

(This is a simplified presentation of Parallel Universe for browsers that are unable to render the [poems as a slideshow](#)).

The winning ten poems from a science poetry competition organised by the Radcliffe Science Library and Kellogg College Creative Writing Centre are currently displayed in the Museum. They can also be read and listened to below.

Sum of Our Parts

by Marianne Burton

Whenever I see a pasta picture
collaged by a primary child

I see my body, contrived
from spirals and curls.

Now look, on the school-run
home, how pieces break away:

here a dog noses one aside,
here a piece breaks under a shoe.

[Sum of Our Parts \(Marianne Burton\)](#)

Index Chemicus

by Charles Whalley

they took their burden in a time
that smelled of drying ink and with
uncurving back they raised the light
that showed all colour through a crack
and traced the lines of orbic weight
and motion that described the world.
the spines are found senescent now
sequestered braced by shelves and seem
forlorn kyphotic Atlases;
but kept in alphabetic rows
the Giants still support the rise
of future minds to further sight.

[Index Chemicus \(Charles Whalley\)](#)

Stained Glass

by Rosemary Appleton

A blood pin-prick splayed between glass
He leans towards it, breath licked in tight

Mr Hutton drones on
The latent smell of gas from boys and Bunsens

9A muttering
A disco, cigarettes, crisps

He sinks his eye into the cradling cup of the lens
Line of sight straitened to these crimson whorls
An enigma, code, map.

Lucas next to him chews and shuffles
He only likes Science with burning tapers and sudden bangs

Peaceful as snowflakes
The blood sits, a silent stain

At home, his mum tries to cheat the meter
Smooths her slip
Uncle Ted lets the back door click shut.

The blood speckles and flowers
Like a crime scene in miniature
He pictures his outline chalked on the ground
Like on TV
A sketch of a boy, mid-flight.

[Stained Glass \(Rosemary Appleton\)](#)

Mapping

by Sarah Darby

Everywhere he goes he sees the heart

Reflections of winter trees in water,
winds washing a pulse through branches.

The map of this well-thumbed city,
suburbs and centre swapping daily tides.

A sculpture with the simple label 'boat'
whose hollow curves make his chest ache.

Everywhere he goes he sees the heart.

He takes the measure of the dark,
trusts the gloved blade to guide his fingers home.

A heart swollen with living spills over
his two cupped hands to rest.

The bones of a wreck worn thin
enough to float, sigh quiet from their bed.

Everywhere he goes he sees the heart.

[Mapping \(Sarah Darby\)](#)

North

by Ciorsdan Glass

I knew it would be a hard place but I arrived on the 17th of July
and from my hotel window I could see a British flag not just on every corner
but mid street, one attached to every lamppost.
And even though I was born in London and speak Queen's English
they felt inexplicably alien, not my flags, just threatening
and I could understand suddenly what dogs must feel when they pass an object
where another has marked itself - the desire to counterbalance it.
There was no wild Camden, no big wheel, no great river here
just a small town with two hills with a church perched on each -
one, I was told, Protestant and the other one Catholic.

There was time to kill and I tried to swim but I needed a cap and the pool was packed
so decided on a walk but braced myself for the things I knew I'd be uncomfortable with
and sure enough, only meters away I found barracks or prisons - I couldn't tell which -
but I kept on walking, and my family are Catholic, so that, in the end, was the hill I picked
and at the top, I felt slightly calmer among friendly looking angels and reading about St
Patrick,
the fawn he was said to have rescued, and its mother which followed on behind it,
and I called my own mother on the way down who was excited and sounded enthusiastic
but the thought of joining the main road again just made me feel sceptical, homesick, anxious
"These towns are just dumps with their prisons and their barracks -
people who wouldn't like my background, people who wouldn't like my accent..."

But just at that moment I was interrupted, by the word "observatory" and an arrow that
pointed
up to a third hill I'd missed till that moment, but birds and rabbits seemed to congregate on it
-
playing in the trees, playing in grasses, among thousands of such appropriate tiny star shaped
flowers
that I imagined some green fingered astronomer scattering their seeds on purpose,
and somewhere near the top I found some sort of residence
with a bungalow at the back full of international students
and beyond their computer room, two modest metal huts
bouncing sunlight back to space and containing two large telescopes,
both looking out, both looking up at the immense azure sky and with neither one claiming it,
and found myself thinking yes, perhaps deer lived here once, perhaps even now, somewhere
near these scientists.

[North \(Ciorsdan Glass\)](#)

Cocktail

by Sarah James

Red pill or blue pill;
I watch her hand hover,
hesitate over colours and shapes,
as if this were her button box.

When people talk about cocktails of drugs,
it gives them a light-hearted party feel.
Even if they're deadly, there's an air of drama.
Not weary routine.

Behind the repetition of trying out new treatments,
juggling different doses, I imagine
my mother's pharmacist.
And the chemist after chemist behind him.

The weighing, the recording, the careful mixing:
each test tube stirred or shaken.
Recording again, more weighing and waiting
- as we wait with her.

Hovering over the day by day tablet box
bought to help her remember,
we can only watch. And record in our memories
the sound of each miraculous breath.

[Cocktail \(Sarah James\)](#)

A Long Life Leg

by Lucy Rutter

Shipwreck your tankard fragments,
button and buckle your bridal boss,
amass your loving
pewter spoons and finger rings.
A piano's worth of burnishing.
Cast off from the bar and
kiss your early horseshoes.
Glaze and bells and trumpets.
Horns will hie you home.
Copper cider arms your ale. Trees
will shield you. Presents of pendants
and tokens and posies padlock you.
Pipe your knife, mend the rims of jars
then find your fittings for the square ship ditties.

[A Long Life Leg \(Lucy Rutter\)](#)

The Naming of Stars

by Patrick Toland

Once it was easy; launch a hero
out of history, freeze him there as sure
as any gaze of Medusa.
Scoop a goddess from her shell, place
the pearl in a glade
of dark irradiance.

Then came emperors, demi-cousins,
the haulage of a bear, a hunter's
broken shoulder.
And that's the fix; those other victors damp
ambition, the reach
of our innumerable.

So, we name a star by the shimmer of
a school-girl and her outlawed
sequined bag,
a galaxy becomes the coal that slips a fire
and chars the paisley
cometing the rug.

Tonight, I christen planets by the words
McKinley calls himself when
the heating oil is running low,
a black hole, the onyx knuckle of a wasp
as it gawps between the hedgerow,
hits the breath

as hard as two mice crushed
within a whirlpool.
As hard as two midges
chased across the stoop universe
by the low-winged
hunger of a swallow.

[The Naming of Stars \(Patrick Toland\)](#)

Hurry Back

by John White

'Your HBs are low' the nurse said, as if you needed
extra pencil-lead, not stronger blood,

announced that way we love to as we intimate in code
some message cheaply, or bypass the unsaid:

foreign stuff - '*thrombosis*' - dropped like pounding brass
among our greens and proteins, from parents talking shop,

or the graphic '*haemoglobin*' (thorn tree under microscope)
which played a dirge in unversed ears, like bluegrass.

'*Globin*' drew a shush, a van Leeuwenhoek mystery
revealed in tears of dew and viscous, planetary, wild.

But '*Haemo*' shot an iron bolt as 'cell change' turned *you* cold
and prompts, my love, this text from me, 'You're clear, *HB, HB, HB.*'

[Hurry Back \(John White\)](#)

Galton's Sight

by Roy Woolley

He's spent a week watching cloud-shapes
unfold on the hill-side in order to estimate
their density, the composition of future rain,
the refractive index of wet skin after a downpour.
He measures everything: the separate shades of green
in the serving dish, the average weight of clocks
in the houses he visits, the changes in his packed body
as it moves through the seasons, words cooling

in mirrors like ferns in ice-water.
He wants the pattern behind these events
to become clearer with repetition
like the nature of God released by a mantra.
And he's distilled language to its bare and expressive bones
and layers each page with diagrams in rows
to track the features these histories yield
with the new ways of seeing he's clarified and named.

He folds a map of the sky into his head
and works out the twists and spills
of water going backwards in a cyclone.
The lineages intersecting in his skull
converge to a golden child he'll describe late in life
when he writes the novel his niece will burn.
He hears colours unlocked by the word,
tastes the shape each sense can make.

His time in Africa is the base note that tells of beginnings.
The collapsed darkness makes each fingerprint burn bright
as a name, as clear as the star orchestrating the weather,
this other 'great bell ringing out light'.

[Galton's Sight \(Roy Woolley\)](#)