

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

**The Manchester Writing Competition**  
**2019 Manchester Poetry Prize**  
**Short List**

# 2019 Poetry Prize Finalists

## Katie Hale

Born in Cumbria, Katie is the author of a novel, *My Name is Monster* (Canongate, 2019), and two poetry pamphlets: *Breaking the Surface* (Flipped Eye, 2017) and *Assembly Instructions* (Southword Editions, 2019), which won the Munster Fool for Poetry Chapbook Competition. In 2019, she was awarded a MacDowell Fellowship, and was Poet in Residence at the Wordsworth Trust and at Passa Porta in Brussels. Her poetry has been published in *Poetry Review*, *The North* and *Magma*, among others. She regularly runs writing workshops in schools, and is currently working on a full-length poetry collection, exploring her family's female heritage.

## Momtaza Mehri

Momtaza Mehri is a poet, essayist and meme archivist. She is the co-winner of the 2018 Brunel International African Poetry Prize and the 2017 Outspoken Page Poetry Prize. Her work has been widely anthologised and has appeared in *Granta*, *Artforum*, *Poetry International*, *BBC Radio 4*, *Vogue* and *Real Life Mag*. She is the former Young People's Laureate for London and a columnist-in-residence at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's *Open Space*. Her latest pamphlet, *Doing the Most with the Least*, was published by Goldsmiths Press in November 2019.

## Lauren Pope

Lauren runs the Scottish Universities' International Summer School at the University of Edinburgh, where she is also pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing with an emphasis on semiotics and the anorexic aesthetic in the early poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Louise Glück. Her poetry has appeared in various journals and online publications including *Gutter*, *Magma*, *The North* and *The Rialto*. She was one of Eyewear Publishing's Best New British and Irish Poets 2017. Her poetry pamphlet, *Announce This*, was published by Templar Poetry, and shortlisted for the 2018 Callum Macdonald Memorial Awards.

## Karisma Price

Born and raised in New Orleans, LA, Karisma Price holds a BA in creative writing from Columbia University and an MFA in poetry from New York University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Four Way Review*, *Wildness*, *The Adroit Journal*, and elsewhere. She has received fellowships from Cave Canem and New York University and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Poetry at Tulane University in New Orleans.

## David Allen Sullivan

David Allen Sullivan's books include: *Strong-Armed Angels*, *Every Seed of the Pomegranate*, a book of co-translation with Abbas Kadhim from the Arabic of Iraqi Adnan Al-Sayegh, published in England as *Bombs Have Not Breakfasted Yet*, and *Black Ice*. He won the Mary Ballard Chapbook poetry prize for *Take Wing*, and his book of poems about the year he spent as a Fulbright lecturer in China, *Seed Shell Ash*, is forthcoming from Salmon Press, Ireland. He teaches at Cabrillo College, where he edits the Porter Gulch Review with his students, and lives in Santa Cruz with his family. He is searching for a publisher for an anthology of poetry about the paintings of Bosch and Bruegel he edited with his art historian mother who died recently.

## Marvin Thompson

Marvin Thompson was born in Tottenham, north London to Jamaican parents. He now teaches English in mountainous south Wales. His debut collection, *Road Trip* (Peepal Tree Press, March 2020), is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. In 2019, he was one of only eight writers to be awarded a grant by Literature Wales as part of the Platforming Under-Represented Writers Funding Scheme. His war poem, 'The Many Reincarnations of Gerald, Oswald Archibald Thompson' was submitted by *Long Poem Magazine* for the 2019 Forward Prize for Best Poem. As well as having an MA in creative writing, Thompson was selected by Nine Arches Press for the Primers 2 mentoring scheme. Reviewers of the anthology described his work as 'exciting,' 'dramatic' and 'a virtuoso performance'.

# 2019 Short-listed poems

## **Katie Hale**

daughter

Ternary

*Earthrise*, 1968

In a Guesthouse in Charlottesville, VA, a Telecommunications Engineer Shows Me His Semi-Automatic Handgun

## **Momtaza Mehri**

Amniotica

Milk Teeth

Haematology #2

On Finally Seeing *Astarte Syriaca* I Am Overcome With A Longing To Text You A Meme Only You Would Laugh At

## **Lauren Pope**

Hold

Meditation on Childhood

Addenda to My Sister's Personality

KonMari

## **Karisma Price**

I'm Always So Serious

Self-Portrait

All Day We've Been Speaking in the Dark

We Wear Each Others Names

## **David Allen Sullivan**

Outside Mosul, the Land

Mortar Strike, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq

Fuck the Tomato

## **Marvin Thompson**

The Weight of the Night

The one in which my children discuss jazz while we set out to watch *The Lego Batman Movie* in Blackwood

The one in which I drive through Crumlin wondering where the cigarette razed crisp factory used to be

The one in which we travel 30m above the Sirhowy River

The one in which I recall standing in the cinema's cream-coloured foyer procrastinating over Häagen-Dazs

# Katie Hale

## daughter

your eyes are shod hooves on a thoroughfare  
lungs twin boulders a recipe for thunder  
your mouth a border quartering the dirt  
from hunger

your first thoughts  
how the air is made for wailing through  
your tinder heart for blazing through

your feathered tongue already soaring  
away away across the water

## Ternary

'America, you great unfinished symphony'  
- Lin Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*

i.

My mother's song was a caterpillar  
trundling a city of grass,

was the grass  
giving in to the wind –

it scoffed on light, reached  
to the height of an elbow

and no further: a jill-spring  
over dewing meadows at dusk,

her tune a horsehair whicker  
cast into the long twilight,

to the dye-light; was indigo  
purling through water,

a gull-wing sweeping  
the fringe from my face –

and her song was a wavelet  
not asking the shore's permission

to land, but drifting  
on the waning tide,

to fleck the hull  
from an unchartered wreck,

where the swell  
raised its hackles and grinned

as it swallowed the ships,  
and my voice was too shallow

or not brave enough to follow.

ii.

It's a well-known fact  
the cello's guts connect  
directly to the heart,

its horsehair bow a bonesaw  
cutting to the quick  
melodic marrow at the core –

except the cello's inner  
is a dig, a peaty dark. It needs  
an archaeologist's fingers

for its bare duet. Once,  
these rain-sung valleys  
unearthing orchestral crackle

from the car radio, I caught  
a cello, playing the road  
I had come down.

And I followed it  
sprouting out of the deep  
earth, and up the glittering path ahead.

iii.

Chorus  
begins behind incisors, resonates  
in the roof of an unsealed mouth  
or mouths, already wonders

what a cupola is for –  
containing  
the grappled song,  
perhaps, or what comes after –

already growing certain of its creed:  
how greedy, how bold  
the silence, how utterly complicit  
in the chords.

## ***Earthrise, 1968***

The year has barely begun to grip  
before her ghost  
drops through, pitches into the unexcavated sky,

before her narrow death-wheeze becomes  
a dusty unlit road  
approaching the horizon. Down it,

Martin Luther King is always  
still alive, drawing breath as my great grandmother  
lets slip her last – before the raised

black fists of Smith and Carlos punch through  
the star-spangled anthem like conductors  
punching tickets on a bus –

and a thousand miles away and still  
unlit, Apollo 8 is caught in the act  
of being made –

though she has begun  
her long yearning towards the launchpad,  
towards the moon's occipital bone,

towards home  
rising  
blue and spotlighted from the night, looking

for all the world  
like a live wire, humming  
at the epicentre of the dark,

like a lustrous unspent coin.

## In a Guesthouse in Charlottesville, VA, a Telecommunications Engineer Shows Me His Semi-Automatic Handgun

In the coffee-sour kitchen, the counter a clean slate  
he tilts against, he tells me again  
about America's *only ever mass shooting*.

His wife is a shut trap at the window – and only when  
a groundhog ripples the long grass under the trampoline  
does she say

*Cute*

and he says how the dog once lost a groundhog  
to the earth, so he tipped in a full can of gasoline  
and a match, and his brother  
waited at the only other exit, loaded  
with adrenaline and shot and hit  
not one, but a family

*a whole fucking family –*

and they're here now, running, nostrils clamped, flanks  
quick with terror, each body a sweater flung back, slapped  
soft as a prayer on the grass and still

they keep coming: tens of them, hundreds, a class,  
a tribe, a whole shopping mall of groundhogs, a nation.

Their heads are the silken heads of children  
smoothed by a trembling  
of mothers. Their palisade  
is an undergrowth of wrought fingers,  
sanctum of hands each not quite touching the others.



# Momtaza Mehri

## Amniotica

*"The sea is history."*

- Derek Walcott

Albann is our Albion is our alabaster-cliffed isles  
is our land of the Angles & angular-jawed mandem  
is the afterbirth of the aftermath is our *salt chuckle of rocks*  
is our unpaid ransom.  
Our white cloth waved from the 21<sup>st</sup> floor  
is our ambient cruelty is our mother Albina,  
our every unmothering of  
everything & everyone else, of each other, untethered. O,  
Our Lady of Perpetual Adolescence,  
forgive us our slippery allegiances, all our *subtle and submarine*,  
  
our tangled origin stories, *pitted like stone are our cathedrals*.  
We believe only in what is built for us.  
For being too literal with our suffering, we repay you with ingratitude.  
We, who are not special, and as such, there is nothing special  
about our pain, though we tend to its wild edges, its seasonal  
disappointments, its *dark ears of ferns*, disputed hedges.  
Clarity we cannot give you,  
nor grant you the gift of our forgetting. O,  
land of our second landings,  
heaving oil of nothing,  
bless us with your chalked linearity, each bloodletting –  
as necessary as it always is, our daisy chain of ivory bracelets,  
our *white cowries clustered*.  
Announce your arrival on windswept beaches  
  
with the scrape of a cleft hoof, *a rumour without any echo*.

We claim our kingdoms of stools, our birthrights,  
our oceans of memory, dismembered.

\*Italicized excerpts taken from Derek Walcott's poem *The Sea Is History* (The Paris Review, Issue 74, 1978).

## Milk Teeth

haze on haze habibi walks like drool too old to want to know better  
too young to give words to what we could be side by side we hug street corners me & hanad  
crooked we are cracked soles lisps like pop-up ads our own hush-hush worlds  
a singular choc-ice from the baqaalah the yemeni owner with the dying son  
lets us put it on the tab our fathers will pay when they can  
orange juice & sticky rolls here the flour is heavier the dough is always flatulent  
trading Pokémon cards our jokes fold us open into skies relish  
what ribbons of afternoon we have left we ignore old men rapping against car windows  
their elegant cruelties thin as miswak hanad leans into breeze  
into cowboy ease the fight is as sudden  
as history & just as incomplete the spasm of a line-break two older thanawi boys  
wisp of stubble & trouble-scented a closed fist burnt like the bottom of the pan  
words to serrate an afternoon then broken skin & rupture a chin  
peeled with a ring after our cards were gone charizard too (the rarest)  
we thanked the stars for things made clear the wound's joyful lack of interpretation  
a smile now stretched & wet absence to lick at his palm unfurled into a bud  
its slow & underhanded reveal a single tooth i trace its glowing centre  
its weeping root let the boy advertise his bleeding his throbbing sacrifice  
let the spit collect where it falls we will not take it with us the tooth or the weeping  
no talismans worth keeping tomorrow will take something else & the day after  
i did not drown in his baby-boy bloody grin  
but the next & the next.

## Haematology #2

This is the age of nightly nosebleeds. You are indecently abundant.

There is a conceptual gap between your thighs. Pillowcases moult faster than election promises.

You mourn each darling erythrocyte's sink into whirlpools –

into the lonely hours, into the heartlands of bin liners. They don't know what to do with you.

Stay with you. Take this shedding as a sign of what's to come. *This country is slowly killing us.*

She says this & you bite your lip. *That's what you said the last time about that other place –*

*& the place before that & the place before that.* Funny that. The host destroying the parasite.

*This dunya got cruel jokes for days.* For days & days & oh the nights. The back ends of the *back homes.*

Sticky, tea-stained nights. The houseboy would serve us chopped liver & lemonade.

The sides of the glass as wet as the rims of his eyes. You almost hear the syrup of his heartache.

Its throaty, tubular descent. He belongs to a lesser tribe. You don't know what that means yet.

Only that the youngers call him boy. Call him something other than his name.

You know him not by name, but by blood. By the sleight of hand we call luck.

By the membrane dividing your life, your delusions, from his. You blot from the inside out.

History is a hangnail we take turns picking at. *This country is slowly killing us.*

You think he could be talking about this place. He could be talking about anywhere.

## **On Finally Seeing *Astarte Syriaca* I Am Overcome With A Longing To Text You A Meme Only You Would Laugh At**

Oily sin tinged green and supple

as any good excuse. I am keening. I end where I begin. A belly  
full of the meat of my own desires.

To be the first-born daughter is to confuse silence for siblings.  
I am armed with rhetorical questions. Accustomed to men who can cross  
continents but never the gulfs in their own living rooms, I think of distance  
as I study a gilded Rossetti. The precise, swollen angle of a pout.

Harped brows. A cold slab of shoulders. Eggshell wrists.  
Is beauty not this thick-haired and exacting? Like the feeling of just making the last train by an inch.

The obscene shape of your panting on window glass.  
A man naming you after a country he has never seen is another kind of portraiture.

I stood in the middle of winged spirits and crowned my own reflection.  
Convincing you is half the problem. Yes. It is arrogant to think you are the problem.

But it has to be one of us and it isn't me. I don't make the rules.  
I am unmade by them. Let me be a slipped disc. Let me be the foetal position you assume after.

Let me be your every assumption. Make me regret how small my palms are.  
Make me regret nothing.

# Lauren Pope

## Hold

I

I make breathing a profession  
as I wait for your hands.

Your hands rummaging like that, your hands in the backseat –  
feeling for loose change, I think.

Your hands like the sugar-coated shell of a candied almond,  
wrist deep in wet plaster; what I could lick from those hands...

if you'd let me. I have ways of keeping time.

When Marvin Gaye played, I knew not to open the door  
to my parents' bedroom for 3 minutes and 58 seconds plus one repeat.

I tell you this  
as your hand thrums the engine of a '66 mustang convertible  
the colour of a silver lining.

You hide in that cloud; I undress in this way.

The distance from your hands to your shoulders  
raised earwards  
is equal in length to the meaningful stare you are so intent

on denying me.  
I have ways of keeping time.

II

I went to school with April Gaye, Marvin's niece. No one said to her,  
*your grandfather's a murderer*, but they were thinking it.  
April was quiet, like you are quiet, which I mistook for sweet.

You are quiet / contemplative, but your hands are shouty  
when they grab my waist and lift me to x.

Time stops.

My sister says *shouty* is the wrong adjective. I know what it is like to hit a wall

at high speed, or to be stranded –  
not like on an island, but like a wheel on the side of the road in a desert.

The right adjective scares me.

My sister says I am the neck on that chicken you broke at army camp.

When I breathe down the phone, and it sounds like *Just one, baby*,  
my sister says I'm an addict.

*Hello?*

Maybe you are not contemplative. Maybe I misjudged you.

III

Who could I tell  
that I wanted to be the sweat on the bodies grinding  
in that smoky room in the opening scene of *Dirty Dancing*?  
Beads of neck-loving curvature, salt poesy.

Who could I tell that I would one day be alone and crying in a room the size of a fist,  
cut like the pierced flesh between my legs?

After the riots, we flocked to the suburbs –  
white flight was a frozen lake around our ankles.  
I have ways of keeping time. Exact time.  
Marriage loops when there is nothing to say or do.  
Marvin Gaye was in elevators.  
Marvin Gaye was at the Department of Motor Vehicles.  
Marvin Gaye was in the feminine hygiene aisle at the grocery.  
Marvin Gaye was buried, again and again, like Bob Marley is buried under every college  
dorm room of the last three decades. Bundling time like this is conventional –  
something I picked up in suburbia.

IV

On hold waiting for a call centre representative:

*Ain't that peculiar.*  
*A peculiar-arity.*  
*Ain't that peculiar, baby?*  
*Peculiar as can be.*

V

You're going for a lamb dhansak with the guys from church.  
What church? Did we / Do we/ Have we ever gone to church?

Marvin Gay Sr. was a Pentecostal minister.

I tell my sister I can make a curry; she says this is not about me. I hang up on her a lot: hang up, hang up, hang-up. I have ways of keeping time.





## Addenda to my Sister's Personality

- a. if the meaning of the condition wasn't known, she might describe the word pleurisy as birdcall, based on its sound.
- b. fact: trees are emotional anaemics. They reach and reach and reach and reach.
- c. "If I could name myself, I'd choose *velour blanket*"
- d. elastic band balls are secretive by nature, and make excellent gifts.
- e. there is logic beyond the folds of linen and time.
- f. if presented with the opportunity, she would wrap herself in a capillary, stroke its hair-like thinness.
- g. check for hitch-hiking bedbugs. After guests visit, inspect beds, carpets, upholstered furniture. Assume it's bad, especially if they are your kin.
- h. "Forest Lawn is an oxymoron; do not, whatever you do, bury me there."
- i. make-up brushes should sweep in a downwards motion. Always, always.

## KonMari

I am a lotus. I count to 10 to keep my mind in check. Picture a flickering light; focus on it. Do I need to be a temple? I could just be a house. A temple is visited on occasion; I housed another being while he grew. I watched his things: his pillow, his bedding, his small comforts, ooze out of me like a long, wet, slippery song. If my face looks serene, will my mind follow? The answer is a nest of Russian dolls – keep looking. We celebrate the downsizing from one house into another. So much of our time spent in-house, house-bound, feeling house-proud. Beneath all this flesh is the chiselled potential, squinting sideways into the vacant space of a gallery wall. I am a lotus. Imagine a flame. Imagine an empty room. If I were to build my selves, into perfect right-angled squares, they would be too beautiful.

# Karisma Price

## I'm Always so Serious

and I've decided to be kind to Faith  
because she has a dead mother, and I  
too will lose a parent in the next month.  
I find it fucked up that her mother named  
her Faith, praised her God for giving her a  
breathing child only to die pressed against  
the armored trunk, flung and flying through glass.  
My father too flew through clear glass after  
the chemo took his balance while the knot  
on his left lung conjured the pneumonia.  
Luckily, he only shattered the living  
room table. Everyday, I feel like God  
watches me through a viewfinder whispering,  
*It'll be worse next time, It'll be your mother.*

## Self-Portrait

*after Chen Chen's "Self-Portrait With & Without"*

As happiness, As the wailing tambourine  
that replaced my uncle's gun, As the dancing  
it does when he waves it at the man who cut him  
off, As the rattle of pills in my father's  
hand to slow the multiplying cells,  
As me thinking something can be  
holy, As a pig, As a poem that doesn't mention  
the word father or water or drowned,  
As a lie as red as a crow's mouth,  
As a street light whose bulb never breaks,  
As a mother who has a child who's allowed to be  
nothing more than their age, As weeknight curfew,  
As reparations, As a new car, As a down payment,  
As the bay leaf inside the pot of red beans boiling  
on Mardi Gras day, As a Zulu coconut, As something  
so dark you have no other option but to call it  
precious, As a sibling, As a rotten tooth,  
As an aunt who has warmed the leftovers  
of our family before sundown, As whatever's  
left of my skeleton after the family pet  
has sucked the sorrow from every bit of my marrow.

## All Day We've Been Speaking in the Dark

and all day the bay horses graze. We are happy in Kingston. We snore. We stain a dish with mixed berry marmalade. What if I stopped here? What if we all did?

We are all happy and snore like overworked fathers and damaged mothers. Everything is a thick kilt pushed over the eyes. I might be wrong when I think all anyone anticipates is living. But are you alright? I crave quality fruit, ache for over-battered popcorn, porcupines without the stick. We are all so formal in our wantings. We whisper walk down wooden hallways. We grow so hard we are dying.

We are all happy and snore into each chamber of ourselves. The bay horses hide our dreams in the barn. We do not grab them from their maws. Our mothers are damaged and our fathers brew. Inheritance, a kettle crying *hamartia*. The water burns Honeybush. Oh, God how the spoons chatter. The way you shake in your sleep when you think the train has hit you. The police will not break the door. The windows are open. We'll sing arrows into them. We are the commonwealth of hooded children in loud raincoats stealing a porch hammock. We trouble the Gregory Pecks down the lane and bust open the chests of neighbors' chifferobes looking for Tom Robinson. It is too late for us to own the mouths of our own darkness. We can't be free, we live here.



II. Alonzo Jr. recast as Telemachus, Age 21

*The baby asked,  
Is there not one righteous among them?*

James Baldwin

Is there an ethics to mythmaking?  
Is there a family that imagination is not allowed to touch?  
Fonny wanted to build Tish a table. To remain the center,  
my father tried to run me over. A wound is a bare patch  
of grass on which a baby's head falls. A plow that parts  
the earth like a rat tail comb. I hold my father's absence  
because it is the blade of my becoming. I twist  
my wrist so every vein is upright and exposed. Do you see  
me bleeding in the way only children can?  
In what way would *you* like to be devastated? I already know  
the color of my own tenderness. Yours is next to mine tracing  
diamonds around the television. Breathing  
is a tender type of breaking. A myth is just someone bathing  
a boy in water not yet made from weeping.



III. Tish recast as Penelope

*...and now again the stormwinds have caught away  
my beloved son (4.727-728)*

Homer

I say I live in a shushing (a woman waiting while a hero is out). Can you tell me it doesn't hurt to live here? Can you return to (for) me, silence me out of witnessing my selves: unmistakably American (I stab the onions), I wash a boy's hair in a warehouse fashioned into love, sleep (I never do this). You are the toy civilian perched in the glass window, your bow an arm stuck flexing. I am the hand that paddles your parting. You are the shape without makes around the body.

moiety is an arrow campaigning for  
our  
now  
all the world

and just like the water the water  
these throats  
want you dead

I say I live in a shushing  
a hero out while

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# David Allen Sullivan

## Outside Mosul, the Land

you're standing on is being  
redrawn. Look down.  
Wiry tufts of grass now belong  
to the Caliphate, now to the Allies,  
now to Taha Sushi Falaha, claim  
substantiated by local Sheikhs.

You detect a rising hump,  
turn over a skull-like stone.  
Underneath, you scrape clean  
a proclamation of Hammurabi:  
*From this boundary marker  
to the river my rule is law.*

You look, but there's no river.

Something tugs your ankles.  
A shrivel of a map? A bracelet  
to monitor movement? No,  
a whip of surveyor's tape.

You look up at the scowling man,  
crouched behind his tripod,  
who waves you off his line.

You're standing on both sides  
of some border. Step back  
or he'll bisect you. You are  
a divided country. Your organs  
belong to separate factions.

Your existence is under dispute.

Your left side's at war with your  
right. No praying, no clapping,  
no confusing the issue.

## Mortar Strike, Sulaymaniyah, Iraq

Across the field the beekeeper strides  
with a metal sheet to lay over  
the mortar-round-wrecked hive,  
snuff out oxygen.

They rise, thundering  
against the thing that would save them.  
He hears them pinging on the underside,  
suffocating out lives to save lives.

Honey  
rivers at his feet, the square of metal  
turns too hot to hold. Fire made them angry,  
smoke makes them lazy.

The militia  
can't retract the fire they rained down,  
can't tamp down what mortar rounds ignited—  
miles off the intended target—and apologies  
only attract arrows of blame.

Bees on fire  
smoke the air, etching grey lines  
like tracer rounds, they reel  
near their hive, crawl its blown off  
burning lid, probe the sweet reek  
of burnt honey.

They spin away and back,  
not knowing whom to attack or what  
to save. Crisped bodies dot the ground  
like burnt popcorn.

He talks down  
the frenzied, sees sleepy bees ride  
his netted face. There's the queen,  
centered on the mesh, her abdomen  
throbbing.

They destroyed the hive  
but couldn't kill what lived in it, lives still.  
When he lifts her off she falls into  
the cup of his hand.

He's a rescue worker  
whose charge causes onlookers to swarm.  
Now the bees are buzzing and crawling  
all over him.

The swarmed human form  
walks slow towards the downed juglan tree's  
cavity. He'll pour them in so they'll be  
out of harm's way.

## **Fuck the Tomato**

—after *Dahlia Ravikovitch*

Fuck the tomato,  
that sweet Iraqi hand grenade.

Fuck the checkpoints  
from here to Sulimaniyah,  
truck exhausts  
rising  
like the tails of dogs.

Fuck the overcharging salesman  
at the market,  
the need to haggle  
and point out the bruise.

Fuck the tomato  
and the longing for it,  
the strangle-hold  
on the free exchange of goods,

the protests at the port city  
of Basra, the slow fuse  
that explodes sequentially:  
Baghdad, Mosul, Nineveh...

Fuck the tomato this dull blade  
enters, mangling through  
seed-rich chambers

to layer them  
with red onion rings  
and hummus  
on this platter.

What will we die for  
if it isn't this fucking tomato?

# Marvin Thompson

## The Weight of the Night

### 1. After the Stag Do

As the evening dims, Lisa stares out of your white-tiled kitchen. June rain is drumming the conservatory roof. You fix your eyes on your cornflakes, scared that if you talk, your secret will pour out of you. Last night, as you danced, you felt something akin to a spiritual joy. You wish those moments were now. You spoon and peer at your cereal. Lisa asks, 'Apart from you downing a skinful, what else happened?' You don't want to reply but the question hangs. Silence: it's as though your words are stones in your throat and your blood is jittering. 'I did something bad,' you tell Lisa and look out at the downpour. Lisa's face is a mix of love and fear. Your wet tabby paws at the window. Lisa lets him in, and sits next to you. Her perfume is a soft wall between you. You look at the sink then stutter: 'Once, when I was younger, I had sex without proper consent.' Somewhere, rain pounds a prison courtyard. 'Not funny,' Lisa says. As she speaks, a spot of her spit lands on your trembling lip. She lets out a chuckle: 'Two weeks before our wedding? Are you trying to...'. From her chair, she steps backwards, reading the despair on your face. As her eyes moisten, you imagine the first raindrop that starts a monsoon that leads to mothers lying on roadsides. 'It was my ex, Sara,' you say. In the conservatory, the cat rolls one of its toys – a ball with a bell. 'You should phone her,' she says, her body somehow both distant and too close. You reply: 'She'd hang up.' With her back against the fridge, Lisa's eyes sear into your face. You try to explain: 'At night,' you say, staring at your bowl, 'Sara and I had a regular game. She'd pretend to be asleep while I woke her up by... And... one night, when she turned round, she didn't smile. She looked alarmed. I told myself she was acting. We never talked about it.' The rain slows. Out of the silence, Lisa gathers words: 'Find her on Facebook. Message her. I need to know that she forgives you.'

### 2. Pendine Beach

Alone, you stroll the dawn sand picturing Lisa's smile. Above the distant sea, a tern glides, then swoops downwards, out of sight. In three hours, you would have been shining your wedding shoes and sipping spiced rum. The air's driftwood scent reminds you of your first holiday kiss in the black of a post-disco walk. Back then, you didn't know that love could make your lungs ache. You listen to the coastline's quiet as if you're listening to Lisa talk about *Moonlight*, or any film she adores. The sea stretches itself across the horizon. In last night's dream, its waves were black. You stood in them, scoffing wedding cake. A ragged breeze rises. You sit on the damp sand, hugging your knees. Your phone vibrates. Sara is calling. In the distance, someone is jogging with a large dog. You wonder what scent is used to teach hounds to chase foxes and tear their bodies into a bloody mess. Lisa said: 'I'm glad Sara's moved on. I can't.' The jogger bears down on your patch of beach, her doberman bounding. You pull your phone from your jeans pocket. 'I've bought a new bed,' Sara says. 'I couldn't sleep in the one you had laid in.' In your throat, your pulse thuds. 'After we talked last week,' she says, 'I wrote things down. Eleven years ago, in my bedroom, you didn't care enough about consent to stop. Do you know what I see when I look at our old selfies? Me with a rapist.' You're sent back to that night – light from her landing crawling over her sheets, the blunt scent of your sweat. You open your dry mouth and offer: 'I thought—' 'We used to pray to be better Christians,' Sara says and you want the sea to wail and drown out the anguish in her voice. She sobs: 'When you put the phone down, walk into the nearest police

station and confess.' Her words are whirring in your head. The cloying scent of wedding cake icing leaks from last night's dream where hushing waves wrapped their oily blackness around your thighs. Your breath is short, short and in this tumbling sunshine you can't breathe. 'Go to the police or I will.' Gazing at the distant sea, you hang up. You walk towards the sea wall. There is a scrap of black bin bag dancing in the breeze. Again, you inhale the smell of driftwood. You stare back at the waves. In your car, you can only look down.

## **The one in which my children discuss jazz while we set out to watch *The Lego Batman Movie* in Blackwood**

A crow rises into the morning mizzle as mist clings to the valley.  
Tired, I bark at my five-year-old Derys to 'Focus,'  
on her seatbelt. She cries. I wipe mucus from her top lip

and tell her there's liquorice in my rucksack. She kicks my bag.  
Hayden (aged six) shouts, 'This music's angry!' –  
On alto sax, Joe Harriott's abstract jazz swirls around us:

'Sad and crazy!' snaps Derys. We fall into silence.  
As I drive, a smile curls – my Mixed Race children are listening  
to something I want them to love: art that sings

Africa's diaspora and raises skin to radiance.  
But they haven't asked to learn a history of defiance  
or the blues' dark beauty. Is this upbringing

or brainwashing? Below the grey-green hills in Hafodyrynys,  
Hayden asks, 'Does the trumpet sound like a forest fire or an arrest?'  
My best mate's mixtapes melted during the policing protest

that blazed on Broadwater Farm: should we tour the bliss  
and sadness those high-rises hold for me? 'Where we live's not racist,'  
I was once warned. Cymbals shimmer. A loneliness rests.

## The one in which I drive through Crumlin wondering where the cigarette-razed crisp factory used to be

Despite its tileless roof and its weeds, there is an iridescence to Crumlin's crumbling colliery. Except, this morning as I cruise beyond its towering chimney, I imagine its bruising

underworld – the scent of dust and sweat silenced like this valley's churches. I change gear as if in the presence of ghosts. In her Grenfell bedroom, with smoke crawling,

would my Derys cwtch her teddies or her Barbies? In my vision, I lie by her door as carbon monoxide lines my lungs. The gas won't be confined:

assisted by cladding, it spreads over neighbours sleeping in front of TVs. I picture my Hayden nodding awake like a coal mine trapper who'd sit alone for hours as methane seeped

from the coal seam. From Grenfell's 23rd floor, a son's *Goodbye* sailed in a Snapchat. The roadside willows look weary. Derys asks: 'Are my sandwiches Marmite?' 'Sorry,'

I reply, wondering why I made her ham. Hayden yells: 'Epic fail!' Grenfell lacked sprinklers – cost-cutting prevailed. In my mind, Derys runs down its storeys. Her slippers are soggy.



## The one in which we travel 30m above the Sirhowy River

Mountain clouds clench like a Maroon's fists  
as she sleeps beyond sugarcane and soldiers' guns with her sons  
and daughters in Jamaica's hills; fists like Jack Johnson's,

an 18th Century Haitian's or an ANC activist's.  
Rain falls knuckle-hard on the giant arms of a brass Chartist.  
Crossing Blackwood's bridge, I wonder at what age I'll hand Hayden

and Derys *The History of Mary Prince*, the slave memoir I stole  
from school in Year 8. That dusk, slurping Dad's spag bol,  
I read: in Bermuda's heat, I hunched over with Mary. We raked salt

from a saltpond, brine biting through our bare legs, shin bones  
exposed. Will my fury be passed on to my children? Will it be easy  
to explain why Chartists marched, demanding suffrage for all

men and not women? From the stereo, Joe Harriott's alto tone hints  
at Calypso and conjures iron mined with calloused hands,  
iron used to forge oil barrels and steel pans

that echo Kaiso. By the road, wet beeches rise dark as flint  
and the clouds hold an ominous tint:  
the first flakes of spring snow fall, ready to suffocate the land.

## **The one in which I recall standing in the cinema's cream-coloured foyer procrastinating over Häagen-Dazs**

My tongue's been stung with pangs for Wray and Nephews white,  
rum my dead Jamaican dad poured with joy over Cornish ice-cream.  
Yesterday, as I indulged, the scent of his cinema liquorice

seemed to rise into the evening, Derys dancing to, 'She's Royal,' the voice  
of Tarrus Riley a sweet gruffness. On the big screen, noonlight  
cascades – Rihanna's makeup advert opens to a gull's flight

above a cityscape: there is a sheen to the folds of a young woman's hijab  
and another woman's cheeks hold an onyx darkness.  
Kerbs and car horns cut to luminous office blocks,

freckled shoulders and St. Lucian-blue eyeshadow. The ad's bass jabs  
and I imagine Dad crooning, 'Ride, cowboy, ride...' as Hayden dabs.  
My feet fizz with a sense of Caribbeanness:

a Barbadian is selling foundation to my daughter  
and her White friends. Mainstream marketing is targeting melanin!  
One day, I'll tell Derys that I hoped she'd have Afro hair, the combing

and cane rows rites I would've held her hands through. Should I be happier  
that she fits into her White Welsh world? The film starts – chatter  
fades as my children munch Butterkist. Here it is: the scent of liquorice.

Since its launch in 2008, the Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 20,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded £175,000 to its winners. These are the UK's biggest prizes for unpublished writing. The Competition encourages new work and seeks out the best creative writing from across the world, with Manchester as the focal point for a major international literary award. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a gala ceremony on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> February in the atmospheric Baronial Hall at Chetham's Library in the heart of the city. The event will feature readings from each of this year's finalists before the announcement of the winners.

This year's Poetry Prize was judged by Malika Booker, W. N. Herbert and Karen McCarthy Woolf. The Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Jonathan Gibbs, Sakinah Hofler and Lara Williams.

**The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Carol Ann Duffy (UK Poet Laureate 2009-2019) and is run the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: [www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool](http://www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool).**

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**If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact [writingschool@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:writingschool@mmu.ac.uk); +44 (0) 161 247 1787.**

**Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: [dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk); +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.**

**Tickets for the Gala Prize-giving are available here: [www.manchesterwritingschool.co.uk/events](http://www.manchesterwritingschool.co.uk/events)**

**The 2020 Manchester Poetry and Fiction Prizes will open to entries in April 2020: [www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk](http://www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk). We are looking to build relationships and explore opportunities with commercial and cultural sponsors and partners, so please get in touch: [writingschool@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:writingschool@mmu.ac.uk); +44 (0) 161 247 1787.**