



# Forward Young Responses

## Poems shortlisted for the 2014 Forward Prizes

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# Devonport

by Fiona Benson

Holstered in the Tamar  
the low-slung bolts  
of submarines come home.

Each breached hood  
looks like part of the wharf –  
black pontoon or tidal berth

and breathes no word  
of its underwater heft,  
its airlocks and vaults,

its sintered, nuclear core.  
Pray for our fathers on leave  
who, in the unstable crucibles

of sleep, crawl  
through drowning rooms  
of war and sorrow.

Pray for the difficult undoing  
of each shining, fissioned load,  
the slow decay of isotopes.

Would that the old wars were done with.  
The sea is still a torpedo-path,  
an Armageddon road.

*From Bright Travellers (Cape Poetry)*

# Black Country

by Liz Berry

Commuters saw it first, vast  
on the hillside by the A41,  
a wingless Pegasus, hooves  
kicking road into the distance.

It had appeared over night.  
A black shadow on the scrub,  
galloping above the gates  
of the derelict factories,

facing East, towards the pits,  
mouth parted as if it would  
swallow the sun that rose  
from behind the winding gear.

Word spread. Crowds gathered.  
Kids, someone said,  
but when they examined its flanks  
they found pure coal,

coal where none had been mined  
in years, where houses  
still collapsed into empty shafts  
and hills bore scars.

A gift from the underworld,  
hauling the past  
from the dead earth. Old men  
knelt to breathe the smoke

of its mane, whisper  
in its ear, walked away  
in silence, fists clenched,  
faces streaked with tears.

*From Black Country (Chatto & Windus)*

# 'The Letter Always Arrives at its Destination'

by Niall Campbell

– then I wrote often to the sea,  
to its sunk rope and its salt bed,  
to the large weed mass lipping the bay.

The small glass bottles would be lined  
along the bottom floor – ship green  
or church-glass clear – such envelopes

of sea-mail. Only on the day  
of sending would a note be fed  
into each swollen, brittle hull –

I had my phases: for so long  
it was maps: maps of wader nests,  
burrows and foxes dens, maps where

nothing was in its true position –  
my landscape blooming from the surf.  
Later, I'd write my crushes' names

onto the paper, as a small gift.  
The caps then tested and wax sealed.  
None ever reached my dream America,

its milk white shore, as most would sink  
between the pier and the breakwater,  
and I would find that I had written

about the grass to the drowned sand,  
again; and to the sunken dark,  
I had sent all the light I knew.

*From Moontide (Bloodaxe Books)*

# Beach Holiday

by Beatrice Garland

You are sitting eating an orange,  
not giving me any  
and staring straight out to sea.

The sand in front of me  
is pocked with little craters,  
every one a wild salt tear.

Why did we come to Spain  
to have this row?  
We could have stayed at home and watch it rain.

You say you'll forgive me  
if I understand what it is  
you're forgiving me for.

I am in a difficult position.  
I want this to be over  
so the beach can go back to normal

all the figures jump about and bat  
their brightly coloured beach balls  
in golden light once more

but I cannot ask you to remind me  
of what it was I did (or said) so  
I say nothing.

Why do you think it's called  
making love anyway, idiot?  
You stride off into the ocean

and are gone a long time.  
I watch its foamy edges smooth the sand  
and change my mind. I want you to be alive.

Indissoluble, how well we know each other.  
These ructions, mutinies, aren't they just  
protests at the gravity of love?

Hating to know how deep it goes,  
that need for one who finds you in a crowd,  
who comes back home at night and stays and stays.

*From The Invention of Fireworks (Templar Poetry)*

# Blue Star Mother

by Kevin Powers

Compare my sins to this, for instance,  
my mother refusing to have her picture taken,  
always raising up her hands the moment that  
the shutter clicks, so that looking back  
on the photographic  
evidence of my life  
one could be easily convinced  
I was raised by a woman  
whose face was the palm of a hand.

This is not the case. I know that  
in the seventies she wore  
large glasses, apparently sat often enough  
on cheap imitation teak couches  
to be photographed on them more than once, sometimes  
had her hair done up  
in whatever fashion  
wives of factory workers  
wore in Richmond  
and was beautiful.

But after hanging her blue star up she covered it  
with curtains. She stopped  
going to the hairdresser  
and took up gardening instead.  
Which is to say that when she woke up  
in the middle of the night  
she'd stand in the yard in her nightgown  
staring at a clump of dead azaleas  
running down beside the house.  
Later, she stopped sleeping.  
Later still, her hair went grey.

I had a picture of her  
in my helmet, shuffled in  
with other pictures.  
I think it was in between  
some cutouts from  
a Maxim magazine and  
a Polaroid of my girlfriend's tits  
with a note on it that said,  
Sorry, last one, be safe, XOXO.

My mother told me  
about a dream she had  
before the sleeping stopped. I died  
and woke her at her bedside  
to tell her I was dead,  
though I would not have  
had to tell her because  
I'd already bled on her favorite floral rug  
and half my jaw was missing.  
I don't know what to make of that.

I like to think she caught  
some other mother's dream,  
because she could take  
how hard the waiting was,  
and had all that practice  
getting up her hands.

*From Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting (Sceptre)*



# A Chair Addresses Jackie Chan

by Vidyan Ravinthiran

As you somersault into my seat and spin  
my legs in a henchman's face, I know  
I love you, always have... Though one  
might consider ours an abusive relationship.  
Your own bruises, do they remember  
how I held you, moved just as you desired  
– or am I simply more of the scenery  
bullets chewed to make that crucial  
inch between my splintering flesh  
and yours enthralling as the Gaza Strip  
played for laughs? You are the realist  
and I am a piece of your code, the mundane  
detail which makes this room appear  
an actual room in which to live and fight  
to keep well-wrought urns from tottering  
off their improbably thin pedestals,  
holding before your face the explosive vest  
so the gun-toting tough is comically arrested.  
Yet I know my worth. I know you  
have nightmares, of empty rooms, with no  
urns or kitchen sinks or silly little chairs  
to work with. There, your kung-fu bricolage  
shrivels to nothing like the limbs of a saint.

*From Grun-tu-molani (Bloodaxe Books)*

# A Clan Gathering

by Colette Bryce

*Dublin, 2009*

Not a birthday only  
but a clan gathering for Bríd.  
Her poor old peerless eyes.  
The young, peripheral.  
The host, with his long jaw  
and recreational shirt  
distributing flutes of gold wine  
to the old, the late, the rheumy-eyed,

who fill the bright reception room  
with its view of the pool  
and, further, the ocean; mingle,  
awkward and sociable, polite  
enquirers after each other's  
links – a slight anxiety  
to be leaves on the twigs of a  
branch of the scheme of things.

They gather around  
the family chart, unscrolled  
on the sideboard, busily plot  
themselves and theirs,  
point and jostle, narratives  
tumbling out of their mouths,  
excitable flow of births,  
deaths, accidents, marriages,

properties lost. What  
it is all about, it seems,  
is the simple multiplication  
of the tribe. The ancients  
lower themselves into chairs.  
A ribboned child, somebody's  
from England, picks out  
phrases on the baby grand.

Bríd floats blindly through the guests,  
immaculate in suit and shades.  
She folds the hand of each in hers,  
intent, intensely feeling her way,  
heels clacking on the oak floor.  
The hosts are oddly embarrassed  
by their wealth, all modesty  
and disconnect. In sepia,

the family heroes. Uncle Joe,  
third from the left at the first Dáil,  
his handsome face pure intellect...  
A hand on an arm, smiles, guffaws,  
a palpable text now almost visible  
in the air; a set text, thick as a  
swarm around the head-to-heads  
and the have-you-met-yets.

I don't mention my lover,  
how we have to invent  
for ourselves a blank, unscripted

future; her guaranteed absence  
from the diagram, the great  
genetic military-campaign,  
and no one asks,  
sensing a difference.

Outdoors, they spill onto several  
levels, settle in groups and lean  
on rails as if on the various decks  
of a ship. United they stand  
against death and difference:  
my mother, who drew nine babies  
from her body, as though  
from out of a conjurer's cloak;

the low-key waiters, musicians,  
caterers; toddlers chasing each other  
through the legs; the North-  
South divide, the Celtic Tiger,  
unmet cousins, country farmers.  
Time for a speech from the birthday girl!  
A believer, she says, in genes,  
genetic inheritance.

The sea's incredible equilibrium.  
Imagine a tilt and the consequence.

The cypresses.

The four-by-fours in the drive.

*From The Whole & Rain-domed Universe (Picador Poetry)*

# A Rival

by John Burnside

Sometimes, when I watch you through the glass,  
fixing your make-up, or twisting your hair in a plait,  
I catch a passing glimpse of someone new,  
someone I might have loved had we ever met  
and, now that we've come this far, I must admit  
that, given the choice, I'd rather her than you:  
this inward self a camera might steal,  
the soul that shatters when a mirror breaks  
and, so they say, takes seven years to heal.  
Sometimes I think if she and I were free,  
she'd tell me secrets you could never share;  
though, now I come to think of it, I swear  
I've caught her giving you such private looks  
as lovers do, when no one else can see  
and then I've turned away, for all our sakes,  
because it's clear she'd rather you than me.

*From All One Breath (Cape Poetry)*

# An Adventure

by Louise Glück

1.

It came to me one night as I was falling asleep  
that I had finished with those amorous adventures  
to which I had long been a slave. Finished with love?  
my heart murmured. To which I responded that many profound discoveries  
awaited us, hoping, at the same time, I would not be asked  
to name them. For I could not name them. But the belief that they existed—  
surely this counted for something?

2.

The next night brought the same thought,  
this time concerning poetry, and in the nights that followed  
various other passions and sensations were, in the same way,  
set aside forever, and each night my heart  
protested its future, like a small child being deprived of a favorite toy.  
But these farewells, I said, are the way of things.  
And once more I alluded to the vast territory  
opening to us with each valediction. And with that phrase I became  
a glorious knight riding into the setting sun, and my heart  
became the steed underneath me.

3.

I was, you will understand, entering the kingdom of death,  
though why this landscape was so conventional  
I could not say. Here, too, the days were very long  
while the years were very short. The sun sank over the far mountain.  
The stars shone, the moon waxed and waned. Soon  
faces from the past appeared to me:  
my mother and father, my infant sister; they had not, it seemed,  
finished what they had to say, though now  
I could hear them because my heart was still.

**4.**

At this point, I attained the precipice  
but the trail did not, I saw, descend on the other side;  
rather, having flattened out, it continued at this altitude  
as far as the eye could see, though gradually  
the mountain supported it completely dissolved  
so that I found myself riding steadily through the air—  
All around, the dead were cheering me on, the joy of finding them  
obliterated by the task of responding to them—

**5.**

As we had all been flesh together,  
now we were mist.  
As we had been before objects with shadows,  
now we were substance without form, like evaporated chemicals.  
Neigh, neigh, said my heart,  
or perhaps nay, nay—it was hard to know.

**6.**

Here the vision ended. I was in my bed, the morning sun  
contentedly rising, the feather comforter  
mounded in white drifts over my lower body.  
You had been with me—  
there was a dent in the second pillow case.  
We had escaped from death—  
or was this the view from the precipice?

*From Faithful and Virtuous Night (Carcanet)*

# In which the cartographer asks for directions

by Kei Miller

Sometimes the cartographer gets frustrated when he asks an I-formant how to get to such and such a place, and the I-formant might say something like

*– Awrite, you know the big white house at the bottom of Clover Hill with all the windows dem board up, and with a high shingle roof that look almost like a church?*

Yes, the cartographer says.

*And in front the house you always see a ole woman, only three teeth in her mouth, and she out there selling pepper shrimp in a school chair with a umbrella tie to it. And beside her she always have two mongrel dog and one of them is white and the nedda one is brown?*

Yes, I know exactly where you mean, the cartographer says.

*And in the yard there is a big guinnep tree that hang right out to the road, so school pickney always stop there to buy shrimp and eat free guinnep?*

Yes, yes, the cartographer insists. I know it.

*Good, says the I-formant. Cause you mustn' go there.*

*From The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion (Carcamet).*



# Love Poem

by Hugo Williams

I suppose you're right and breaking up  
would be quite a good thing,  
but staying together  
would be an equally good thing,  
so whatever we decide to do  
it will be all right. On balance,  
I lean towards doing nothing,  
but whatever happens we'll go on  
seeing each other, won't we?

I suppose it wouldn't be so bad,  
seeing other people for a change,  
we might even find someone  
we could bear to be with  
for more than half an hour,  
although I doubt it somehow.  
Experience suggests we go on  
feeling the same about everything

*From I Knew The Bride (Faber & Faber)*