

National Poetry Competition resource by **Pascale Petit**

Pascale Petit, who was commended in the National Poetry Competition 2012 for her poem 'Harpy Eagle Father', also judged the 2017 competition with Andrew McMillan and Hannah Lowe. In this resource, Pascale reflects on two of her favourite past prize-winners, discussing what makes these poems work so well for her, and offers up some writing prompts you can use to launch into your own National Poetry Competition entry.

She says: "The poems I've chosen, 'The Opened Field' by Dom Bury, and 'Bernard and Cerinthe' by Linda France, juxtapose people with nature, and both interrogate our attitude to the vegetable kingdom. Both these poems could be read as eco-poetry, now that we are in the grip of climate crisis, and our planet, as well as ourselves, is in peril."



*Pascale Petit.
Photo: Brian
Fraser.*

Pascale Petit's eighth collection, *Tiger Girl* (Bloodaxe, 2020), was shortlisted for the 2020 Forward Prize for Best Collection, and a poem from the book won the 2020 Keats-Shelley Poetry Prize. Her previous collection, *Mama Amazonica* (Bloodaxe, 2017), won the RSL Ondaatje Prize 2018, was a Poetry Book Society Choice, and was also shortlisted for the Roehampton Poetry Prize 2018. She published six earlier collections, four of which were shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize.

Using this resource

The discussion points work equally well for individual contemplation or group discussion. If you are working with these poems in a class or group setting, you may wish to ask students / choose to work with a partner.

Feeling inspired? If you'd like to use these writing prompts to pen your own National Poetry Competition entry, the competition opens for submissions in the summer and closes on 31 October every year. You can find out the most up-to-date information on how to submit to the competition at poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

On 'The Opened Field' by Dom Bury



I was one of the judges when 'The Opened Field' won first prize in the 2017 National Poetry Competition. I have vivid recollections of coming across it among the piles of boxes, and of how it haunted me. It took a while to realise it was a sestina – I was so mesmerised by the ritualistic rhythm, the six boys in a field, enacting a series of chilling initiations. The field is far from passive, which intrigued me. It was their stage, and ultimately swallows one of them. Or does it? Even on a tenth rereading of the poem I find more layers. There is an un-naming of the natural world, and unlearning of the self. That the subjects are boys is significant, questioning masculinity's relationship to the "opened" field of the natural world. In my judge's comment I wrote that this was "a neutron star of a poem compressed inside the restraining machinery of a sestina". The poem doesn't say what it's about, it just goes through the six actions and lets us draw our own conclusions. It has its own mad song, a hymn of visionary eco-poetics.



Points to discuss

1. What do *you* think the poem is about? Is it easy to understand?
2. Would it work just as well if it wasn't a sestina? How does the form help?
3. Why does the author place six boys in the field, and not six girls or a mix?
4. What do you imagine surrounds this field? What era are we in?

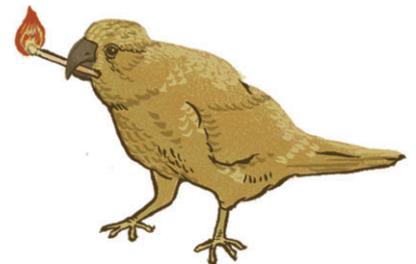
Writing prompts

1. Place yourself in a natural setting: a wood, a garden, a seashore, school playing field, etc. Who is with you? What do you have to do? Whatever you have to do is important to you. Give yourself and your companion(s) a series of tasks.
2. Then write about doing them, allotting one task per stanza. If you feel like it, try writing a sestina, but don't if that will hold you up. Look up the form guidelines here. Or you could try free verse, using any other constraint that might help. For instance, you might like to keep the stanzas regular, six, five or four lines in each. But keep to one main action per stanza.
3. The aim of this exercise is to not have to mention how you feel, how anyone feels, as the actions could reveal this, and if they don't, perhaps the reader will have their own thoughts about how your characters feel. The other aim is not to have to explain what the poem is about – the actions might reveal the theme.

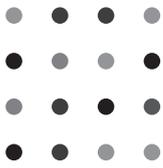
4. Include an object in each stanza, the objects are part of the tasks.

Look at how Dom Bury's poem has one or two objects in each stanza – a calf's tongue (multiplied by six), a fire, skin, a hose, snow, a grave, soil. The objects acquire ceremonial power, it's almost as if Bury has created a series of landscape art events and we, as readers, are his audience.

5. You could add an envoy at the end as there is in a sestina – an extra stanza where you use some of the words in your previous stanzas to play with. See what moving them around does. Are there any surprises?



National Poetry Competition artwork by Arna Miller. arnamiller.com



2

On 'Bernard and Cerinthe' by Linda France

This bewitching poem by Linda France won first prize in the 2013 National Poetry Competition. It immediately draws me in with its opening line, “If a flower is always a velvet curtain / onto some peepshow he never opens”. I’m invited into an intimate space to observe a man’s reaction to a flower, the Cerinthe major ‘Purpurascens’. The words “always” and “never” provide clues as to the nature of the main character, Bernard. I read the poem several times before Googling the plant Cerinthe, with its intense blue petals and silver green leaves. Linda France later offered a note on the inspiration of the poem, and her discovery of this flower, her feelings about the ‘otherness’ of plants, how they don’t run away from us as wild animals tend to. I love the playfulness of the language, of “the can-can. Can’t-can’t”, and the exquisite sensuousness of the atmosphere. We are in a greenhouse, where a man reacts to the beauty of nature. That we are in a greenhouse expands the lyric from an intimate setting to suggest a macro-view of the earth, the garden of Eden with its ‘greenhouse effect’.

Points to discuss

1. What do you make of Bernard? Do you empathise with him?
2. Why is the poem in couplets? Does this enhance the theme?
3. Why do you think the poet has introduced surreal elements, such as the velvet curtain, the cocos-demer, the can-can dancer, the seahorse? Do these add to the feeling of strangeness, or do they confuse you?
4. Why are there so many sense impressions – the “scent of terror, vanilla musk”, “the ruffle of knickerbockers”, the sound of rain?
5. What do you make of the last line, “soft against the steamed-up glass”? Is this a good way to end the scene? Why?

Writing prompts

1. Imagine a place where you would love to be, where you are accompanied by one or more plants. Now put someone important to you there. You are the invisible observer.
2. Here is a list of eight senses:

Visual

sight, brightness, clarity, colour and motion, pattern, form, depth of field, perspective, scale.

Auditory

hearing, sounds in the poem, sonic effects of the language: alliteration, assonance, half-rhymes.



Writing prompts *ctd*

Olfactory

smell, a powerful evoker of memories.

Gustatory

taste, food.

Tactile

touch, temperature, texture.

Organic

awareness of heartbeat, pulse, breathing, digestion, inner bodily sensations.

Kinaesthesia

awareness of muscle tension and movement, also gravity, mass and density.

Synaesthesia

a sense impression produced by another sense: that loud green, her prickly laugh.

3. Write a poem in couplets, using two senses in each couplet. Try to use senses you haven't already used to develop the poem in unexpected directions. Include some surprise images as Linda France did.
4. End the poem on an image. The image can also have a sound, smell, taste or a movement. It doesn't have to just be visual.

Enter the National Poetry Competition **2020**

Judges: Neil Astley, Jonathan Edwards & Karen McCarthy Woolf

Enter online at poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
Deadline for entries: **31 October 2020**

Ten prizes

First Prize: £5000

Second Prize: £2000

Third Prize: £1000

Seven Commendations: £200

Established in 1978, The Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition is one of the world's biggest and most prestigious poetry contests. Winners include both established and emerging poets, and for many the prize has proved an important career milestone. Win, and add your name to a roll-call that includes Carol Ann Duffy, Ruth Padel, Tony Harrison, Jo Shapcott, Colette Bryce, Philip Gross and Sinéad Morrissey.

Entry fees: £7 for your first poem; £4 for each subsequent poem in the same submission. Free second poem for Poetry Society members. Full details and rules at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

**FREE second
NPC poem for
Poetry Society
members**



Dom Bury

The Opened Field

Six boys, a calf's tongue each, one task –
to gulp each slick muscle down in turn,
to swallow each vein whole and not give
back a word, a sign, our mothers' names.
The scab stripped off, the ritual learned –
five boys step out across an empty field.

Five boys step out across an empty field
to find a fire already made, the task
to dock then brand a single lamb. We learnt
fast how to hold, then cut, then turn
each tail away, to print in them our names –
our ownership. We dock, we brand, give

iron to the skin until at last their legs give.
Four boys step out across an empty field,
each small child waiting for a name,
our own name to be called, the next task
ours to own, ours to slice into, to turn
each blade, to shear off skin until we learnt

the weight of it. One by one we learnt
the force our bodies hold, the subtle give
our own hands have, how not to turn
our gaze. Three boys stand in a frozen field –
each child stripped and hosed, the next task
not to read the wind but learn the names

we have for snow, each name
we have given to the world. To then unlearn
ourselves, the self, this is – the hardest task.
To have nothing left. No thing but heat to give.
Two boys step out across an empty field.
Still waiting for the call, waiting for our turn,

waiting to become, to dig, to turn
at last our hands into the soil then name
the weakest as an offering – the field
opened to a grave, my last chore not to learn
the ground but taste it closed. I don't give
back a word, surprise I am the task –

that what the land gives it must then learn
to turn back into soil. One child, a name its task
to steal. Five boys turn from an empty field.

*'The Opened Field' was the winner of the 2017
National Poetry Competition. © The author,
2020. More at poems.poetrysociety.org.uk*



Linda France

Bernard and Cerinthe

If a flower is always a velvet curtain
onto some peepshow he never opens,

it's a shock to find himself sheltering
from the storm in a greenhouse,

seduced by a leaf blushing blue
at the tips, begging to be stroked.

He's caught in the unfamiliar ruffle
of knickerbockers or petticoat, a scent

of terror, vanilla musk. If he were
not himself, he'd let his trembling lips

articulate the malleability of wax;
the bruise of bracts, petals, purple

shrimps; seeds plump as buttocks,
tucked out of harm's way, cocos-de-mer

washed up off Curieuse or Silhouette.
But being Bernard, he's dumbstruck,

a buffoon in front of a saloon honey
high-kicking the can-can. Can't-can't.

He attempts to cool himself, thinking
about sea horses, Hippocampus erectus,

listening to the rain refusing to stop,
soft against the steamed-up glass.

*'Bernard and Cerinthe' was the winner of the 2013
National Poetry Competition. © The author, 2020.
More at poems.poetrysociety.org.uk*