

# The Anonymous Invitation

## *Eight New Poems by Unnamed Poets*

NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

Having had what seemed like a simple idea, the logistics of putting together the Anonymous section were interesting. Firstly, we wondered whom we should ask, and then worried about whether they'd be hostile to the notion – after all, publication in *Poetry Review*, even for established poets, is generally a cause for celebration and fanfare. In the event, we were delighted that most of the poets we approached were able to accept, and were, in fact, intrigued in a variety of ways by the concept. We're very grateful to them for their willingness to take on this unusual editorial request, and for their generosity and talent in providing us with such a fine set of poems.

The eight poets who took part are all established and there's an even split between women and men. We encouraged them to write something new for the commission to test if the cloak of anonymity affected their creative process in any way, or to take this as an opportunity to send us a poem where they had tried something they considered rather different from their previous work. In addition, we asked them to provide any thoughts they had on the experience of writing/publishing anonymously and you'll see there's a fascinating range of reactions, from those who felt it had little impact to those who found it liberating or unnerving. Finally we gave them the choice of remaining permanently anonymous or having their identities revealed in the Summer edition of *Poetry Review*, allowing them an interval to decide whether they'd like to 'claim' their poem at a later date. Watch this space!

As a concluding note, we should say that, at the time of writing, the poets' identities are known only to us as the editors and to staff at the Poetry Society, whom it was necessary to inform for purely practical reasons – the poets remain anonymous to each other. Beyond the fun of trying to match poets to poems, we hope that readers will be intrigued by the experience of encountering these poems against the white field of their own making.



*Anon. Poet I*  
The Storm

Was I always like this, a watcher first and a doer second?  
Twenty children ran from the house to greet the storm.

But not me. I stayed on the porch and studied them.  
They cartwheeled as lightning rolled dice overhead.

Something crawled under my skin for me to join them;  
An impulse that I had to fight to keep in check.

I looked at the nearest grown-up to make doubly sure  
It was all right and saw no reaction, just watchfulness,

A peer up at the blackness thickening and a glance at us,  
And not much more than a pulling close of an open shirt.

And so I dived off the front porch and into field grass  
With the others and pitched defiance (gobbled up by

The hungry wind throwing its weight around)  
At the strapping dark, whistling trees, pushing them

This way and that for fun, with twigs and leaves torn  
And flung in our faces and water lashed at us.

As lightning squared up directly overhead, white sheets  
Cast wide and deep with us for fish to gather up,

Aunts and uncles called us in, and the stragglers by name.  
We filled all the windows for the rest of the show.

We were loud, jittery, spastic, giddy, and at one  
With the storm whose current ran in us and made us

Beg to go back out in the open, to throw up our arms  
For the wind and the lightning to claim us all

As their offspring and drag us up into their embrace,  
Beyond the reach of adults calling, calling our names.

*Anon. Poet I writes:* A commission to be anonymous is like the invitation from hell: you don't ever want to go there though you won't mind finding out a bit about the place. In this instance the result is a poem that originates in the spark of a memory but owes much of its art to the imagination (Eliot's visions and revisions, I suppose). The artist-figure who watches the making of the memory ends up being the one who fashions it into art. There is something of sociology's participant-observer to all this. The poet lives the experience and, simultaneously, imagines it as art. That posture of hesitant participant may be the hardwired condition of the artist in life as much as that life inhabiting the artist. The two-way street (many ways, many streets) makes it hard to do anything more than simply obey the signs of the poem when it arrives, and asks to be fleshed out and be made more of than the bare bones of recollection. The nervous system of the poem translates as the emotional reality for the poet. The success or otherwise of the poem can be gauged or measured by the extent to which the reader picks up on the poet's declared architecture of feelings. Or not. I wish I could have just read the invitation and not attended the party. But it turns out that these invites appear in disguise since they are really offers made to the imagination that are too good and therefore cannot be refused.

*Anon. Poet II*  
Sciurus Carolinensis

Sun rivers on glass, threatens to mount, blaze  
into my eyeline so that, heat-struck, I headlong  
down to hump squirrelled in the shade below, leaves  
moving as I move, as grass moves with the snake.  
I am the grey. Born helpless, blind and deaf.  
My mother lays me across her forepaws, fetches me  
out of a cave, weans me once my teeth appear.  
*Sciurus* names only my *skia*, shadow, *oura*, tail.  
I displace the red. Acorn-bred, carrier of the pox,  
I infect it with lesions, ulcers, scabs, weeping crusts,  
it shivers, shivers, *skia*, *oura*, and then it's dead.  
I mean no harm. I'm no image seared on your brain  
only seen side on, tail up, ears tufted like conifer spurs;  
no nutkin on a branch, jug on a wall, graphic loop,  
no ampersand between presentiment and trace.  
*Skia*, *oura*, I flicker on the walls of the cave.

*Anon. Poet II writes:* I was very happy to be invited to submit a poem for the anonymous section of Poetry Review. It feels quite joyful to be nameless, without the baggage of biography and history, much as it does wandering around in airports once you've checked in and are suddenly unburdened. Every poet wishes to get out of the way of his poem and this is a welcome step further. Freed of the writer's or reader's expectations, prior knowledge, cultural frameworks, the poem can stand, ageless, genderless, before us and newly introduce itself. Although a poet's work necessarily leans on its biographical and critical context, it is always revealing to see how a single poem fares when it is orphaned. I look forward to reading the other anonymous poems in this bold and intriguing editorial project.

*NOTE: The following pair of poems comes from a poetic dialogue between two poets.*

*Anon. Poet III*

43

buried in play, before winter  
arrives in quills & sets out its case

rolled up in last resort, stripped  
down to heart rot of a peeled twig

sounding of ash, coppiced to  
the finality of endings nilled

sourcings of voice, here she  
sends back echoes where

tunnels & fingertips take you  
through the darkness to meet

the sudden purge of light, that  
point where it began to tread

a path, she finds principle  
& die-back, diamond

canker, marked out

*Anon. Poet IV*

44

sourcings of voice: window, door, streetlight,  
branch scraped and rattled, pod, rain,  
wings of wind so voice, so the sudden

purge  
and then nothing, space and nothing, voice  
and nothing gaps here we live in this

in this and that and the winter blanched  
unbranched like the sky a white space and grey  
and swart and indigo and then and then

so she, child, voice like undersong, heard  
through window, door, streetlight, sourcings

of wind and sudden and purge

and this is where this is where voice

breaks and holds its sustaining path,  
principle, play, quill, tunnel, ash

*Anon. Poets III & IV write:* The project involves us writing alternating poems, each a response to the last. Having agreed a starting point of 28 lines, we decided to move through ever fewer lines until we got to one line, and then reverse the process. The broad subject was fixed by the very first ekphrastic poem that had in mind a specific painting deliberately withheld from the other poet. That painting was loaded with certain associations, material texture, colour. The next poem picked elements of the first to riff on and develop, and so it continued, touching and prompting beyond habitual practice. Anonymous is the most productive of poets and we are pleased to be adding to such a magnificent oeuvre. Going without names is also what people on the internet do a good deal of the time – the billion-headed monster is composed of a billion mouths and twice that number of ears. These poems pop out of two of such mouths more naked than they would normally be in the company of their names. Let them live on their naked wits and hearts.

*Anon. Poet V*  
PG Deaths

When hero shoots pulley they are buried under a pile of chain;  
one hand protrudes, twitches, twitches, goes limp.  
They drown in syrup / sump oil / treacle, gurgling  
because viscosity is funny; we cannot say why.  
They slap the ground in frustration and fall out of shot,  
eternally incapacitated. A child murders them.  
They are pointing out the Pleiades to an ermine-wrapped  
starlet when the crane they booby-trapped last season  
swings and knocks them both off the promenade  
to be conked by a love boat. They are made into taffy  
or jerky or both. Their weakness of spirit addicts them  
to a volatile and difficult to source recreational drug,  
a tainted dose of which dissolves their throat, salt on ice.  
A bowling ball rolls down an ironing board and strikes a match  
and etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. etc. severe clinical depression.  
The hero refers to their demise in parenthesis.  
They are crushed by falling novelties / brightly coloured  
exotic fruits / vast ivory button. They are thrown in a bin.  
A single rogue castor from the falling piano winched  
above the hero's tenement ricochets off a fire hydrant  
and into their temple. Flattened by the elephant they abused.  
They fall into an industrial mincer to be blended into a fine paste,  
the company logo incongruously jocular.  
The camera pans left and accidentally slices them in half  
against the side of a mountain. Racism gives them a heart attack.  
Representative from a minority group to whom  
they have previously expressed prejudice  
lands killing blow with ironically appropriate object.  
Following head injury they develop artistic ambitions,  
and death, a useful formalist – and silly, and wise –  
comes to nobody but the unjust who asked for it.

*Anon. Poet V writes:* The first image comes from that Arnold Schwarzenegger / Danny DeVito comedy *Twins*. I was talking to a friend about the scene where the villain dies and that, while suffocating under a pile of chain must be a pretty horrible death, it's necessarily played for laughs. That in PG films death has this clownish presence, so (bad) characters still have to die for the story to have a conclusion, but the writer has to do this without upsetting the young audience or raising any difficult questions. This probably sounds like a truism, but I think you write all that you're capable of writing. I've certainly never written a poem I wasn't capable of writing, and that's not for lack of trying. I've never spoken to a writer who feels as though they have a brand to uphold, so that writing anonymously might liberate them from that. But I have spoken to writers, including myself, who are prone to lapsing into self-parody, but I think I can say with conviction that writing anonymously hasn't liberated me from that at all. Which in the absence of a self is maybe death by self-parody.

## *Anon. Poet VI* Notes on the Enemy

*after W.H. Auden, from 'Journal of an Airman'*

Three enemy coats – black to the calf on Sundays – reversible anorak – dripping cagoule.

Three enemy faces – white – harmless – man & woman interchangeable.

Three enemy voices – whisper – rumour – sermon.

Three enemy weapons – orphans – Jesus – ABBA.

Three enemy strategies – Saltire on a 100ft pole – Boden – flowers on the doorstep.

Three enemy codes – 3 for 2 tea lights inscribed with a prayer – embrace – ☺ over the 'i'.

Three front lines – frozen beach – herbaceous border – window.

Three battle conditions – incandescent – grey – apocalyptic.

Three signs of enemy victory – swans – leaves falling in spring – swollen congregation.

Three enemy celebrations – shit through the letterbox – dancing on the ceiling – solemn cheering.

Three lines of defence – Jubilee bunting – leylandii – blinds (handmade in one night from nettles).

Three casualties – air – life – nation.

*Anon. Poet VI writes:* : Between 1929 and 1931 W.H. Auden taught at a small school in the west of Scotland. During this time T.S. Eliot accepted his first book for publication and he wrote 'The Orators', arguably his first major piece of writing. 'The Orators' contains many references to the area he was living in as an outsider. My poem responds to a section from 'The Orators', taking Auden's theme and mood of surreal paranoia and bringing it into the present day. This poem thrived under the strictures of the Anon. invitation because anonymity gave me freedom to write about what I wanted to, unfettered by concerns about how readers might relate the poet and the poem, and it also creates an interesting uncertainty around the poem.

*Anon. Poet VII*  
Fall

That was our most inspired decision:  
escape from perpetual love –  
the taste of our insipid sin  
still on our tongues –  
into the giddiness of separation.

Once in the world of random things,  
away from those complacent borders,  
dazzled by all this changing,  
we've found our own language,  
the drunken freedom to be wrong.

Perfection made us restless,  
created human as we were.  
It was His choice – to make us  
lower than the angels,  
with imaginings beyond our grasp  
and incapable of constant happiness.  
Here, it is the permanent erasure  
of each day; it is death, loss,  
that render luminous each detail  
of this urgent, fragile universe.

It never rained in heaven.  
Here, our very breath returns to us  
as dew. We shield our skin  
prepared to feel the blizzard in our hair.  
We fly! We leap! We run!

*Anon. Poet VII writes:* The invitation to provide an anonymous poem for the spring issue of Poetry Review was, at first, exciting. The possibility of writing as someone of the opposite gender, for instance, or in the style of some other poet, or in a form I have never used opened up the prospect of discovering a new voice, a different direction. But I soon came to feel that I had been given almost too much licence, and none of those tempting, playful possibilities produced a convincing poem. In the end, I relinquished the attempt and wrote a poem in my own, possibly characteristic, way – though not in my own voice. Curiously, preoccupation with the issue of how much freedom one can handle seems to have given rise to the poem. Adam and Eve are euphoric at having escaped the predictable constraints of heaven. But perhaps, if the poem were to have a sequel, we would find their joy tempered with disorientation and regret. Who knows!

*Anon. Poet VIII*

With Two Young Cats, New Year's Day, 4am

After the party, the three of us are hunkered-down  
in a moonlit scullery, a household asleep above.

Twin nocturnes; they stare back bright-green the light  
their blackness captures. Their world is full of unknowns

to which the answer is always *lick fur cleaner*.

I love these young killers: their brazen innocence,

their comic ignorance of their beauty. Somewhere  
a year is turning, but this ink and silver hour

is theirs, their alien time-zone. They move and freeze  
as one; resting now, heads lowered, eyes just-green

in threshold reverie, listening to things  
I'll never hear, listening to the moonlight.

Anon. Poet VIII declined to comment on their anonymous poem.