toilet cistern, preferring

A cleaner or fellacheen should find it, then was
 The only one not searched, couldn't speak

For 3 months, was catatonic all through
 Stateless transition and beyond, oh oh the
 Rides my

Maternal grandparents took in fiâcres along
 Alexandria's croquette, my mother's shock at
 NW4's

Manor Hall Avenue ..., *sakhtent bent*, she and
 Her friends would laugh when the conversation
 Lulled

Mid-sentence at tea parties after someone
 Gave way, *as quiet as the house on the day a*
Girl's born

Yvonne Green

Ness

"Ness", we add, tipping a word's end with calm and the small.

"Ness" brings a gleam and an affinity of a construct,

a place,

and a thought, an action or inactivity.

Idleness,

No, not idleness,

Softness. Stillness,

Notness

Ness in such Northern lands is commonplace.

Ness is a wet tranquility in old Gaelic and Norse sourced as waymark on the waters' edge, a point of end and destination,

Or signpost to more:

The world's end when we are land-begun, and

As well see is, a journey's end.

Or as sea voyages' sequel, now, its newness begins and booted footfall shore time finds, unsure, unknown, newfound lands firm and feet fall forest for New beginning where we, being so long sea-borne, are now, and anew, land secure espied.

Ness to nestle here ashore safe.

Un-compassed we need this Ness

with no charts but memory

Ness: the way to find the way, to place the place we aim to find

A shoreline searched and sought whereby pointed ways by winds and waves-by, unwind a path, wound, coiled, curled and furled like the unwrap of time as the wind-wings tight twines o' halyards, sheets' stretch and speeds us on our way.

Shored stone softened dewiness of moss under my toes and the moist slimy bark of the hands –steady silv'ring birch in a dampling hill misted forest.

Ness

Ness

Pointing a pathway

But soft, stay, or better again be on my way. not yet nested homeby

Ness always searching another way

for I have not learnt yet to rest in stillness.

Ness can calm Yet so often, often softens-not for softness

Some stillness. gone, bids us on the other way, 'tis life's song ever-on not to rest for stillness on that softness of moss-soft stone and in a flash, soft, look time's gone on.

Prof. John Hunt

Mamgu¹

In the coal-dark kitchen of Mamgu's house
above the fireplace scratched with coal-dust,
brief sunlight reflects in the miner's lamp.
Every morning Mamgu would polish it
with Brasso and a red cotton cloth.

Her thin hands handled six-thousand washes
and bathtubs, but never touched the lamp.
Those milk-grey eyes looked out and seemed to wait
for the coalman in strict silence,
then drift to the dent in the miner's lamp.

I imagined the dent was a crater
in the cheese-like moon I could not touch.
Mamgu laughed at my plans to conquer space.

Mamgu talked of grandfather breaking coal.
How he'd rise in the frosted dark of morning
and return to a sun hidden under the sky,
place the lamp on the fireplace
and read the rustling newspaper.
Mamgu said the paper rustling
was like shingle thrown in a rock pool.

When she finished polishing her lamp
she'd light a cigarette, smoke wrapping the room
and smelling of fire.
She'd gaze at the ceiling sticky with nicotine,
throw her stub into the fire
and stroke a black and white photograph
with the tinted faces of sixty-five men,
and one-hundred and forty-four children
she had outlived.

¹ Welsh: grandmother

Cave: How to Say Goodbye to a Door

i

Sometimes the most frightening thing in the world is your own front door: open, step outside – there are children who bully your children, parents who bully your parents, neighbours judge your garden or there's no garden and everyone is pressing against your walls, billboards flash lights through your curtains, bulldozers break and rebuild ever more pavements and everywhere people need things, then take more and more, more and more; or nobody wants anything from you at all: your shadow invisible in the midday sun. Or there's snipers taking pot-shots, the body of your mother, your child, your lover, the air full of the sound of the latest ways to kill your hope. Rain falling but never snow or a view so dazzlingly beautiful you can't bear to take a step or you'd spoil it: just boulders left on the top of a hill by the remnants of an ice age or the forgotten game of a mythical giant.

ii

Sometimes the most frightening thing in the world is your own front door: six foot by three, wooden, a piece of canvas, a sheet of corrugated steel. How to keep it tight against a hole? Locks like ivy across a gap in stone. Metal dug out from far below and forced to fit round corners. This is my cave.

iii

Sometimes the most frightening thing in the world is your own front door: close it and step inside – unresolved arguments bounce against the walls, secrets hide in corners no broom can reach, bruises in the memory of mirrors: your most unattractive self – you as you'd always dreaded you could be. Your best self: staying awake late into the night soothing a sick child or an ageing father. Writing a poem better than anything you've ever done but too personal to share, tucked into the bottom of a bedroom drawer. The things you sacrificed that no one will ever know. Love folded neatly into a crease in the bed-covers.

iv

Sometimes the most frightening thing in the world is my own front door: smeared with dog shit or someone else's slogans, strangers insisting that it is I who is strange. A door stops them getting in and me getting out. Doors hang themselves in a fictional world. This door is not even my door. This door I borrowed and then forgot to give back. This door stops you in your attempt to journey inside my head. As if thoughts are places. My mind is not a cave. This is a door hanging in space. This door is a telling. This door has a job to do which has nothing to do with the locks you're smelting. This door is the latest installation of art in a free world. This door is my voice creaking its way between one imagined room to another

learning how to say goodbye to a door.

Hannah Linden

Connection

The only place
that you'll get signal in Newport
is in the immediate
vicinity of the Cromlech.

Away from the mountain,
the market, the coastline,
try to comprehend whereabouts
the air has most substance,

here you will have it:
four Standing Stones
set apart from the road
and huddled as a war shell
or rugby scrum,
supporting the weighty
cumbersome fifth –

but, on closer inspection, only two
of the vast Standing Stones
are touching the roof.
The other two, although
they veer close,
leave a gap
in which space exists:
a gap which has
the strength of breath;
a caesura of air, and there
the rock rests -

like the synapse,
crossed by impulses
from the neurotransmitter,
the painted filament
between God
and Adam's finger,
or the replenishing
pause
of the lecturer,

the air is eloquent
as the phonecall you make
as you lean back
on the silent hauls

Isabella Mead

The Odds

There, ahead of my step, the hatchling,
its nakedness splayed on the storm-soaked path.
A deflated toy, flattened except for
a little bulb of a skull, not enough weight
to break, extended on its rubber-band neck.
The eyes shut, beak still soft,
waxy yellow lips crumpled.
A child trying hard not to cry.

Two weeks ago, in almost the same place,
a glint of turquoise, an inch of oval, caught
my eye. Broken at the wide end; at the other,
purple splodges. Splashes of ink on porcelain.
I placed the eggshell in my palm, looked up.
The oak was a shimmer of spring frills
hiding the nest. Inside, a new life
fresh from this jettisoned egg.

Today's hatchling is dead.
Only a few from every brood survive.
Predators, parasites, parental neglect; any
can claim a fledgling's feathering time.
Death stalks right to the final edging
to where a nudge launches novice into air,
strength beneath wings: the lift

that is flight. Can anything be so fine?
This bringing into being of the bird.
The survivor rises without learnt thought.
For us, what is taught? To analyse data,
calculate the odds, quantify a struggle.
Is that it then? Is everything under control?
Is fragility ours now, part of the whole?

I gentle the hatchling into a hollow,
go back indoors to fetch crumbs and seeds,
sprinkle with care all along the stone wall.
Somewhere out there a young bullfinch stretches
its wings, opens its throat and whoops.

Amanda Rackstraw

Distances

When we parted at Sydney Airport,
 I couldn't stop myself turning
 for one last look as you walked away.
 Your shoulders were hunched
 and I saw them shake. You became smaller and smaller
 vanished through the sliding exit door.

All the times I visited you, my stay
 had a little shadow in each day's sun
 knowing this moment would come.

This year, plane booked, itinerary sorted,
 you were going to fly back to me here
 become clearer and clearer
 until I could actually touch you.

But now there are rules we can't break
 borders we're not allowed to cross.
 I don't know how much time I've left
 and whenever I think of the turning earth
 I think of your sun and my moon,
 my sun and your moon,
 out in the endless distance of space.

When I carried you inside my body,
 when I held your hand, wiped your tears,
 I thought of your growing up
 thought of your leaving home.
 I never stopped to calculate how far
 you might move away from me.
 I didn't know then the tyranny of distance.

Jean Stevens

Cardiff, Summer 1976

They gazed at heaven, lazing on parched lawns,
Through scented evenings, drifting song and smoke
Across the orange-rose suns floating down
Till honeysuckle and first stars awoke.
Gauche, bare-backed, freckled, sun-drunk as the Med,
The half-maned lion boys bought legal beer,
Took girls at last not just to heart but bed
To write the last page of that last school year.
And from its ridge of hills the city's lights
Rippled in heat-haze shimmer, and the bay's
Moon-silvered plain stretched out to England's heights,
Like their glimpsed futures, close and far away.
How soon they woke not to expected sun
But the forgotten rain, and summer gone.

David Walrond

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