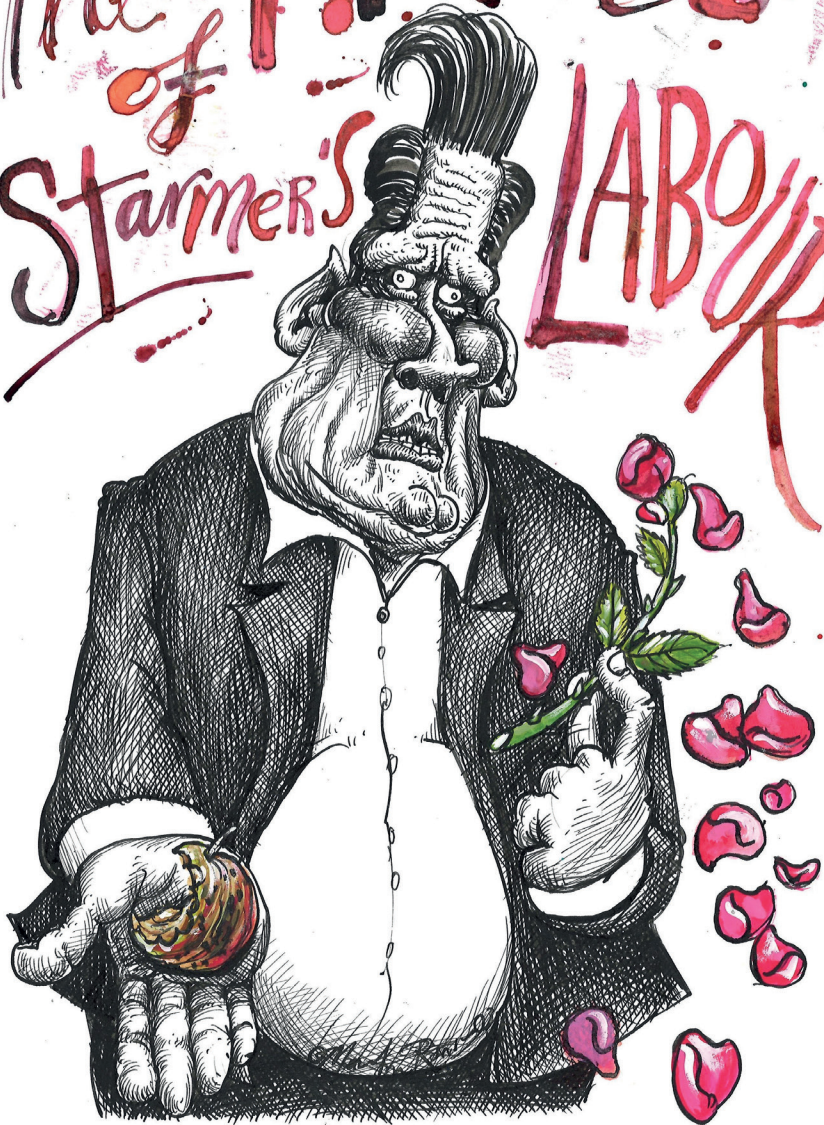


The FRUITS of Stammer's LABOR



The Bread & Roses Poetry
Award Anthology 2023

The Fruits of Starmer's Labour

The Bread and Roses Poetry
Award Anthology 2023

Edited by
Mike Quille

*Speak up and speak out. Staying silent is never an option. Life is full of
opportunities, and full of risks—and full of surprises.*

—Jeremy Corbyn

CULTURE  **MATTERS**

First published 2023 by Culture Matters.
Culture Matters Co-Operative Ltd. promotes cultural democracy.
See www.culturematters.org.uk

Copyright © The contributors
Edited by Mike Quille
Cover art © Martin Rowson
Layout and typesetting by Alan Morrison
ISBN 978-1-912710-65-2

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Newcastle TUC in the funding of this year's Bread & Roses Poetry Award and anthology.



Contents

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | | 1 |
| Abigail Ottley | Caring is 'a lifestyle choice' | 5 |
| Cara L McKee | The Libraries | 7 |
| Steven Taylor | The Fruit of Starmer's Labour | 8 |
| Peter Raynard | England's Dead, 2023 | 9 |
| Lois Hambleton | Honour | 11 |
| Ian Parks | A Bend in the River | 13 |
| Gwyneth Wilson | Hills that Talk | 14 |
| John F Keane | Country of Lost Things | 15 |
| Ross Walsh | A Lament for Thomas Sankara | 17 |
| Mary Black | The Distribution and Centre of Power | 19 |
| Ruth Aylett | City Whispers | 21 |
| Declan Geraghty | Blood on the Dole and the Bled Out | 23 |
| Julie Easley | Stones | 24 |
| Jenny Mitchell | Sestina for a Food Thief | 26 |
| Alan Weadick | Castle View Properties, 1980s | 28 |
| Sarah Leavesley | The Skyscraper | 30 |
| Michal Lowkain | nada | 31 |
| Angela Topping | Sometime Soon | 33 |
| Laura Taylor | Life Hacks | 35 |
| David Bleiman | Unsettled | 37 |
| John Morris | When is a Party Not a Party? | 39 |
| Owen Gallagher | Striker in a Sari | 41 |
| Paul Francis | Just Talk | 42 |
| John Freeman | Bernard's Good Record | 44 |
| Laura Strickland | When I Meet Someone for the First Time | 46 |
| Joe Williams | BTEC Level 2 | 47 |
| Martin Hayes | the people kept on yelling | 48 |
| Alan Morrison | The Heart's Lightning Recital | 49 |
| Peadar O'Donoghue | Advice for the Working-Class Young | 52 |
| Moira Garland | Food Bank | 54 |
| Rob Walton | Brilliant Family Fun Tower of Bricks | 56 |

Introduction

By Alan Morrison and Mike Quille

The Culture Matters Bread & Roses Poetry Award has established itself as an annual staple of poetic dissent and political witness. In this, the seventh Bread & Roses Poetry Award anthology, we are again treated to a potpourri of political poetry chosen by competition judge, poet and publisher Andy Croft. 31 poems from 31 poets, comprising 26 shortlistees, and the five winning entrants, Ian Parks, Ross Walsh, Jenny Mitchell, michal lowkain and Rob Walton.

The poems gathered here form an anatomy of diminished British society splintered into polarities by the most politically corrupt and openly racist government in living memory, which has lurched from one senseless and pernicious slogan to another (*Go Home, Take Back Control, Stop the Boats* etc.) in a bid to mop up populist support; and the equal and opposite response among growing swathes of the public sector and professions with strikes and protests on a scale not seen since the early years of Thatcherism.

Indeed, the unions represent the only organised opposition to this dangerous government, now that the Labour Party has so systematically filleted itself of all socialist—and arguably even social democratic—principles under the unscrupulous and authoritarian leadership of Keir Starmer. It remains a grating irony that Starmer was christened after the great Keir Hardie, Labour's first parliamentary leader (1906-08), and a true socialist. Starmer has far more in common with historically vilified first Labour prime minister James Ramsay MacDonald (1924, and 1929-31), who went on to form a National Government with Tory support.

By purging the left on spurious pretexts and conservatising the Labour Party in policy, rhetoric, and obtrusively 'patriotic' posture, Starmer seems to be following a similar course of political betrayal. Having sold out the 10 pledges he made in his bid to become leader, he is now intent on selling out the nation's most economically-challenged and marginalised in a bid to grab back the mythical 'red wall' votes by cosying up to the right-wing red top press, appeasing the xenophobic lobbies, and wrapping himself in Union Jacks.

Having dismantled the soul of Labour on the domestic front, Starmer has now stained the party's reputation on the international stage by unconditionally supporting Netanyahu's arguable genocide of Palestinians in Gaza in

response to the horrific Hamas incursion of 7 October, and refusing to call for a ceasefire (calling instead for the almost warped concept of a 'humanitarian pause' before a resumption of the carpet bombing of the Strip). This fateful intransigence has been met with mass resignations of Labour councillors and an exodus of the party's Muslim membership (which one of Starmer's inner circle reportedly dismissed as "shaking off the fleas"). At the time of writing, over 11,000 Palestinians have been wiped out, almost all civilians, and almost half children, thousands more are seriously wounded in shell-struck hospitals, or are dying under rubble.

It was inevitable that there would be an Israeli retaliation after the terrible events of 7 October, but, in spite of the dominant narrative of Western political leaders and mainstream media, there is a fast-growing consensus among much of the world's public (cue weekly mass protests and peace marches), human rights charities, and the United Nations, that it is grossly disproportionate, amounting to 'collective punishment', and in violation of international law (not least the use of illegal white phosphorous on civilians, and the bombing of hospitals, schools, mosques, churches, and ambulance convoys).

By perverse juxtaposition, in early November, the UN's poverty envoy, special rapporteur Olivier De Schutter, stated that the UK Government was in violation of international law due to the "unacceptable" levels of poverty in British society, and called for that most unlikely of actions under a Tory administration: an increase in welfare spending. Something also highly unlikely under a Starmer administration if his refusal to scrap the Malthusian two-child benefit cap is anything to go by (which has already earned him the epithet 'Kid Starver').

The contrast between Starmerism and Corbynism could not now be starker: while Corbynism promised peace and social justice (cue Corbyn's post-leadership Peace and Justice Project), Starmerism augurs war and austerity, those ignominious bedfellows of neoliberalism, sacraments at the altar of anarcho-capitalism. *The Fruits of Starmer's Labour* are sour indeed.

So, not for the first time, many on the left now feel politically homeless, after the all-too-brief five year period when the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn was both authentically socialist and, accordingly, a proper Opposition. This anthology at least provides a paper haven for some of those voices who currently have no mainstream party to represent them.

A plethora of contemporary social and political vicissitudes are tackled herein: the slow-motion car crash of Brexit in Peter Raynard's 'England's Dead, 2023', and John F Keane's 'Country of Lost Things'; the cost of living crisis and energy price rises in Declan Geraghty's 'Blood on the Dole and the Bled Out'; the resistible rise of an unprincipled opportunist and not very oppositional 'Opposition' Leader in Steven Taylor's glibly figurative 'The Fruit of Starmer's Labour', and Paul Francis' swipingly polemical 'Just Talk'; the climate emergency in Mary Black's 'The Distribution and the Centre of Power'; the Tory Government's pernicious scapegoating rhetoric around refugees in Julie Easley's fabular 'Stones (*Embracing Equity in Times of Tory Britain*)', and David Bleiman's historically astute 'Unsettled'; child hunger and abuse in neo-Dickensian 21st century Britain in Jenny Mitchell's 'Sestina for a Food Thief'; the dark farce of Partygate in John Morris' 'When Is A Party Not A Party?'; creeping privatisations and public service strikes in John Freeman's 'Bernard's Good Record'; welfare stigma in Laura Strickland's 'When I Meet Someone for the First Time'; the state exploitation of unpaid carers in Abigail Ottley's 'Caring is 'a lifestyle choice''; the alienation of employment in Martin Hayes' 'the people kept on yelling'; austerity's evisceration of communities and the social fabric in Cara L McKee's 'The Libraries' and Rob Walton's 'Brilliant Family Fun Tower of Bricks'.

And these are just some examples from the rich seam of contemporary socio-poetic comment rampant in these uncompromising pages.

It just remains to thank Martin Rowson for once again providing the piercingly accurate cover art; Newcastle Trades Union Council for their support for the Bread and Roses Poetry Award; and most of all, all the people who submitted poems this year.

Abigail Ottley

Caring is 'a lifestyle choice'

Caring is 'a lifestyle choice' or so I'm told by those who think/
they are my betters/ as though we can choose/ if we grow sick or
old/ or when our hearts or minds might fail/ so that the ground
beneath our feet/ trembles/ falls away/ as if we can say/ in
advance of the event/ *if such and such a trouble should befall me/
here are those people the state should approach/ surely, one of
them will choose to care/*

Are disease and disability likewise choices then/ in the busy,
brash, I'm-alright-jack/ consumerist parlance of the day/ pray
silence happy shoppers/for a buzz-word from our sponsors/ who
bring us di-rect from the US of A/ that fine nation of Walmarts
and shopping malls/ gentrification/ the privatisation of healthcare/
dispossession of the urban poor/ hate crime directed against those
most in need/ drug crime/ inner city desolation/ rigged
employment figures/ rigged election polls/ rigged elections/ if we
let them get away with it/ *deals* and *trade-offs*/ in place of
convictions/ the demise/ of the welfare state/

just a minute now/ wait/ don't interrupt/ my question was purely
rhetorical/ the truth is it's abundantly clear/ that none of us are
free/ to *choose*/ how shall we *know* when we are hale and
strong/ what afflictions may stalk us through life's shadows/
how the threads/ of our lives might wear thin/ unravel/ leave us
vulnerable/ shivering/ exposed/ there may be fear loneliness/ loss
of hope/ even guilt and shame/ may abide there/ and who would
choose /for their life-long companion/ even one of these/

likewise who would choose /were they not so compelled/ to make
themselves a burden/ for their lover/ husband wife/ sister or
brother/ their good-hearted friend of long-standing/ their own
ageing parents/ who soon/ too soon/ must themselves/ grow

feeble and die/ who would choose/ to make a cross of their pain/
and who would choose/ to be their Simon/ were she or he not
bound/ by duty or anchored/ by the ties of blood

how can caring be any kind of choice/ when *not* to care / is not an
option/ show me those who have/ so much *more* / than plenty/ yet
stand in judgement over others/ those whose lives are shrinking/
whose glow-worm light/ must flicker and grow feeble/ every
hour/ those who daily look for new ways/ to survive/ to mend/
make do/ keep their chins up/ show me those who stand in
judgement/ let them stand up/ in plain view/ we will ask them/
what is their solution/ if those who care with all their strength/
their patience/ all their open-heartedness/ should tomorrow/ as
these carpers would have it/ *cease*/ to choose /to care/

what will they do/ these penny-pinching pundits/ will they give
freely of their time and their affections/ to those whose human
value is beyond their poor reckoning/ who/ asking so little/ need
so much/ who *are* these people/ let them make themselves
known/ let them show us/ what hollow souls/ they are

*(This poem was written after a media discussion of the 'problem' of care
without mention of the plight of unpaid carers)*

Cara L McKee

The Libraries

After Michael Longley's A Prayer

And they are desecrating libraries.
May the smoke move through, purify the spaces.
May we gather at the altar of the Good Book,
Come together to read with our own fresh eyes.
For the drift of words cannot obscure the Truth
For all the people form the congregation.

May we pass from one hand to another.
May we cherish the good that is given.

Steven Taylor

The Fruit of Starmer's Labour

Sir Keir has been gifted a perfectly ripe and ready to eat avocado but he's not the man to waste it. Sir Keir will keep it in his pocket until it softens, rots, and becomes pulpy, inedible and worthless

He reassures himself by squeezing the existence out of meaning



Peter Raynard

England's Dead, 2023

(after Felicity Dorothea Hemans, 1822)

Old Men of Brexit Land

 You claim that England's full?

Show where our shiny brand

 Now sits on this State's skull

You've drawn up the last bridge

 Cut off our kingdom's head

Drained ties that filled the bilge

 It's final, England's dead

The Celts have prickled hides

 They want to be alone

Seen through your blue-eyed lies

 They want you overthrown

Boats sail on migrant tides

 The traffickers misled

Deflates at any time

 Too late now England's dead

Fishermen and Farmers

 Of emptied seas and fields

Villagers turned mourners

 What will there be to feed?

As prices rise and rise

 Our pockets emptied out

Your profits rise like pies

 The poor are left with nowt

But as the fools squark on
 Their feathers shall be shed
Then when they're left with none
 They'll see that England's dead

In these strike-filled seasons
 Threatened, be unemployed
Workers shy of their bikes?
 Their wages are destroyed

You left the sky to burn
 Heavens have lost their Gods
Power is out of turns
 Now worthless England's dead.

From that which warms and melts
 Comes fiery revolt
A bitten hand is dealt
 From cocks who shot their bolt

So let these crows screw up
 From worm rid wooden sheds
Their corpse a rotting stump
 Their Headstone 'England's Dead!'

Lois Hambleton

Honour

Always remember to check the rear view mirror

—Boris Johnson, Westminster, July 2022

The angel Gaius coils unto himself and folds his wings.
Dark blue, embroidered waistcoat, loosened
At the seams—he'd fled a scene in 44 BC,
Left Caesar, writhing in the bowl of Rome, stabbed
Some three & twenty times.
A righteous dagger seeks a noble deed, he thought.
For Gaius, not so many places left to hide, he could
Be reassigned of course or floating, wingless in the
Thames but on this night ...
Must he be seen? Sometimes a bloodless coup
Can turn the guts far swifter than a butchered corpse.
Palatable? Perhaps it was his years but on this night ...
Who of us sleeps? He thought.
He joined a thinking butler who'd had had time to read
But nought for supper. A generous glass of claret
None the less—he felt awash with honour. Dripping
Forth like Whitsuntide, but this, this piercing
Will freeze the Serpentine.
Oh, how he envied actors on the open stage
Deceit, to them, a fair and honest thing—he'd happily
Be honour bound with theatre masks, but no, his brief
Demands the facing off of dogs, pit fighting, yet, enough
To know, to measure, mark the fading glow of honour.
Gaius, will make it so.
And now, all Brutus filled he sits astride the middle
Horse—*'I am the honourable one!'* He cries, but wishes

That he held the might of all the Roman angels at his knees.
Their armour, primed against this simmering crowd.

A noble blade requires an honourable deed.
Jon Snow at Castle Black
Was stabbed—HOW MANY TIMES?



Ian Parks

A Bend In The River

At Putney where the river takes a turn
they crammed into the chancel and the porch,
the smell of death still clinging to their clothes.

Someone sharpened his blunt pen
and dipped it in the ink.
Cromwell, Ireton, Rainsborough

and all the coming men
took turns to shout each other down
between the altar and the pews

and stop the revolution in mid-flow.
And there among the soldiers and their oaths—
the rough-hewn godly of the Civil War,

the stumps of burning candles
and the smell of melting wax,
the bloodstains spreading on the floor

a plain-worded man in a buff-coloured coat
who spoke for us and everyone
and whose name we'll never know.

Gwyneth Wilson

Hills That Talk

To know the man you have to walk the hills
drive the beasts in droves along the road,
sink the shaft to search the earth for coal,
dump the slag that scars the land.

Tough grasses, wild calls of birds block your way to cairns of celts
and men of faith who shed their blood to pray the way they choose.
Recall despair at strikes and pleas to feed the needs of those who went
without

Return to work for less, still with strength to hew and heave, to build
a life that gives to all a chance to leave this toil and prove their
worth amongst their peers; but not forget the ones who did remain to
work these hills.

John F Keane

Country of Lost Things

And hope departs
with the melancholic roar
of a dying lion driven from
his pride awaiting his
end under thorn bushes in
the dry season

with fewer lionesses
than jackals and vultures
at his side.

And the train pulls
out of the station in a sigh
of evanescent steam
with the plaintive toot
of a failing destiny
on a long, wayward journey
along uncertain tracks

beside precipitous drops
through hard space
beneath perilous peaks
watching like eagles.

And a nation dreams
of its lost things as an old
man dreams of lost youth
or a bare tree mourns
its summer leaves

yearning for
immutable certainties
unchallenged perspectives

haunted by a vision
that never materialised.



Ross Walsh

A Lament for Thomas Sankara

Explained in this way, our struggle for the trees and forests is first and foremost a democratic and popular struggle.

—Thomas Sankara

The world is a poached pig
skewered with millionaires' meathooks
and stashed in a sycophant's smokehouse.
Heating up, drying out.
Drained of life and ready for consumption.

Half a century ago
Sankara could see it happening
in the Land of the Upright People.

The sands of the Sahel swallowing
Burkina Faso.
Filling in the mines
dry as riverbeds,
their wealth already stolen away to Europe.

Sankara dared to invent the future,
a vision with a certain amount of madness.
An army of trees millions strong,
a bulwark against the invasion of the desert.

Now we know that he was right,
but he was slain in a hail of bullets
as revolutionaries often are.

The desert keeps growing
as the planet is cured
with wildfire smoke
and dirty sea salt.
All to feed the greed of billionaires
with stars in their eyes as they plunder.



Mary Black

The Distribution and the Centre of Power

Poles lie flung on fields of chargrilled straw
Broken where the bracken used to grow
Grounded power-lines lie limp on moor,
Metal strings hang clumped from burnt hedgerow

London to the rescue: "Meet the team.
We make markets, energised by law
We paint paths to zero carbon green
We deliver, from the trading floor".

Winter winds are blowing oddly warm
Even though the summer fires have bust
Strange tastes of the tropics to this storm
Air in constant streams of heat, not gusts

London team brief: "Ioam St Paul's.
Propagise the best pitch to the press
Hide the hideous behind closed doors
All that counts is how we window dress".

Muted hums as milk machines are stilled
Cows stand cold in sheds with power cuts
Whole herds starving, grain stores scarcely filled
Roads with debris, ruined and in ruts

London calling: "Come to our event:
'Climate Change Solutions that Cost Least'
First a speaker from the government
Then a working champagne luncheon feast".

Workers wait, repairs remain on hold
Reaping years when no-one learned the trade
Skill gaps sowed between the young and old
Staff laid-off when profits first got made

London warns; "Event is selling hard.
Book in quickly, do stay overnight,
Book a hotel on your Amex card
Then try Covent Garden for a bite."

Sleet storms follow, snow falls overhead
Restoration promises lie broke
Old men start to cry at night in bed
Chilled bones breaking hardy moorland folk

London buzzing in the meeting hall
Swarming round a queen bee in full flow:
"New Tariffs, and regulating more,
Blah, blah, blah ... our way to net zero".

Lives lie flung through fields of fog and blah
Broken where the power grid once fed
Infrastructure crumbling near and far
Market systems hanging from a thread.

London rising: people on the streets
Banners flying, placards in the air.
Movement growing, hope in hearts now beats
People on the march—because they care.

Ruth Aylett

City Whispers

They touch the soles of my shoes
as I walk their fan-laid cobbles;
at home shoulders brush mine
along the walls they constructed.
They flick at the wheels
of the train on the rails they welded,
and the tyres of the traffic
on their rolled tarmac.
Nameless invisible builders.

Never in fashion, least of all now.
City quant market the dream of the concept
of the idea of money,
the nation states, torn
by piranhas, bleed into the water.
Their gift was in making:
to drive a nail in, absolutely straight,
with a pair of accurate blows,
lay bricks on plumb; skim plaster flat.

I hear the murmur of their voices,
a practical conversation
of few but useful words,
side-lit by swearing.
Getting the job done
and letting that speak for them.

Only once, years back
on a London May Day march
brickies from the local
building sites began a chant
question and response,
echoing against the office blocks:
'Who built this city?'
'We built this city!'

Walking home in winter I see the
soaring silhouette
of a slow-moving crane.
Can you hear them?
Without fuss, unnoticed,
building the city again.



Declan Geraghty

Blood on the Dole and the Bled Out

There must have been a mistake on the bill
there must have been something wrong with their computer
but I can't wait all day
on the electricity company
and their aggravating music
so I hang up
I'm anxious
maybe a loan
but that would only make it worse
she rolls her eyes
said I'd be lucky if I got a place in ten years
she asks me if I'm working
then rolls her eyes again
I push the door instead of pulling on me way out
the council sign is so colourful
but I only seem to see grey
on the dole queue
they don't lift their eyes
as I think to meself
worrying
while looking at the floor
I make a call
and hear that awful music again.

Julie Easley

Stones (Embracing Equity in Times of Tory Britain)

There's something about the way the stones are stacked
packed tightly against each other

that allows the few to come and crush them.

They cast doubts
about their legitimacy
are they even stones?

cast doubts
about their right to be stacked
like that,

cast doubts of those at the bottom
imperfect and broken
in spaces other stones can fill.

There's something about the smooth white stones
that single them out as specimens to be lifted

out of the stack, crowned and curtsied to,
while the others
more shaded and speckled
lay disturbed,

stirred by speculations
and suggestions of impurity.
Some stones are removed

stacked elsewhere,
relocated in covert raids
and disappeared to distant lands.

And then there are the displaced
the stones labelled illegal,
the desperate ones designated dangerous

by lies passing through lips
and regurgitated in right-wing rags.

These are the days of division.
These are the times of Tory Britain.
These are the times to leave no stone unturned.



Jenny Mitchell

Sestina for a Food Thief

They catch her stealing in the closed canteen, a girl who goes to school for a hot meal, still hungry from the night before, mouth dry. Torn clothing fails to hide how much she's lost—the weight. The cost of living fills her family home with cupboard space. When caught, she's marched to the headteacher's room.

He orders her to walk towards his desk, the room too hot. Small eyes behind designer specs take in the girl, as he sits back to give his paunch more space. She cannot raise her eyes because he is the hungry wolf in fairy tales. She's read a word—is it accost? That's what he does to kids, ripping off their clothes.

The dinner lady says it has to stop, adjusting clothes, stained apron much too tight, bulk taking up more room as she points at the child, insisting that it adds a cost when food is stolen from the school canteen. The girl licks her dry lips, tries to tell them both she's hungry, not a thief, but they talk all at once, taking up the space.

She's told three times to speak but only feels a space appear as she falls down—a bony heap—clothes swimming on her frame. It's not the first time. Hunger's felled her twice before, once in the tiny bedroom where her step-dad comes too close. He is a wolf. The girl can't tell her mum who cries at bills, the rising costs.

As the young girl faints, the head stands up. It might cost his job if she is hurt. He stumbles, gives more space to the dinner lady who bends fast, reaching for the girl, afraid to touch, awkward in her too-tight clothes. The nurse is called, comes running to the room, phones for an ambulance but knows it's only hunger.

She hates the fact she's grown immune to hungry children who've begun to steal now that the cost of a hot meal's gone up. They huddle in the sick room, hoping she will let them rest because they have no space inside their heads to learn a thing. Filthy clothes are nothing new—she doesn't even see them on the girl.

As the adults talk about the rise in hungry children, the girl stares at the room, curled on the floor, not given any space until she feels accosted by three wolves in human clothes.



Alan Weadick

Castle View Properties, the 1980s

The mounds and mounds us stringy chisellers
crawled around; vultures for punishment, we were,

when nobody's house sat far from a building site.
Ruined castle turret and monastic tower hunkered down

among truckloads of muck and gruff leftovers,
quite tolerable worms and hills only the sturdiest

could be kings of. Crowned with crusted paint tins,
the rusted nails of a holy god searching for hands

and feet to be proud of, bloody but unbowed,
mammariated but turning feral as the voices called

through the five o'clock shadows. But who needed tea
when you could sleep over in Sloppy Joe's,

your skeletal uncle's place that, between mouthfuls
of his hard cheese trapped in silver paper,

gave you the lie of the shack you hid in, nightly:
what was under the Santa suit of the shag pile,

what lay behind the Mickey Mouse plastering.
And it wasn't even Norman Bates' Ma:

under the bare bones glare of a forty watt bulb
was the real estate, peopled by little men

with Havanas huge in their father's faces
looking for shelter from the marked cards

falling around their heads in a blizzard,
changing the rules of the game they just lost,

the hand we were all about to be dealt.



Sarah Leavesley

The Skyscraper

You're in the basement bar of a glass Eiffel Tower, twisting the cocktail in your hand: a champagne coupe of sparklers—the half-a-passion-fruit boat on top filled with spirit and powder, then set alight: a small blaze on night's ocean. This drink's £20 a time, but that's alright: he's buying, his fingers stroking yours while you sink one, two, three... they taste like decadence, slip down way too easily—as easily as the thin strap of your slinky top slips from your shoulder, while the ground sways away from your feet. Up in his room, the city below is a glitter of twinkling lights unravelled from a giant Christmas tree. You are the present, being slowly unwrapped. You don't know who you are at this moment, nor the man at your side. Suspended here like an exclamation mark that doesn't have to fall towards a full stop, you curve into the wild escape of it. A ghost of you in the glass smiles back. Afterwards, you re-wrap yourself into the anonymity of a fluffy white toweling robe, its fresh laundered warmth. Only later, do you think of the hundred other bodies that have worn it before, with just a quick mechanical rinse and spin in between. A gift tag is not a price tag, you tell yourself, as the elevator speeds downwards and you slip from the shiny glass out into a frosty dawn. Like Christmas, you want to pretend you still believe this.

Michal Lowkain

nada

a poem is about to jump out of my head

today morning i've met a homeless family
couple with five kids
they had travelled from a different county
slept last two nights in a garda station

by the city council they were kindly informed
we don't have any emergency accommodation
we have nothing

the whole day listening to this mantra
and wandering around the freezing city

and the whole day is forever
tomorrow is just another forever

a poem is about to jump out of my head

city council (choir of bureaucrats)
we have the housing crisis here
we don't have any emergency accommodation
we have nothing for you at the moment
please stay with your family
stay with your friends

single mother
what should i do to make them see?
cut off my arm cut off my fucking leg?
they don't want to listen to me

*i'm dirt to them
they love our music
they hate the musicians*

*they can't hear me
they can't see me
i live with my six kids
my father and sister
in the meat container
it's a disgrace*

a poem is about to jump out of my head

happy friday city centre
a man huge like the buildings around
is screaming his head off with a slavic accent
*there is no fucking hope!
dublin is fuuuuucked!
ireland is fuuuuucked!
we're fuuuuucked!*

the street is shaking to its foundations
people are busy with shopping drinking
having the craic and getting crazier

affluent areas are safe
fluent in preserving the status quo

a poem is about to jump out of my head

to have nothing
fucking nada

to lose

but

Angela Topping

Sometime Soon

There is no more gas. The central heating
is silent; the cheerful purring of the pilot light
with its blue sanctuary ritual flame
has gone for ever, radiators
reduced to white elephants,
mere shelves, or nostalgic artworks.
At least we have log burners
to take the ice off the air.
Coal ran out a long time ago
and coffee logs are expensive.
We prune our trees more often
though felling is forbidden by law.
We are grateful for pinecones
that burn like tinder. Families gather
in local woods with buckets to forage,
will fight for them if they have to.
Rags burn too well, bring little heat.
No one gives away old clothes now.
Jumpers are darned. We wear them
in layers like pass the parcel wrappings.
Hot water bottles are prized possessions.
We no longer use some rooms.
Thanks to wind turbines and solar panels
we still have just enough electricity
to boil a kettle, use a microwave.
Exercise helps. We run around the kitchen,
do star jumps in the lounge.
We hear on the wind-up radio
things will get worse before they get better.
Frost on the inside of the windows:

melt it with a lit candle or warm coins
from inside the gloves everyone wears.
At night when we go to bed
we are equipped like ancient Artic explorers.



Laura Taylor

Life Hacks

I've heard you can run a car on nothing
but good faith, if you're careful.

Who's for soup?

I make it out of stones, fill our
pockets with them afterwards.

They make you feel fatter,
like your ribs don't rattle,
and the hunger doesn't matter
when you drown.

I read something somewhere
you can make your gas go further
if you never put the heating on or dress
in feather boas and an old string vest.

Who's for stew?

I make it out of dew and fresh air,
feeds a family of four
for a year, maybe more, with a side
of despair and mashed depression.

I was advised that a cap is not a cap
in that way. Not protective, a cover, a lid
to keep the wayward in, to stop mad dogs
making profits on the back of destitution.

Who's for chips?

I make them out of little bits of fluff,
fry them in a dream I once had about grease.
They taste of greed and unremitting grind.

I've been told that you don't really need to keep clean.
Just shower in the rain, let the trickle-down
bathe you in its piss.
Who's for cake? Eton Mess;
layers of distress and sell your pet to pay the rent
on *affordable homes*.
Serve with loans and filthy lucre
for a weekday treat.



David Bleiman

Unsettled

Exiles fixed in times of passage,
gape at us through eyes in amber,
never ageing nor forgetting,
stuck in everlasting flight.

Exiles sing the songs of exile,
Heimat, patria, watan,
sit and weep beside the rivers
flowing through a foreign land.

Exiles carry tongues of exile,
Nakba, Shoah, Venceremos,
turn the English they unsettle
with the spades of *Moorsoldaten*.

Exiles eat the foods of exile,
pitta, bagels, chapalele,
matzo lacking time to leaven,
packed in haste, the Red Sea rising.

Exiles come in boats and dinghies,
beached in barges, held in camps,
fleeing prison, we intern them,
waiting, wasting, wanting work.

Exiles hear our politicians
fanning flames of fear and hatred,
reaping phrases from the sewers:
they should fuck off back to France.

Exiles carry tales of horror—
Grandma knew, we never asked—
we're now those whose eyes in amber,
question why you never ask?



John Morris

When Is A Party Not A Party?

If it looks like a party, feels like a party,
has a party atmosphere.

If you can hear the rhythmic thud-thud-thud of the disco beat,
the clink of beer bottles
and can smell the cheese and wine,
and vomit,
then obviously—it's a business meeting.

If they suddenly wheel out a cake,
a suitcase full of booze
and pop on the party hats,
then—it must be a surprise business meeting!

There may be an agenda of party games like
'pin the blame on someone else's donkey',
'pass the brown envelope'
and 'spin the truth',
but no rules are ever broken;
not that you can break the rules
when they are your rules!

everybody who attends must have had at least one of their shots
and be prepared to have a whole lot more all through the meeting.
Masks are never removed.

They're the ones that Matty Hancock paid millions to his mate for
that don't actually work as masks,
but do make rather splendid party hats.

The '2 Metre Rule' is strictly enforced.
Each chap insists that the drunken secretary

chooses the stationery cupboard or empty office
where later, he is going 'to meet her',
and where, for a couple of minutes at least,
she will be the 'Under Secretary'.

At last we can reveal why it's called Downing Street;
it is where they work tirelessly, day and night—
downing glasses of red wine.
"Number 10," is often the reply when staff are asked,
"How many is that you're on today?"

So no, it's not a party,
Because if it was, somebody would have told him.
Anyway, isn't this the way everybody conducts their business meetings?

So, when is a party a party?
Well, it seems that it's when it's your father's wake,
your dying gran's birthday
or you're only daughter's wedding.
But no, a party is not a party—
when it's The Tory Party!

Owen Gallagher

Striker in a Sari

I can still see her at the far end of the street,
a small woman in a coat with a sari beneath,

hoisting a placard: 'The workers united will never
be defeated!' She'd probably just walked her children

to school and was making her way to join the picket line
demanding they all be reinstated in their jobs.

Nothing could stop her, not the state, nor the courts.
Hundreds of police held back the shouting supporters.

She walked the middle of the road as if on a red carpet.
When she reached the workplace, she was handed

a megaphone. You could hear a leaflet drop.
From her body came words that changed lives,

gave hope. When the odds against me
are cliff high I think of Mrs. Desai.

Paul Francis

Just Talk

Roll up for Starmer—he's the man
who's got the goods on Labour's plan.
There's sceptics out there full of doubt
so now's the time to spell things out.
He'll change the world, rewrite the rules
about how work is done in schools.
The rows of desks, the silent test
decides what matters, who does best
and sets a ceiling we call class
through which the poorer kids can't pass.

As workers, lovers, parents we
negotiate through oracy
not literacy. So we should teach
all kids the subtleties of speech.
It's time to liberate the young.
No need to learn an alien tongue;
they should be free to use their voice
to find a future, make the choice
of where they'll go with confidence.
That's justice. And it's common sense.

Suppose a class discusses, say,
how girls are harassed every day.
A range of attitudes is aired—
ignorant, guilty, angry, scared.
Step one: the pupils analyse
how things can look through different eyes.
Secretly filmed, clips go online
where our opponents think it's fine

to vilify what they call woke.
Our brave new world's become a joke.

The pile of awkward questions grows.
Can talk be tested? No-one knows.
If angry parents voice dismay
what are head teachers going to say?
Millions of teachers overnight
are told they haven't got it right.
Who's going to organise this change?
We can't afford to rearrange
how teachers train, how work's assessed.
Then there's the polls—the acid test.

We have to be the safer bet.
There's no way we can be a threat
to money, Murdoch, powers that be
and none of them want oracy.
False hope is worse than no hope, so
no hope's the way we're going to go.
We're realists, we know the score;
this was a soundbite, nothing more.
What might have been a brilliant scheme
has vanished. It was all a dream.

John Freeman

Bernard's Good Record

A fairly good record, says the manager.
It's a very good record, Bernard says.
Off for two weeks after Christmas this year
and last year, a pattern, or coincidence?
Coincidence, says Bernard just as firmly,
I broke my ankle last year, falling over
a step on a customer's property.
And this year I've had a chest infection.

How could anyone who knows Bernard doubt him?
Or seeing him, in the last couple of weeks,
back at work but looking very poorly,
imagine that was put on for effect?
He couldn't catch his breath, had to stay in bed,
as he told us when we saw him at long last.

He waves his phone. From next Monday, he says,
they're going to watch us all through the round.
Like now, they'd notice I've stood here, not moving,
for ten minutes, they'd see a yellow dot
getting larger. We're allowed forty minutes
for a break, and I never use all that,
I take twenty. The other twenty I spend
talking to customers. People are worried,
but I say, play by the book, do the job,
and they can't touch you. We'll see how it works out.

More strikes? Nothing planned. Another ballot.
I tell him that in Australia, or so
a friend there writes to me, letters won't be
delivered anymore, they're losing money.
And there was me, she says, imagining
it was a service. Bernard isn't laughing.
That could happen here. He says Royal Mail
is considering outsourcing letters
to another company, it's a plan
under discussion.

More and more I feel
what I'm bearing witness to with Bernard
is the slow death of an institution,
of a golden thread that has run through life,
with all its troubles, for two centuries.
Those of us who knew it will regret it.
The young won't miss it and won't care, mostly.

Perhaps some child with an imagination
will catch an after-echo, as we hear
of a gone world with linnets and skylarks,
and feel uneasily how sad it is,
before getting on, as we all must, knowing
that if we stand still thinking about things
or talking for too long, a growing circle
round a yellow dot in our internalised
line manager will bark at us, *hurry up*.

Laura Strickland

When I Meet Someone for the First Time

it's always the same question—

what do you do?

and I have a script ready—

I worked full time in HR but I was made redundant/but it was a blessing because I'm a carer for my son/and I couldn't keep up with the two hour commute/and I was always late picking him up from school/even if I could get him there/and I was always tired because I'd be up until 3am putting my house back together after a meltdown/and once my ex told me I put work before our son

but what I say is—

I work freelance and I'm a carer for my son.

Sometimes there's a slight lean of their head

and I know they want to ask more—

what's wrong with your son/how much do you earn/are you on benefits?

It's the same with people in the doctor's waiting room

when they hear the receptionist say,

in her outdoor voice,

do you pay for your prescriptions?

and the script in my head starts to unravel—

not at the moment/but I won't claim Universal Credit forever/it's just because I'm a full time carer for my son/but I work part time and I do some voluntary work/and I used to work full time...

but what I say is—

no/not at the moment.

Joe Williams

BTEC Level 2 Construction and the Built Environment

I built you a house,
laid each brick with my own hands,
held them together with love,
which, it turns out, is not as good
an adhesive as cement.
Don't even ask about the electrics.
I wouldn't know where to begin.

You never lived in the house,
which was probably for the best.
It was cold, and much too dark.
I forgot to put in windows.
They'd only have fallen out
when the walls began to collapse.

It was meant as a grand gesture,
but didn't work out as intended,
though I did end up with a job
as Secretary of State for Education,
which doesn't require a City & Guilds
or Corgi registration.

Any idiot can do it,
and often, they do.

Martin Hayes

the people kept on yelling

and the machine said
work
and the people said back
work, yes, but let it be fair
and then the machine sent it supervisors in
to slap the people across the back of their legs
with a reed
but the people took it and said back
work, yes, but let it be fair
and then the machines supervisors said
Fair!? I'll show you what's fucking Fair!
and then they created their HR department
to try and crush everything with its rules
but the people kept on yelling
work, yes, but let it be fair
and the moon kept on coming and going
and the sea was always there
and nothing could kill what was in the centre of the people
which was work and love
and the machine understood this
and they came in the end in their billions to the power of 10
to protect the machine
the machines did
from the people who wouldn't stop yelling
work, yes, but let it be fair

Alan Morrison

The Heart's Lightning Recital

LXXX

*"And let Panic, who outspeeds
The career of armèd steeds
Pass, a disregarded shade
Through your phalanx undismayed.*

LXXXI

*"Let the laws of your own land,
Good or ill, between ye stand
Hand to hand, and foot to foot,
Arbiters of the dispute,*

LXXXII

*"The old laws of England—they
Whose reverend heads with age are gray,
Children of a wiser day...*

—from 'The Mask of Anarchy' (1819), Shelley

Our souls in bondage to the shadow of the Baby Boom,
Playground of gray-haired children, incubi in silvered bloom—
Harangue them through a megaphone, protestor's spittoon,
Expect a hoarse voice, rattling ears to the hackneyed tune
Of mocking laughter from every metropolitan poltroon,
They'll pillory you as a contemporary Peterloo—

You are the unappointed poet of the streets, protestor,
Your amplified philippic a spleen-vent in pentameter,
Your passive weapons: placard, whistle, woofer horn & banner,
Tins of glue & paint & soup, squibs of orange powder—
O roadside radical, rabble-rouser, tent-pitched objector,
O slow-marcher, road-sitter, car-blocker, pop-up occupier,
Dayglow Digger, Rainbow Ranter, rain-or-shine Picketer—

But our right to protest is being torched by authority
To whom a new Act gives extra powers to arbitrarily
Decide what is 'disruptive' (though protest is supposed to be)
& grade types of disruption by ever-shadier degrees
Apportioning proscription & punishment accordingly:
You'll get banged up for hanging a banner from a gantry
& distracting traffic—for locking-on to object or body,
Chaining yourself to railings—that suffragette agency;

If 'risk' is weighed in the gravamen then a swift sentence
Of up to ten years with extra built-in intolerance,
The antiquated charge of causing '*public nuisance*'
Replaced by a more nuanced, multifaceted offence
Of causing '*serious distress, serious annoyance,*

Serious inconvenience or serious loss of amenity'—
So, if you must protest, you must do it very quietly,
'Noise' will not be tolerated but be met exponentially
With truncheon, handcuff, taser, horse charge, pepper spray,
Kettling, cordoning, tagging—English democracy

Does not accommodate bleeding-hearted Robin Hoods,
Wat Tylers, John Balls, Jack Cades, Jack Straws, Herewards,
Winstanleys, Lilburnes, Bamfords, Paines, Pankhursts, do-goods—
The English are free to express dissent in spit-hoods,
Unruly minors in soundproof booths, bolshy shrubs in Wormwood

Scrubs, climate whistleblowers in Belmarsh, precarious
Poets in open prisons of impecuniousness—
Philistine society spits on its poets with pittances;
& none are spat on more than the street poets, protestors,
Lumpenpoetariat (among Karl Marx's monikers:
'*Poet of commodities*'), pamphleteers & agitators,
Uncompromising spirits undampened by poetasters
Of spite, petty Harpies, counterintuitive provocateurs,

Spikers of the principled, free speech poisoners of the pool
Of public opinion—dip of red-top spoon-fed floccule;
O protestor you are poet of the streets spouting political
Penillion—kerbside Hed Wynn, shepherd of chant & heckle;
Pavement minstrel of mounting complaint—hecatoncheiral;
Red Shelley of the shell-likes & the heart's lightning recital.



Peadar O'Donoghue

Advice for the Working-Class Young

Whatever you expect, expect nothing.
Do not expect kindness, friendship, tenderness,
forgiveness, second or even first chances,
forget mercy, don't expect goodness
fun, understanding, empathy,
don't expect fairness, equality, exacting standards
of inclusion, a cushioned fall, enough money,
or even enough food, do not expect a roof over your head,
let alone a good one that you can afford,
don't expect a good education, safety, security,
recognition or acknowledgement,
do not expect anyone to thank you
for getting out of their way,
do not expect a, 'Hello', in return,
do not expect the light of day, rest assured of
the darkest of nights, to avoid disappointment
(hatred, anger, bitterness, chips on your shoulder,
blisters on your feet, curses on the tip of your tongue,
hot shots and (un)cool delirium tremens)
simply expect and accept disappointment as your lot in life.
You're (not) welcome.
Falling in my Standing
And failing in it,
my place, down there,
down below, low, lower,
a kind of bring-me fetch-
me-carry-me, impaled wretch
pea-brained vetch
lift me up to the sun
that shines only

on the visage of the better man,
the better woman,
we are the bitter men,
the battered woman,
look at our egregious shoes,
hear that soft hush shuffle of
calloused hands and callous ways,
batter the bitter, get fitter,
belittle the little,
the whelks and weasels,
no master of peace on our easels,
painting towns red across
a barren land, cap in hand,
cut in throat, mist-eyed,
corbelled pallor, brick red prick
of un-exsanguinated valour,
oh, be vainglorious cap thruster doth
with all thy strength faith muster in your
bonfired vanity, slash tasty cuts
and slalom sluices to dribble
in the weak gravy of moribund sanity,
juice up the jukebox rabble, press
the button on the no nuke box,
yes, sir, no sir, three bags
of shite sir, where would
you like them,
back up your arse?

Moira Garland

Food Bank

the magpie lands
on the half-broken fence
still neatly-dressed

in black and white
I have seen her before
on the ground

below hedges
tethered by goosegrass
her mates tell her

those raspberries are for the taking
by those who know
informed by the kite when

he allows the mobbing crows
to get anywhere near him
so she hops or flies when she can

out of the shade
reaches out pecks out one raspberry
hops off

next week if she's lucky
and the raspberries are still there
she'll eat more

then the hedge-fund manager
will find blood-red
globes on his Diablo windscreen



Rob Walton

Brilliant Family Fun Tower of Bricks

The first brick to be removed
was a youth club in Retford.
Easy enough.

The second player then removed a Sure Start Centre in Stockton
set up to make sure youngsters got, well, a sure start.

Player One then pulled out a little library in Ludlow
that was only open two days a week
and only nine miles away from the next nearest library
which is a very short taxi ride.

Then a chancy brick right in the middle of things—
—this was a dodgy manoeuvre—a post office
in a small town in an unfashionable part of Warwickshire.

Next there was the deft removal of a twice-weekly market
in a Lincolnshire coastal town
which caused a bit of a wobble.

No-one expected Player One to take out the Preston pub
because Player One was forever extolling its virtues
and there was a photo of them behind the bar
helping at the pensioners' free lunch club.

When the refugees' garden group was pulled out
it all came crashing down but the screams and shouts
didn't morph into laughter as is usually the case with these games.

There was just a load of kids looking at some bricks
and wondering who the hell
was going to piece everything back together.



The Culture Matters Bread & Roses Poetry Award has established itself as an annual staple of poetic dissent and political witness. In this, the seventh Bread & Roses Poetry Award anthology, we are again treated to a pot pourri of political poetry. The poems gathered here form an anatomy of diminished British society splintered into polarities by the most politically corrupt and openly racist government in living memory, which has lurched from one senseless and pernicious slogan to another (*Go Home, Take Back Control, Stop the Boats* etc.) in a bid to mop up populist support.

Now that the Labour Party has so systematically filleted itself of all socialist—and arguably even social democratic—principles under the unscrupulous and authoritarian leadership of Keir Starmer, many on the left once again feel politically homeless, after the all-too-brief five year period when the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn was both authentically socialist and, accordingly, a proper Opposition. This anthology at least provides a paper haven for some of those voices who currently have no mainstream party to represent them. *The Fruits of Starmer's Labour* are sour indeed.

*When the democratic process is blocked by inequality, authoritarianism, deceit and a narrow ideological consensus, poetry becomes a refuge for expressions of dissident opinion. **The Fruits of Starmer's Labour** is full of eloquent ridicule, revulsion and rage at the knaves and fools responsible for the overlapping crises of our time. It's historically-informed, future-leaning, based on individual experience and rooted in collective struggle. And it's the strongest Bread and Roses poetry anthology yet!*

—Andy Croft, poet and publisher of Smokestack Books

