

EMBARGOED TO SUNDAY 9.30PM 20 OCTOBER 2019

Poetry that brings the violence of the Greek gods into the Me Too era, a son's elegy inspired by Super Mario video games, and an Afghan tale of self-sacrificed girls have been awarded the UK's most coveted poetry prizes, The Forward Prizes for Poetry 2019



The winners of The Forward Prizes for Poetry 2019 announced tonight at the Southbank's Queen Elizabeth Hall are:

Forward Prize for Best Collection (£10,000)

Fiona Benson - Vertigo and Ghost (Cape Poetry)

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

Stephen Sexton - If All the World and Love Were Young (Penguin)

Best Single Poem (£1,000)

Parwana Fayyaz - 'Forty Names' (PN Review)

Fiona Benson's collection *Vertigo and Ghost* explores female fear and desire, first casting the classical god Zeus as a contemporary sexual predator then foregrounding fierce maternal watchfulness. Stephen Sexton's first book, *If All the World and Love Were Young* uses his childhood love of Super Mario World to examine his mother's death, mapping loss into its bright digital landscapes. And Parwana Fayyaz's poem, 'Forty Names' reshapes a semi-mythical tale of 40 girls who died for honour in her birthplace, Afghanistan.

The chair of the 2019 jury, broadcaster and academic Shahidha Bari, commented, “We are immensely proud of the winners of the 2019 Forward Prizes for Poetry. These are poets who inspired us with their conviction and impressed us with their fearlessness. They remind us of what poetry can feel like at its very best: politically urgent and emotionally resonant”.

The Forward Prizes, founded by William Sieghart and run by the charity Forward Arts Foundation, have been sponsored since their launch in 1992 by the content marketing agency, **Bookmark** (formerly Forward Worldwide). Winners include some of the most celebrated names in poetry: Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Carol Ann Duffy and Claudia Rankine.

The three Prizes were awarded at a ceremony at Queen Elizabeth Hall on the evening of Sunday 20 October 2019 in London’s Southbank Centre with readings from the shortlisted collections, hosted by jury chair Shahidha Bari. The five strong jury - poets Tara Bergin, Andrew McMillan and Carol Rumens, with Jamie Andrews, head of the British Library’s Cultural and Learning Programme - read 204 collections and 183 single poems

Fiona Benson, winner of the Best Collection Prize, says of *Vertigo and Ghost*:

“Many of these poems came in what felt like an involuntary rush, and sometimes in the case of the Zeus poems, I felt I didn’t want them, or couldn’t keep up. I’ve been asked where the Zeus poems in particular came from – a long buried experience, and then a sudden pouring-in of words, that I can only explain as coming out of the woods. There was no plan.”

Shahidha Bari says of Benson’s achievement: “*Vertigo and Ghost* is a work of unfaltering determination and self-inspection. It is an exhilarating collection that pulses with fury, fear and defiance - and enduring hope too.”

If All the World and Love Were Young, **Stephen Sexton** writes of the video-games that shaped his experience of his mother’s death. He says:

“I started this book as a kind of joke! The idea of writing poems, or little texts, or a whole book about *Super Mario World* seemed mildly absurd, and utterly compelling. I started writing it around the spring of 2015, and soon thereafter realised that this particular game was so much a part of my childhood that I couldn’t write about it without thinking of my childhood, and I couldn’t think about my childhood without thinking about grief. So, I discovered I was actually writing an elegy for my mother, which came as a surprise to me. In terms of genre, it’s a pastoral elegy, and the digital

landscapes of Mario's world are put beside the actual landscapes of our world."

Shahidha Bari says of his work "*If All the World and Love Were Young* talks to a generation who have learnt that life can be both digital and fragile. It is a singular and utterly original work that moved us with its quiet beauty."

Parwana Fayyaz, winner of the Best Single Poem prize, for 'Forty Names', published in PN Review, says:

"I first started writing poetry when I learned English as a second language in 2010. (I had) all these strange questions about all the things I encountered around me and that drew me to poetry. My poetry became my philosophy of life on little things I cared about. I realised that everything I wrote not only reflected my own life, but was also about the other women's lives that surrounded me – in memories. I believe that a good poem in essence should captivate the reader in heart and mind. The poem communicates a story about forty women jumping off a cliff to preserve their honour. I have tried to give names to these women"

Shahidha Bari says: "This is a poem that feels close to a prayer, and yet is shocking and vital. It startled us with its simple, invocatory power, and reminded us of the profound act of witness that poetry can be."

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Press contact:

Tatti de Jersey at tatti@sp-agency.co.uk Tel: 07796571569

All shortlisted poets are included in the recently released **Forward Book of Poetry 2020** which also contains more than 50 poems highly commended by the judges

For further information visit www.forwardartsfoundation.org or join the conversation at @forwardprizes #forwardprizes

Notes to Editors

1. Biographies of the winning poets and interviews with the poets are on:

www.forwardartsfoundation.org/forward-prizes-for-poetry

Fiona Benson (b. 1978, Wroughton, Wiltshire) lives in Devon with her husband and their two daughters. *Vertigo and Ghost* is her second collection. Her first, *Bright Travellers* (Cape Poetry, 2015) was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, winning the 2015 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the 2015 Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry Prize for First Full Collection.

Stephen Sexton (b. 1988, Belfast) teaches at the Seamus Heaney Poetry Centre at Queen's University, Belfast. He was the winner of the 2016 National Poetry Competition and his pamphlet, *Oils*, was a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice. His poems have appeared in *Granta*, *POETRY*, and *Best British Poetry 2015*. He was the recipient of an ACES award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and was awarded an Eric Gregory Award in 2018.

Parwana Fayyaz (b. 1990, Kabul) grew up in Pakistan, learning English at the age of 20. She is currently working towards a PhD on the medieval Persian poet Jami at Trinity College, Cambridge. 'Forty Names', her shortlisted poem, draws inspiration both narrative and lyrical from those medieval Persian traditions. Fayyaz graduated with a BA and an MA in CompLit, Creative Writing and Religious Studies from Stanford University, studying under Eavan Boland. She intends to stay in academia to pursue her studies of Persian Sufi poetry, and work towards her first collection.

2. The Forward Prizes 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) This year's judges were chair, **Shahidha Bari**, presenter of BBC Radio 3, *Free Thinking*, **Jamie Andrews**, head of the British Library's Cultural and Learning Programme and poets **Tara Bergin**, **Andrew McMillan**, **Carol Rumens**.

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. For more information, see @BookmarkContent and 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, www.forwardartsfoundation.org.uk

5. Past winners of the Forward Prize for Best Collection are: Danez Smith *Don't Call Us Dead*, (2018) Sinéad Morrissey *On Balance* (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.



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