



## National Poetry Competition resource by **Ella Frears**

At the digital National Poetry Competition Awards ceremony in March 2020, one of the judges of the competition Maurice Riordan noted that although the most recent winning poems were written pre-COVID, they were able to transcend their original moment and be renewed with fresh meaning in the wake of future events. In this writing guide, Ella Frears looks at two poems that exhibit their own timelessness and offers prompts to help you write your own poems not tied to the here and now.

Ella writes, “The poems I’ve chosen by John Wedgwood Clarke and Sinéad Morrissey both explore the unknowable or inexpressible. Wedgwood Clarke uses the movement of a walk to structure his poem, Morrissey the strange interior world of a dream. Though both were prize winners over a decade ago I think they speak to aspects and feelings of the current climate. The claustrophobic domestic scene, the walk that could so easily be one’s government sanctioned exercise, the ever present darkness at the edge of things.”



*Ella Frears, photo: Etienne Gilfillan.*

### About Ella Frears

**Ella Frears** is a poet and artist based in London. Her debut collection *Shine, Darling* (Offord Road Books, 2020) was a Poetry Book Society recommendation and is shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Ella was commended in the National Poetry Competition (2018). Her poems about the St Ives Modernists are currently on show at Tate St Ives.

## 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 the questions to the whole group or choose to discuss in pairs.

**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](https://poetrysociety.org.uk/npc)

## On ‘Stubble’ by John Wedgwood Clarke

1

These were the lines that struck me first on reading John’s poem ‘Stubble’:

I keep looking back  
for cars down the lane, but it is only  
the streams gunning for stones

Sometimes it’s the precision of language in a poem that makes your heart trip and fall over a line break. I’m obsessed with the word “gunning” here. The eagerness, the violence. The tension that is built so beautifully before it, so that the sound of the river “gunning for stones” sets us on edge along with the speaker. This precision is carried through the poem. The “glass insulators [...] blue as Glacier Mints” which Wedgwood Clark holds against “the rush of sky”; the “static caravans”; the “hiss of propane”. Movement and stasis. The friction of the world rubbing up against itself. Everything feels ready to break or blow or burst. And yet it doesn’t.

What is unsaid – the thoughts of the speaker, the relationship between the ‘I’/‘us’ and the ‘you’ – is



woven into the surroundings. The walk creates a structure, allowing thoughts and memories to unfold with the landscape. The poem is formally and geographically cyclical – from indoors, to outdoors and back in again. As readers, we gather clues, feel the unease of the speaker and their unnamed companions who seem both worn out and hyperaware. The enjambed lines, slowed slightly by the punctuation, tumble down the dense pillar of text which is relentless and without stanza breaks. As we near the close of the poem things begin to slip: “Dusk. It will be soon. / It will never come.” We’re presented with impossible images, “a golden fish we never caught”, “an unplayable stave of notes”. We’re left with that one image which is simultaneously a sensation – “your stubble, a kiss from the darkness.” It’s an unstable poem written with a steady hand.

## Points to discuss

1. Who do you think the ‘you’ is and what is their relationship to the speaker?
2. How would the poem differ if the speaker remained indoors for the whole poem – would it work?
3. What feeling are you left with at the end? Loss? Love? Confusion? All of the above?
4. Why has the poet chosen “stubble” as the one detail to focus on? What does it evoke?
5. What is the significance of the word “ineffable” in the penultimate line?

## Writing prompts

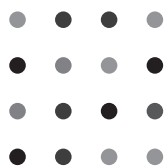
1. Think of someone you love (alive or not). Set a timer for five minutes. List as many small details as you can as though you are drawing them, e.g. small scar on left hand the shape of a forward slash, soft dark arm hair, slightly curly.

2. Go for a walk. If you can’t, think of a path or street you know well and take yourself down it in your mind. Take notes.
  - what can you see?
  - hear?
  - smell?
  - what are you thinking?
  - what is the sky doing?
  - what is the light like?
  - are you warm or cold?
3. Return to your notes about the person you love. Choose a few favourite details.
4. Write a poem about the person you love, using only images, sensations and noises from your walk. Refrain from telling us directly how you feel about them, what your relationship is. Saturate the landscape with these feelings.
5. If the poem feels like it needs something else, try adding your chosen details about that person.
6. Once you have a draft, think about the form:
  - should it be a block like Wedgwood Clarke’s poem?
  - an ethereal sliver that only has one or two words per line?
  - gently paced long-lined stanzas that break after each third or fourth line?

Keep changing the form until it feels wedded to the content of the poem. Title it using one of the details about the person.



*National Poetry Competition artwork by Arna Miller. [arnamiller.com](http://arnamiller.com)*



## On 'Through the Square Window' by Sinéad Morrissey

2

This poem is dark and deliciously strange. It begins “In my dream the dead have arrived / to wash the windows of my house.” Our expectations of what the dead might come for are subverted almost immediately by the seemingly benign “to wash the windows”. As with ‘Stubble’ nature is used to create an atmosphere of foreboding. The clouds “have the gluttoned look of clouds over water”. The word “gluttoned” is wonderful here – everything is too big, too heavy, too much. Morrissey uses a slightly detached tone, as though reporting on the dream as it happens, “the heads of the dead are huge”, everything is noted with authority and yet without agency. The form helps to regulate the pace, giving even the most surreal parts a deadpan quality.

The image of the sleeping son against the backdrop of the dead “sluicing and battering and parting back” the glass, is all the more unsettling because he is “inured” to it rather than afraid. It is not his stillness in conflict with the movement of the dead but the speaker’s inability to move against what is happening, she can only observe.

Everything is centred around the window/s, the boundary between the inner, domestic world and the outdoors with its clouds that “stare in”. At first we feel the interior is being threatened or breached, but as the poem progresses the room feels claustrophobic: “a density”, “I find it difficult to breathe in”.

With the dead suddenly gone and the horizon visible we expect there to be some resolution, or release, but the poem masterfully twists again. “I wake, flat on my back with a cork in my mouth.” We are left unsure if the speaker is really awake – the reality outside of the dream equally symbolic and just as, if not more, alarming.

### Points to discuss

1. What do the dead want?
2. What is the speaker afraid of?
3. The poem begins by foregrounding the events as being within a dream. How would the poem change without this explanation? Would it work?
4. What is the significance of the window?
5. What do you make of the ending? What has happened?

### Writing prompts

1. Keep a dream diary, if possible for a week or more, if not possible, try and remember a dream, maybe a recurring dream or nightmare.
2. Gather as many images, and sensations from the dream/s. Make a list of the weirdest ones.
3. Think of something that is a boundary between places or states – a door, a window, the surface of a lake, the earth’s atmosphere – anything! Centre your poem around this.
4. Decide whether you will tell the reader that it is a dream or not.
5. What are you worried about? Make a list.
6. Write a poem exploring a worry with images from your dreams. Use the boundary e.g. door or lake to separate the speaker slightly.
7. Think about the line breaks. Do you want the reader to be pulled across enjambments breathlessly, or walked through end-stopped lines with an eerie calm?



## John Wedgwood Clarke Stubble

None of us can be with you as you prepare.  
You send us out for a walk. It's been  
raining for hours. I keep looking back  
for cars down the lane, but it is only  
the streams gunning for stones  
along the edge of the loch. Overhead  
the glass insulators on power lines  
measure the rush of the sky with their  
frozen rings of mineral stillness, blue  
as Glacier Mints. The day walks all over us,  
but still we listen, still we arrive at  
the small point, the static caravans, windows  
dark as teapots, smoky fingers, old  
photographs by an eddy of gold baubles  
spun under a carriage clock. The burn  
brims with the tide, held up, full  
and coiling in the lea of the point,  
the mountains and clouds in its mouth.  
Fresh water floats; you can see it  
mixing, the skeins and clouds of translucence,  
smoke from an icy fire. You were always  
'emptying the waters' down at the shop  
to keep us afloat, sliding brimful trays  
of condensation from under the fridges,  
balancing planes of water before  
pouring them into a galvanised bucket.  
The lights of the nuclear submarine shed,  
on the other side of the loch, flicker  
through a squall. Dusk. It will be soon.  
It will never come. The radar, among birches  
beside the lane, spins silkily, spins its  
disappearing web to the hiss of propane  
from a mildewed cylinder. Like scales  
from a golden fish we never caught, or  
an unplayable stave of notes, birch leaves  
shine in the green-black gloom, ineffable  
as your stubble, a kiss from the darkness.

*'Stubble' by John Wedgwood  
Clarke was commended in  
the 2006 National Poetry  
Competition. © The author,  
2020. More at  
[poems.poetrysociety.org.uk](https://poems.poetrysociety.org.uk)*



## Sinéad Morrissey

### Through the Square Window

In my dream the dead have arrived  
to wash the windows of my house.  
There are no blinds to shut them out with.

The clouds above the Lough are stacked  
like the clouds are stacked above Delft.  
They have the gluttonous look of clouds over water.

The heads of the dead are huge. I wonder  
if it's my son they're after, his  
effortless breath, his ribbon of years –

but he sleeps on unregarded in his cot,  
inured, it would seem, quite naturally  
to the sluicing and battering and parting back of glass

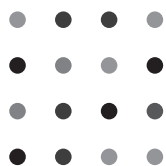
that delivers this shining exterior.  
One blue boy holds a rag in his teeth  
between panes like a conjuror.

And then, as suddenly as they came, they go.  
And there is a horizon  
from which only the clouds stare in,

the massed canopies of Hazelbank,  
the severed tip of the Strangford Peninsula,  
and a density in the room I find it difficult to breathe in

until I wake, flat on my back with a cork  
in my mouth, stopper-bottled, in fact,  
like a herbalist's cure for dropsy.

*'Through the Square Window' by Sinéad Morrissey was the winner of the 2007 National Poetry Competition.  
© The author, 2020. More at [poems.poetrysociety.org.uk](https://poems.poetrysociety.org.uk)*



## Enter the National Poetry Competition **2020**

Judges: Neil Astley, Jonathan Edwards & Karen McCarthy Woolf

Enter online at [poetrysociety.org.uk/npc](https://poetrysociety.org.uk/npc)  
Deadline for entries: 31 October 2020

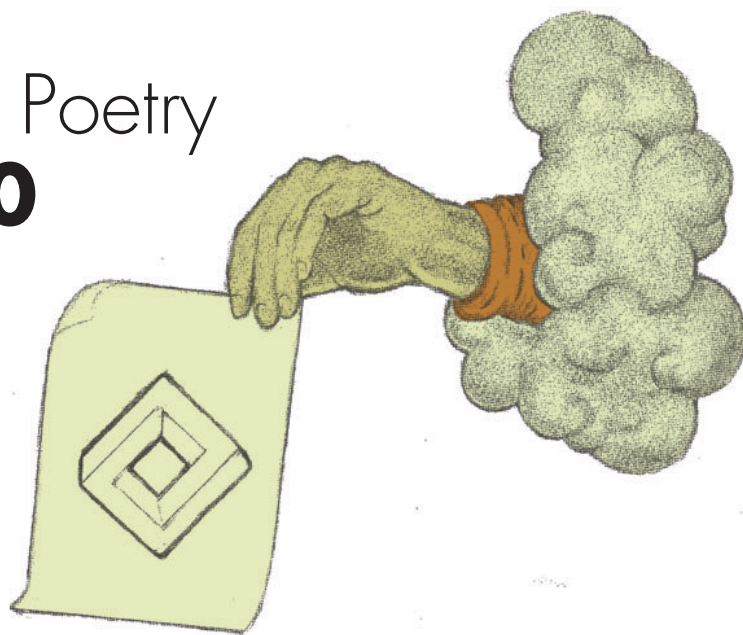
### Ten prizes

**First Prize: £5000**

**Second Prize: £2000**

**Third Prize: £1000**

**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](https://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc)**

*National Poetry Competition artwork by Arna Miller.  
[arnamiller.com](https://arnamiller.com)*

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