



Media Release **EMBARGOED TO SUNDAY 5.00pm, 25 October 2020**

## **Change, uncertainty & love's power celebrated in 2020 Forward Prizes**



The winners of **The Forward Prizes for Poetry 2020** announced this afternoon (Sunday 25 Oct) in an online celebration of poetry hosted by the British Library are:

### **Forward Prize for Best Collection (£10,000)**

Caroline Bird – *The Air Year* (Carcenet)

### **Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection (£5,000)**

Will Harris - *RENDANG* (Granta)

### **Best Single Poem (£1,000)**

Malika Booker - 'The Little Miracles' (Magma)

Caroline Bird's audacious and erotically charged collection *The Air Year* is named for the hurricane of a new relationship, the time before the first or 'paper' anniversary: in the year of coronavirus, the title has taken on an eerie double meaning. Will Harris's debut *RENDANG* tackles his mixed-race heritage, considering family, borders, transience and the need for 'a voice capacious enough to be both me and not-me'. Malika Booker's 'The Little Miracles' is a tender account of caring for her mother in the aftermath of a stroke.

The chair of the 2020 jury, writer, critic and cultural historian **Alexandra Harris**, commented: 'We are thrilled to celebrate three winning poets whose finely crafted work has the protean power to change as it meets new readers.'

The Forward Prize for Poetry, founded by William Sieghart and run by the charity Forward Arts Foundation, are the most prestigious awards for new poetry published in the UK and Ireland, and have been sponsored since their launch in 1992 by the content marketing agency, Bookmark (formerly Forward Worldwide). Winners include many of contemporary literature's most celebrated names: Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Carol Ann Duffy and Claudia Rankine.

The three Prizes were awarded in an online ceremony hosted by the British Library on Sunday 25 October 2020 with readings from the shortlisted collections and announcements by William Sieghart. The jury - poets Kim Moore, Roger Robinson and David Wheatley, with journalist and author Leaf Arbuthnot - read 205 collections and 208 single poems.

Alexandra Harris says of *The Air Year*: 'These poems are trapeze ropes made with words, swinging us up and out into the unknown, from dazzle into darkness and back again. With hurtling fluency and ethereal weightlessness, they give chase to mysteries of love and hurt. Turning, tumbling, vaulting, *The Air Year* performs a surrealist aerial dance. Every time you look, its shape has shifted, its extravagance, puzzlement and passion are startlingly reconfigured.'

**Caroline Bird** says: '*The Air Year* was written during a time of complete uncertainty in my life, when I felt I was mid-air between rooftops with nothing beneath me, trying to knit a future for myself out of the air in the same way that I knit a poem out of the blankness of the page. The speakers of the poems are often falling from planes, clifftops, windows, or evaporating and dissolving - the things they want most in the world seem unattainable; their shame is just as loud as their love.'

Alexandra Harris praises *RENDANG* for the 'marvellous generosity' in which its ideas 'meet, leap, and circle each other'. The poet, she says, is 'fascinated by how we read and mis-read the world around us, how we send out signals to each other, how we dance and flail as we try to communicate across chasms', while the book 'teems with signs and symbols, echoes, allusions, jokes, colours, con-men, tricks, all netted and questioned in poems of acute intelligence and mobile grace.'

**Will Harris** says of *RENDANG*: 'It's about what it means to believe you exist – for a self to exist in language, rended by multiple cultures. For some people, nothing you can do will prove you're human. For others, proving you're human – whatever you do – won't make a difference to how you're seen or heard.'

**Malika Booker**, winner of the Best Single Poem prize for 'The Little Miracles', wrote her poem as part of a project organised by the poetry magazine *Magma*, in which she collaborated with Lowri Dowthwaite, a lecturer in Psychological Interventions at the University of Lancashire.

Booker says: 'Dowthwaite's research resonated because my mother has been living with the after effects of a major stroke and exhibiting signs of dementia since 2016. I had spent the last few years in denial, banning the illness from my notebook and reluctant to write any poems about mum's illness. Dowthwaite's work prompted me to be more present during these visits with my mother, scrutinising our time together by tuning in as a daughter, which has led to more meaningful and precious interactions, culminating in this poem of witness capturing the reality of my family's emotional upheaval.'

Alexandra Harris says: "The Little Miracles' is a poem about love and patience: you can feel time moving in its rhythm of work and relief. Every word is freighted with the effort and desire to communicate. The poem breathes with warmth, frustration and humour.'

All shortlisted poets are included in the *Forward Book of Poetry 2021*, which also contains more than 50 poems highly commended by the judges. The book is on sale here.

<https://www.faber.co.uk/catalog/product/view/id/7724/s/9780571362486-the-forward-book-of-poetry-2021/>

The ceremony can be watched on <https://www.bl.uk/events/forward-prizes-for-poetry-2020>

For press enquiries, pictures and review copies, please contact Susannah Herbert on [Susannah@forwardartsfoundation.org](mailto:Susannah@forwardartsfoundation.org)



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## Notes to editors

1. Biographies and interviews with the winning poets are here:

[www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry](http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry)

**Caroline Bird** (b. 1986) grew up in Leeds, the daughter of theatre director and producer Jude Kelly. Bird's first collection of poems, *Looking Through Letterboxes* (2002), was published when she was just 15. *The Air Year* is her fifth book of poetry: the others are *Trouble Came to the Turnip* (2006); *Watering Can* (2009); *The Hat-Stand Union* (2013); *In These Days of Prohibition* (2017), which was shortlisted for both the T.S. Eliot Prize and the Ted Hughes Award.

Bird's work has been commended for her dexterous use of image, pun, and voice; poet [Simon Armitage](#) described Bird's poetry as 'spring-loaded, funny, sad and deadly'. Her poems have been widely anthologized, and in 2012, she was an official poet at the London Olympics. Her poem 'The Fun Palace' is on permanent display at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

Bird is also a successful playwright, the youngest ever member of the Royal Court Young Writers Programme, working under the guidance of Simon Stephens. Her plays include the musical *The Trial of Dennis the Menace*, which debuted in 2012 at the Southbank Centre.

Bird's other plays include a new version of *The Trojan Women* for the Gate Theatre (2012), *Chamber Piece* for the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith's Secret Theatre season (2013), and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* for Northern Stage (2015). In 2013, Bird was shortlisted for Most Promising New Playwright at the Off-West-End Awards.

**Will Harris** (b. 1989) is a writer of Chinese Indonesian and British heritage, born and based in London. His 2018 essay [Mixed-Race Superman](#) (UK: Peninsula Press, 2018; US: Melville House, 2019) reflects on the lives of two very different supermen: Barack Obama and Keanu Reeves and argues that the mixed-race background of each gave them a shapelessness that was a form of resistance. His debut collection [RENDANG](#) is the first ever poetry collection published by Granta Books and is published by Wesleyan University Press in the US.

His poem 'SAY' – one of the centrepieces of *RENDANG* - was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2018. In 2019, Harris received a Poetry

Fellowship from the Arts Foundation. He also co-edited the Spring 2020 issue of [The Poetry Review](#) with Mary Jean Chan

**Malika Booker** (b. 1970) is a British poet of Guyanese and Grenadian parentage. As the co-founder in 1991 of the writers' collective Malika's Poetry Kitchen (MPK), she fostered a culture of craft, community and development among poets with limited access to mainstream publishers: the MPK model has since inspired collectives across the world from Chicago to Delhi.

Her pamphlet *Breadfruit*, (flippedeye, 2007) received a Poetry Book Society recommendation and her poetry collection *Pepper Seed* (Peepal Tree Press, 2013) was shortlisted for the OCM Bocas prize and the Seamus Heaney Centre 2014 prize for first full collection. She is published with the Poets Sharon Olds and Warsan Shire in *The Penguin Modern Poet Series 3: Your Family: Your Body* (2017).

Malika received her MA from Goldsmiths University and has recently begun a PhD at the University of Newcastle. She was the Douglas Caster Cultural Fellow in Creative Writing at Leeds University, the first British poet to be a fellow at Cave Canem, and the inaugural Poet in Residence at The Royal Shakespeare Company. Malika hosts and curates *New Caribbean Voices*, Peepal Tree Press's literary podcast, and is currently a poetry Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University.

'The Little Miracles' takes as its departure point Tomas Tranströmer's 'Winter Night'; the raging storm of that poem is transformed into an interior storm, the poet's mother's stroke. Booker gives an uncompromising picture of the process of care and recovery: its fears, its effect on sibling relationships, its moments of false hope, its triumphs and gritudes: 'each spoonful of puréed food / slipped into her mouth like a tender offering takes us a step away / from feeding tubes, and we are so thankful for each miniscule miracle.'

2. **The Forward Prizes for Poetry** are the most coveted accolades in the UK and Ireland for established and emerging poets. With a total value of £16,000, the prizes are in three categories: the Forward Prize for Best Collection (£10,000), the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection (£5,000) and the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (£1,000)

3. **Bookmark**, the world-leading content and communications company, has been the sponsor and key supporter of the Forward Prizes for Poetry since they were first awarded in 1992. Bookmark creates engaging, shareable content in multiple formats and languages: it has offices in the UK, Canada, the US, Peru, Chile and China and its clients include Patek Philippe, Air Canada, American Express, LATAM,

Dyson, Lindt, Standard Life and Tesco. Until 2016, Bookmark traded as Forward Worldwide. For more information, see @BookmarkContent and [bookmarkcontent.com](http://bookmarkcontent.com).

4. **Forward Arts Foundation**, which runs the Forward Prizes for Poetry, celebrates excellence in poetry and widens its audience by encouraging the enjoyment, discovery and sharing of poems. An Arts Council England National Portfolio organisation, it also co-ordinates National Poetry Day, which fell this year on October 1st. [www.forwardartsfoundation.org](http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org) @forwardprizes and @poetrydayuk.

5. Past winners of the Forward Prize for Best Collection are: Fiona Benson *Vertigo & Ghost* (Cape Poetry) 2019, Danez Smith *Don't Call Us Dead* (Chatto) 2018, Sinéad Morrissey *On Balance* (Carcanet) 2017, Vahni Capildeo *Measure of Expatriation* (Carcanet) 2016, Claudia Rankine *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Penguin) 2015, Kei Miller *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Carcanet) 2014, Michael Symmons Roberts *Drysalter* (Cape Poetry) 2013, Jorie Graham *PLACE* (Carcanet) 2012, John Burnside *Black Cat Bone* (Cape Poetry) 2011, Seamus Heaney *Human Chain* (Faber & Faber) 2010, Don Paterson *Rain* (Faber & Faber) 2009, Mick Imlah *The Lost Leader* (Faber & Faber) 2008, Sean O'Brien *The Drowned Book* (Picador Poetry) 2007, Robin Robertson *Swithering* (Picador Poetry) 2006, David Harsent *Legion* (Faber & Faber) 2005, Kathleen Jamie *The Tree House* (Picador Poetry) 2004, Ciaran Carson *Breaking News* (Gallery Press) 2003, Peter Porter *Max is Missing* (Picador Poetry) 2002, Sean O'Brien *Downriver* (Picador Poetry) 2001, Michael Donaghy *Conjure* (Picador Poetry) 2000, Jo Shapcott *My Life Asleep* (OUP) 1999, Ted Hughes *Birthday Letters* (Faber & Faber) 1998, Jamie McKendrick *The Marble Fly* (OUP) 1997, John Fuller *Stones and Fires* (Chatto) 1996, Sean O'Brien *Ghost Train* (OUP) 1995, Alan Jenkins *Harm* (Chatto) 1994, Carol Ann Duffy *Mean Time* (Anvil Press) 1993 and Thom Gunn *The Man with Night Sweats* (Faber & Faber) 1992.

6. About the Chair of Judges

**Alexandra Harris** is a writer, teacher, literary critic and cultural historian. Her work includes *Romantic Moderns* (2010), *Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies* (2015), *Time and Place* (2019) and many essays on books, paintings, people and places; she is currently working on a study of rural history and local feeling. She reviews for the *Guardian* and has presented a range of arts programmes for BBC radio. She is a Professor of English at the University of Birmingham and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

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