

# Same Boat

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**Poems on poverty  
and lockdown**



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Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally. Further information can be found at [www.church-poverty.org.uk](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk).

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Food Power is a four-year programme led by Sustain and Church Action on Poverty. It aims to strengthen the ability of local communities to reduce food poverty, through solutions developed in partnership and with the support of peers from across the UK. Our goal is to transform the way that people experiencing food poverty access support so they can create long-term, sustainable lives that are free from hunger. Further information can be found at [www.sustainweb.org/foodpower](http://www.sustainweb.org/foodpower)

The process of selecting poems for this book was carried out by a panel of editors made up of people with lived experience of poverty, activists, researchers and poets: Barbara Adlerova, Ben Pearson, Jayne Gosnall, Matt Sowerby and Penny Walters.

Published by Church Action on Poverty in September 2020.

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ISBN 978-1-9999669-6-6

Church Action on Poverty, 28 Sandpiper Court, Water's Edge Business Park, Modwen Road, Salford M5 3EZ

This publication is available to download at [www.church-poverty.org.uk/sameboat](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/sameboat)

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## Foreword

From the beginning of lockdown until September 2020, I worked as the Poet in Digital Residence at Church Action on Poverty. My hope was to find out how to make poetry useful both to people living in poverty and to the movement fighting to end it.

For the first 13 weeks I facilitated online workshops on poetry and activism. In these sessions we covered everything from the history of protest poetry to its power in supporting wellbeing and building communities. These workshops felt very relevant to the times in which they happened. In a workshop on the power of hope, we discussed the words of civil rights leader John Lewis: "I learned that day that in changing the world there is room for both outrage and anger and optimism and love." Months later a new generation had taken to the streets to protest racism, and John Lewis was dead.

Between workshops I hosted a series of virtual open mics where participants would take turns sharing their poetry, visual art, music or dance. Each brave act of honest expression was met with enthusiastic praise from the other contributors. Each time, it was inspiring to see how a group of strangers on a Zoom call would transform into a community within the space of an hour.

I also participated in Church Action on Poverty's nationwide discussion series 'Gathering on the Margins', where I had the privilege of meeting and learning from both anti-poverty activists and experts with lived experience. I was later able to collaborate with some of these people to create new work exploring poverty in the UK.

Emerging from lockdown, I helped facilitate a series of workshops designed by the PhD researcher Barbara Adlerova on how the UK might 'build back better' after lockdown. The findings of these sessions were submitted to the House of Lords COVID-19 committee's inquiry into 'Life after COVID.'

Finally, I was asked to put together this book, which I did with the help of a wonderful editing panel. I'd like to thank the people at Church Action on Poverty for the entire experience of the residency. The road to ending poverty is long and difficult but it is made shorter and easier by the individuals within this organisation. I look forward to seeing where the movement takes us all next.

*Matt Sowerby, Church Action on Poverty Poet in Digital Residence*

## Introduction

There are many storytellers in politics: politicians, commentators, journalists and – increasingly with social media – us. But it seems that most of the time when stories are told about poverty in the UK, they always follow one of two narratives with little variation.

The first of these narratives is that of the ‘undeserving poor,’ a.k.a. the ‘benefits scrounger’ or ‘fake homeless’. In this story – told on repeat on programmes like *Benefits Street*, *On Benefits and Proud*, and *Benefits: Too Fat To Work* – a work-shy character will exploit or con the public or the benefits system, and spend their earnings on massive TVs and flashy holidays. The second narrative is that of the ‘deserving poor’, found in the films of Ken Loach, the novels of Charles Dickens and the adverts of several leading anti-poverty charities. These narratives position those in poverty as victims of an unequal, apathetic society by depicting them as morally angelic and entirely helpless.

Although seemingly opposites, both narratives fail to recognise that poverty is a crime against humanity, regardless of how ‘deserving’ or otherwise society might see those in poverty to be. Both narratives are also simplifications. When categorised as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’, those in poverty are denied the complexities, nuances and contradictions that all humans have. Depicting those in poverty as absolutely helpless, as the ‘deserving poor’ narrative does, may convince a politician to change their policies, or a member of the public to donate to their local food bank. However, it may also stop a person living in poverty from recognising the power they have to create change, both in the movement to end poverty nationally and in their own lives. Although the ‘deserving poor’ narrative is often used by the allies of those in poverty, it is therefore arguably even more harmful than the narrative of the ‘undeserving poor.’

During lockdown we reached out to those with lived experience of poverty, as well as anti-poverty activists and allies, and invited them to share with us their experiences of poverty or of lockdown in the form of poetry. The product of this exercise is the book you are reading. The voices pressed between these pages demonstrate such diverse experiences that it is difficult to understand how binary narratives around poverty have been up until this point. While the term ‘poverty’ is often understood as a financial problem (describing any household with less than 60% of contemporary median income according to

the Joseph Rowntree Foundation), these poems suggest that the word is more of a blanket term for numerous different 'poverties.' These include social poverty, poverty of choice, psychological poverty, poverty of autonomy, digital poverty, poverty of access and poverty of opportunity among others.

The book also takes a closer look at some of the people behind the statistics. Rejecting the myth that those in poverty are helpless, several poets choose to explore the power that their experiences have given them. 'i have a voice' is the assertive refrain of Penny Walters' poem of the same name. The use of the lower case 'i' is itself a powerful metaphor for the state of having been "abused and berated downcast / shunned" from which she, regardless, speaks out against poverty. Earl Charlton, in his '100 days', records how "being homeless before and living in social isolation, / gave me the knowledge and sense to beat this complicated situation," reframing his relationship to poverty from 'victim' to 'expert'.

In direct contrast to the inescapable bleakness associated with poverty, many poets choose to portray moments of joy, hope or humour. In 'Luton man charged after woman threatened with a knife in Bedford,' Sarah Murray juxtaposes news headlines about the area she grew up in (an area with high levels of poverty) with moments of beauty. She observes that "there are birds here. They sing" and how "the sun's rays fall in patterns through the trees". The poem is a reminder that all the letters in 'poetry' can be found in 'poverty' as well. Jayne Gosnell's 'Utopeea' begins humorously with the image of the poet urinating in her garden, then opens into a deeply moving ode to its ecology, and to the resilience of the 'recovering family' who care for it; "resurgent spring growth in every season". Both poets choose to focus on the pockets of utopia found in poverty that rarely make it into newspaper articles or researcher's case studies. Poetry creates a space for these moments, and there is something universal about them that allows the reader to better understand the people in poverty beyond their struggles.

Some poets find these pockets of utopia in their communities. Matt Sowerby's found poem 'From Signs', is entirely composed of quotations from signs put up in shop windows at the beginning of lockdown, which together say something about the increased sense of community in the area. Another found poem, Yo Tozer Loft's 'Keeping in Tune' weaves WhatsApp messages into the story of a newly-formed

guitar group which evolved into a community after going online during lockdown.

For many in poverty, poetry is not merely an intellectual interest but a tool for coping with psychological strain. Several poets reflect on the effects of poverty on wellbeing. Ben Pearson's 'Yellow Sticker' pinpoints the stigma around poverty with delicate precision. Melanie Roger's 'My Mask' finds relevance to mental health in the face coverings that coronavirus has made part of our daily reality. Kate Srichandra's 'At What Cost?' confronts the guilt of accessing private health care "as my previous classmates clamber and clasp at mirage-like straws in the form of waiting lists", highlighting inequalities in the UK's mental health support.

Some of the poets in this book are very well established. For others, this is their debut publication or even their first attempt at writing a poem. All find the perfect form or genre to reflect the issues they explore, enriching the book with elegy (Andrea Walker), persona poetry (Brody Salmon), blackout poetry (Matt Sowerby), flash fiction (Ellis Howard), prose poetry (Kate Srichandra) and found poetry (Yo Tozer Loft and Matt Sowerby), among other kinds.

The book is also a reminder of the political power of poetry. In activism especially, poetry is everywhere – spreading through Twitter, chalked on the walls, howled through megaphones and chanted by thousands. With chillingly clear-sighted outrage, Sarah Grant directly addresses those in power in her polemic 'End Hunger' that "your defence is a parody / but no longer a comedy". In his poem 'Adrift', Chris Reeves, with both musicality and rage, responds directly to the book's title; "we're all in the same boat, they say / but there are no ports round here". Simply reading these poems is arguably political, a radical act of empathy in an increasingly apathetic culture.

At the time of writing, many in the UK are looking to 'Build Back Better'. We would argue that these poems, and the people who wrote them, could be the building blocks toward a more equal future. As Liz Delafield puts it in 'Nobody Saw it Coming', "And when we emerge once again / instead of going back to normal / may we go ahead, remembering / what we missed, and what we didn't." This is a book of creative and personal accounts from experts in the field of poverty – experts by education, by engagement and by first-hand experience.

## How poverty has changed during lockdown

This certainly isn't a book about facts and figures but it is perhaps worth reflecting on how poverty in the UK has changed during lockdown. A recent survey by the Child Action Poverty Group and the Church of England reports eight in ten poorer families feel worse off since lockdown. Whilst many people have been impacted by the pandemic, it's those who were already struggling that have been hit the hardest. Those on minimum wage who scraped by, their furlough no longer covering all the bills. Those living in poor quality housing in densely populated areas having some of the highest cases of COVID-19 deaths. Those expected to home-educate multiple children in highrises or terraces – difficult enough as it is, but with 12% of 12–17-year-olds not having access to the internet by a computer or tablet at home, even more challenging. Those who relied on free school meals to feed their children, let down by a system that took no consideration of how this might work for those eligible, with schools left out of pocket due to the chaos and families eligible not being able to take advantage of the voucher scheme. Those criminalised for breaking lockdown rules, without taking consideration of how much more challenging it is to lock down in a two-bed flat than a middle-class home with a garden. The elderly or vulnerable who relied on food parcels which were inadequate, unsuitable or lacked basic nutrients. The homeless, disabled, or those with mental health conditions who relied on vital services that had to close. The list could go on but the fact is lockdown has only amplified the inequality that was largely present prior to COVID-19.

And as we try to 'build back better' we have schemes like 'Eat Out to Help Out' for those privileged enough to have some disposable income, whilst many still go hungry. We hear of local councils wanting to hand out fines to people sleeping in doorways during the deepest recession since records began. We hear of migrants being used as scapegoats to distract people from government failures. We see police brutality against BAME and working-class populations. We can't further criminalise, point blame or stigmatise the most vulnerable without tackling the root causes. We need a system that ensures people have an adequate income to begin with, a system that gives equal opportunity regardless of one's background, ethnicity, race, gender or sexuality, rather than one that prioritises those in positions of power, one that values profits over people. We saw an increase in the amount that could be claimed through Universal Credit during

COVID-19; sadly this was because those more privileged people who had lost middle-class jobs said it wasn't enough to live on, not because those who've had to rely on it for years and have repeated time and time again that it wasn't sufficient were listened to.

We did however see compassion and resilience in communities across the country. This is something we should build on but not take for granted – taking people out of retirement, relying on volunteers and people donating to food banks isn't the answer, neither is it sustainable or fair. The government needs to step up and show real compassion, in their welfare, housing and education policies, investing and listening to those with lived experience to understand the reality of what it's really like living at the grassroots, designing policies with them to ensure we don't fail generations to come. That means paying key workers a decent living wage, it means stopping evictions and capping rent, it means investing in schools and youth provision, it means stopping school exclusions and welfare sanctions, it means food banks not becoming institutionalised and embedded within a welfare state, it means people having enough money in their pockets to have agency to make their own choices.

We must not accept COVID-19 as an excuse for further injustice, together we must build a movement that challenges those in positions of power and moves us towards a society free from poverty.

*The editing panel: Barbara Adlerova, Ben Pearson, Jayne Gosnall, Matt Sowerby and Penny Walters*

## **i have a voice**

Penny Walters

i am hidden small and dainty  
issues with health and motivation  
my world is crumbling around me  
my pain is hidden from all to see

i have a voice

abused and berated downcast  
shunned by government and society  
unloved and forgotten

i have a voice

i use my voice  
loud and clear  
shout and scream  
for all to hear  
more articulate  
more knowledge  
and more motivation

i am here to help to use my voice  
to speak up for those who can't  
who are hidden like me  
who feel that there is no hope  
i have a voice

---

*Through my life I've had many downs as well as some ups. Having the support that people give me has helped me tremendously. Through coaching and support you can achieve most things in life, like writing poems. Having support means a great deal to people that don't believe in themselves.*

# Blackout Poem

Ben Pearson and Matt Sowerby



10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

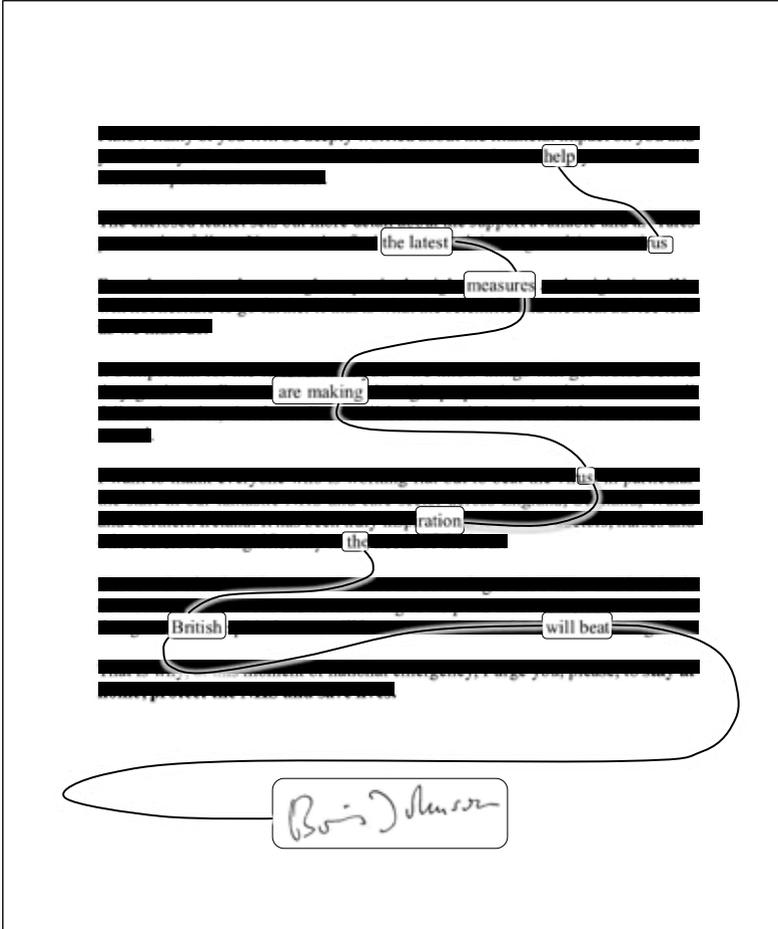
we are

short

cut

food

## Poems on poverty and lockdown



At the very beginning of lockdown, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson wrote to 30 million households and promised "the government will do whatever it takes to help you make ends meet and put food on the table." In this they failed. As those 30 million letters slipped through 30 million letterboxes, they marked the beginning of 66.6 million different lockdown experiences. This blackout poem uses the words from this letter to illustrate some of those experiences.

## The Price of Conformity

Jayne Gosnall

School shoes. Cost big. Growing feet  
Struggle. Worry. Missed heartbeats  
Wish that those who make the rules  
Remember *our* kids go to school.

White shirts. Black skirts. Black trousers  
Black socks. Black shoes. No trainers.  
All kids hate them, fight against 'em  
No colour, stripes or fancy laces

Special school ties snag and fray.  
Blazers shine more every day.  
Mates might mock a hand-me-down  
so got to buy new, scour the town.

Boy says all his mates have Vans  
forgets they also have helpful Nans.  
Girl says Kickers fine for her  
I'm wishing that their Dad would care

Benefits not fit for purpose.  
Constant fear. State couldn't care less  
When they're laughed at 'cause of me  
of course I feel guilty.

Boy comes home after PE  
says "My shoes got nicked!" expecting me  
to solve the problem, like they're free.  
They're our food budget for the week.

I cry so hard can barely speak

---

*Every time I think of my sisters and brothers struggling to raise their children in poverty, I remember crying over my son's stolen school shoes.*

## **Yellow Sticker**

Ben Pearson

You label me.  
Late night  
hungry  
I search aisles  
for the battered  
bruised, left behind.  
Trolleys overflowing  
they look at me.  
Battered, bruised  
left behind  
they label me.

---

*'Yellow Sticker' was written after listening to people's stories of shopping late at night for reduced food in the supermarket and the stigma they felt from others. It touches upon the mental strain involved in living on a tight budget, the physical impact of hunger and the overindulgence of those more privileged.*

## **Did You Eat Your Breakfast?**

Sarah Grant

Did you eat your breakfast  
have you had your toast  
jam and butter melted  
just when you get your post  
a cup of tea  
a bowl of porridge  
here to provide you  
the best meal of the day  
no one and nothing  
to get in your way  
How was lunch  
or did you have  
an early brunch  
beans on toast  
leftover roast  
a selection of sandwiches  
to share with your host  
an essential to guide you  
through the rest of your day  
until it is time to sit and pray  
Come for afternoon tea  
cakes for you and me  
little cream slices  
triangle squares  
pretty plates with  
matching saucers  
triple stands overflowing  
our bellies ever knowing  
a ready supply  
I do not lie  
Let's dress for dinner  
make an effort  
sausage and mash  
always a winner  
gravy and peas  
custard and cheese

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

cakes of queens  
with strawberry hats  
wearing posh dresses  
high heels with our besties  
Just along down the road  
at number two  
there's a family there  
a bit like you

the day has been busy  
the moment too long  
unfortunately there's  
no treats to come along  
they've worked really hard  
sung all of the rhyme  
but there's no food  
for this teatime  
the cupboards are empty  
the fridge is all bare  
where is the food  
that should be there  
We have to take note  
we have to take action  
no one to live  
with this dissatisfaction  
we fed ourselves  
but not the few  
unable to buy food  
like me and you  
but they are me and you  
at number two  
they're our neighbours  
our friends  
let's make amends  
End Hunger now  
to bring food to the table  
of someone less able  
this story is  
not just a fable.

## Same Boat

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*I literally know the head space of someone hoping they'll get a food bank voucher so they'll eat next week, trying to cram cakes in your bag, trying not to look greedy, and trying to share with everyone around you at the same time, because you look round the room and everyone is hungry, not just for food but for life and some love, a little love goes a long way.*

## **Nobody Saw It Coming**

Liz Delafield

It changed everything.  
All those things that seemed important yesterday  
Ofsted, SATS, spreadsheets of data, observations  
suddenly was not.  
We began to realise what was.  
People  
keeping safe  
being happy  
little things like soap.  
May we always remember  
how it felt  
when the unimportant important things came crashing down.  
Yet with them important important things  
like a child's hand held in safety  
laughter of a game played together with friends  
a trip to the zoo  
lining up for school dinners  
story time and reading books (in real life, not online)  
walking with you and helping you grow  
saying goodbye with hugs and handshakes.  
And when we emerge once again  
instead of going back to normal  
may we go ahead, remembering  
what we missed, and what we didn't.

---

*The last week of school before lockdown was an extraordinary experience. We had all been stressing about an impending inspection, a visit from a phonics adviser and getting the kids through assessments. Then, COVID19 happened. Guidelines were changing every day. Parents were worried. We were trying to look cheerful for the children's sake. Saying goodbye on that Friday was incredibly emotional. The next week, I attended a Church Action on Poverty poetry workshop. We were given the prompt, 'Nobody saw it coming, it changed everything.' I used it as a chance to express what I felt about what had just happened.*

## **From Signs**

Matt Sowerby

To all our dear clients – after much consideration and sleepless nights – TEMPORARILY CLOSED – we hope this won't be permanent but it's a scary time and we are a small family business – but ultimately lives are at risk – the church remains open and invites you to come in for private prayer –

We have currently sold out of – 1. thermometers – 2. antibacterial hand gel – 3. Calpol (under 6rs) – for online tuition please call – our NHS and care workers are risking their health for us – no matter how much we try and keep up with the sanitation guidelines – DELIVERY AVAILABLE TO THOSE WHO NEED IT –

individuals are looking after their neighbours on every street – IF YOU ARE NOT WORKING & NOT BEING PAID, RING ME & WE WILL MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GO WITHOUT –

flowers will still be available to buy for funerals –

putting together a box for residents to borrow books – cars and local volunteer drivers available for medical appointments, hospital visiting, any distance – the town's coronavirus mutual aid group has set itself a tremendous task and deserves support from all who can provide it – KEEP SMILING –

we will see this through and build ourselves and each other up again at the other side. – we thank you for all for your loyalty, and amazing support – there will be an end to this crisis – we look forward to welcoming you all back – stay safe xx

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

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*When the shops in my hometown closed their doors at the beginning of lockdown (some for the last time), most put messages to their customers in their windows. This poem consists entirely of quotes from these signs, together reflecting the resilience of my community. It was published online as part of the 'Write Where You Are Now' project by Carol Ann Duffy and the Manchester Writing School, which documented poets' responses to lockdown. It was also published in print in a book called 'Through The Locking Glass' (Inspired By Lakeland), alongside work by other Cumbrian artists to raise funds for the NHS and Cumbrian grassroots arts.*

## Last Night

Emily Parsler

Last night I learned new pain,  
of being empty,  
of being without  
you.

Waves pulling out  
of my body,  
stomach shaking  
legs folded  
hands pressed  
over mouth.

The sounds I should have been making,  
the screams,  
forced inwards instead  
into a sick and ugly sight  
so as not to wake anyone.

A guttural quietness.  
I learned  
the paralysis  
of not having you around.

---

*For me, the poem is describing the overwhelming feeling of lying in bed at night and being unable to think about anything else but the fact that you are separated from someone you really love. I think we can all agree that lockdown has been incredibly lonely, a feeling that can be all-consuming at times. Lockdown has taught me how much I need the people I love; hopefully the poem conveys this.*

## **Quarantine**

Rachael Ensoll

These hours, days  
turn into weeks.  
Sing, shout, swear inside,  
laugh and repeat.  
The day one tickle is a  
week 3 eye twitch.  
Giggle at a year ago me  
in the streets.  
Unquarantined.  
Unaware of this time limited feat,  
featuring passers by brushing elbows.  
They didn't even blink  
as a stranger swung his arms,  
sniffled then coughed  
into his sleeve.  
Smirk wryly. Think how  
we thought we were untouchable -  
and now we are,  
or so say the booths queue;  
the double decker  
that could fit between us;  
surgical masks on view.  
Losing sanity.  
Only eating cuppa soup.  
There's barely any loo roll.  
Check lists ticked,  
There's nothing left to do.  
kick the floor, the door,  
bang heads on walls.  
Let's not bruise too much  
nhs' got enough on their to do's.  
but these days are slip sliding  
struggling to move.  
feel sticky.

## Same Boat

download apps to help sleep.  
These hours, days  
keep turning into weeks.  
Sing, shout, swear a lot,  
laugh and repeat.

---

*This poem was written on 1 April, the first day of #NaPoWriMo (National Poetry Writing Month), an annual month-long challenge where participants are invited to write a poem a day for the whole of April. Lockdown meant that NaPoWriMo2020 was the most participated in so far. The prompt that inspired this poem was 'your life as an action.' I hadn't had any concrete ideas, but knew I wanted to create a snapshot of my life right now, locked up and locked down in all its guts and glory. I was nodding off at late o'clock when the first four lines of Quarantine popped into my head. A short while later, voilà, poetry!*

## **All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go**

Rahela Khan

All dressed up and nowhere to go  
Having to watch the latest reality show  
Stuck indoors and getting bored  
Want to get rid of the stuff I usually hoard  
So called useful gadgets that were a must  
Pulling them out, they'd turned to rust  
Dried herbs that have turned brown with age  
Is that marjoram, lovage, thyme or sage?  
And cookery books so out of date  
Leaves fall out and books disintegrate  
Knick knacks, jewellery and dresses boxed  
Folded tidily for the charity shop  
Got covered in dust but my hard work does show  
Stood in the shower under a warm water flow  
Came out and chose some fresh clothes  
Oh no!  
All dressed up and nowhere to go!

---

*This poem was written as my daily contribution to a Whatsapp writing group 'Cloud Riders', set up by Jayne Gosnall, which I joined at the beginning of lockdown. I started to self-isolate on 17 March, which was roughly about a week before the national lockdown was enforced. As a way of ensuring I was spending some time on my positive mental wellbeing and not just cleaning, I joined this group which had daily prompts to stimulate and initiate some kind of creative writing. It's quite fitting how this poem was around cleaning.*

## Nothing Changes Around Here

Matt Sowerby and Penny Walters

We look out for one another, or some of us do.  
The older community that has been here since here began,  
when the Victorians slums were ripped out,  
and the people in them. Faces change – Russian, Zimbabwean,  
they keep themselves to themselves mostly.  
Here, we have our own microclimate.  
The jobs have been gone so long that unemployment  
is almost part of the culture. These are people who spit  
the name of Mike Ashley but would kill for a season ticket.  
There is something wrong about the children.  
And then there are others. Those same ones you saw  
collecting on matchday. Doing deliveries  
from the grangermarket, working down the pantry,  
Vinnys, *pay what you feel, love*. Gobshites with a cause.  
Mamma P, who should be home but is shopping for her neighbours.  
These people are splitting deliveries between houses.  
They don't shout about it.

In the background, Erskine's wall rises up,  
a limping promise, a tropical bird on the roadside.

---

*this poem is based on real experiences of living on the Byker Estate. The estate is instantly recognisable from its brightly coloured early 1970s buildings, which replaced Victorian slums which had been condemned unfit for human habitation almost three decades before. Byker Wall was designed by the socialist architect Ralph Erskine, based on consultations with the area's residence. However, following completion, fewer than 20% of original residents were housed at Byker Wall. Like many inner-city urban housing areas, Byker experiences high levels of poverty. This poem is a tribute to the residents of Byker who were working to support their neighbours long before lockdown began.*

## Growing

Jayne Gosnall

1

My friends, The Incredibles are self-reliant  
Growing food in old freezers (mine's in a bath!)  
Modern-day Wombles.  
We don't care for poshness  
We get down and dirty at one with the earth  
Mark, Jane & Mike spread love of  
growing mind, body and spirit.  
It's not showy, it's slowly,  
creatively circular,  
Old cartons for seed trays  
and worms as pets,  
value the most lowly

2

In past centuries we grew what we needed,  
some flowers, our medicines  
and all of our food.  
The rich brought back specimens  
to add to collections  
Low Countries' weavers  
fled persecution  
Arriving with seeds and bulbs,  
a new gift to our nation:  
a rainbow of tulips and frilly carnations,  
Then Paisley weavers became  
our first 'Florists'  
before the slave traders bought  
people like goods

## Same Boat

3

Stately home gardens  
are all Pomp and Circumstance,  
Now, everyday gardens  
show wealth off in a glance  
So what if your garden's got pizza ovens,  
mirrors and fire pits, next decade's landfill,  
plastic topiary, and grey "rattan" seats,  
or decking and paving where plants could be growing?  
Browning the green isn't posh it's just crass.  
Growers do more than plant,  
we nourish and hope  
Nature feels us and feeds us.  
She doesn't see class

4

So, today as I stare at empty racks,  
plantless and grey  
The furloughed, the working-from-homers,  
with same pay, and time to kill  
have rampaged like locusts  
gobbling all in their path,  
leaving nothing for us.  
This is *our* garden centre, a loved, family nursery!  
We came on 2 buses dragging a shopping trolley  
year on year, in the late frosts, and after the floods  
Where were you in bad weather,  
when they needed us most?  
Will you care about Nature,  
when there's no more Corona?  
Will you care about wildlife,  
learn old recipes for healing?  
Or just buy more stuff  
and forget about feeling?

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

---

*Not everyone is lucky enough to have a garden, but even windowsills, balcony and yards can grow food, medicine and flowers, and communities can grow together in alleys, allotments and parks. We all noticed the silence of early lockdown and nature seemed to dance in celebration. Working people and poor people have always gardened when they have had access to land. We can share knowledge, skills, seeds and cuttings with each other to make this possible. It's not about having a big wallet or a big car to drive the entire contents of a garden centre home in!*

## Untitled

### Brody Salmon

Sometimes I squash flies and align them on the windowsill like fingernails. I cough on park gates as well, see, it isn't hard to socially distance when I'm socially distant. This fish bowl is flooded with make believe people, trudging like moths to make believe places. You just can't see it, can you? That's why I started letting the toast burn, the baked beans n all! Letting the phone ring and the odours of animal honesty reek out the house. The neighbour's cat has been missing a week now.

Nothing says freedom like pausing the prisons, unfolding prisms, ripping neckties, exchanging white ironed shirts for pyjamas and slippers. I climb into the old suitcase that we used to take to the seaside. I climb inside and pull the zip, leave just enough room for a fingertip, and imagine seagulls swooping, squawking for fish and chips.

Dad once hit the back of my hand.  
I hear arcade machines and pennies dropping. I miss you dad, but the gulls won't go away because they don't believe me when I say (scream) there's no food in here at all. Truth is, I'm just too clever for my own good.

---

*I wrote the poem because there's something lovable about a freak like my narrator. There's something intriguing and disturbingly honest about his cynicism that everybody can sort of relate to. This is somebody whose madness is crippling them now that social norms and practice have been stripped from them. This is somebody relishing the isolation of lockdown, and in fact enjoying being locked away from the world, in a time where everybody seems to want to be seen, my character wants to disappear.*

## 1 in 84

Andrea Walker

Why do I feel so alone?  
Got nobody to turn to,  
no place to call home.  
Gotta get out of this place,  
sick of these tears  
sliding down my face,  
playin' into my fears.

All these thoughts  
goin' round my head,  
dark and destructive –  
*bang bang, you're dead.*

Trying just to survive,  
don't nobody care  
if I'm dead or alive.  
Dead or alive?  
What's the point of it all!  
When I try to reach out  
nobody takin' my call.

I'm meant to believe  
that I'll be OK,  
that my time will come,  
every dog has its day.  
Such a fuckin' lie!

Nobody cares.  
It's like really, mostly,  
I just ain't there.  
Only thing holding me  
is gravity.

No mother love  
in my depravity.  
Nobody can see,  
I'm hangin' on by a thread.

## Same Boat

Lookin' at myself in the mirror.  
Did you hear what I said?  
I tried bein' nice.  
Tried bein' polite.  
That didn't work,  
didn't put anything right.  
I've messed up my life.  
There ain't no goin' back.  
I'm the joker,  
somebody havin' the last laugh.

No point in goin' out,  
got nobody to visit.  
This ain't a life,  
there's nothin interesting  
in it.

Love and caring  
was a prerequisite  
that was taken away  
when I reached my limit.

That's how I felt.  
By the hand of fate,  
that's the cards I was dealt.  
I played the wrong way.  
Ask me again,  
am I OK?  
I'm struck dumb,  
got nothin' to say,  
givin' nothin' away,  
tried everything  
to just reconnect.

Given up  
for my own self respect.  
Plenty will mourn,  
plenty will worry,  
all the pledges they swore,  
but all left in a hurry.  
No one to run to,  
nowhere to hide.  
I'm lost and alone  
within plain sight.

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

I lie when they ask  
*hey you doin' alright?*  
Cos I'll be damned  
if I'll ease their conscience  
one bit  
so the words I speak  
are just full of shit.

Lying here now,  
alone in my bed,  
dark thoughts are swirling  
again in my head.  
I'm filled with longing  
for the fight or the flight,  
desperation from not belonging.  
I'm alone in my plight.  
Thoughts drumming,  
as I lay here humming,  
nobody ain't coming  
but I gotta do somethin'.  
I'll sleep on it,  
wait till mornin',  
then make a decision.  
If the truth ain't forthcomin'  
I'll not carry on.  
It's just too bleak.  
I'll join my brothers,  
the 84 in a week.  
Somebody listen.  
Somebody shout.  
I'm dying inside,  
can't you reach out?

I don't want to be  
just another statistic.  
I'm lost and I'm hurting,  
I'm bein' realistic.

## Same Boat

Help me Man,  
because I sure can't  
sort this myself.  
I'm trapped  
like a rat,  
caught in this hell,  
no money left,  
it's all gone.  
Poverty is my world,  
my luck's flown.  
I'm tired of handouts,  
sick of begging  
and of the looks  
of the masses,  
the fucking upper classes  
that keep the wealth  
with their own.  
If something don't change,  
If something don't give,  
I'm out of this shit show.  
I don't want to live.

---

*I wrote this poem because I started to see in the news, during lockdown especially, that suicide rates amongst young men are tragically rising. I remembered Project Calm, where 84 sculptures were made to highlight that 84 men a week take their lives in the UK, with the families of some of these victims helping with the design of these sculptures. I imagined that in lockdown that the figure will, alas, rise, so I wrote this poem to again highlight their plight.*

## **At What Cost?**

Kate Srichandra

And when I tell my best mate via facetime that I'm doing more than alright, I feel like I'm boasting.

Citalopram and therapy cost me more than my scarred arms and legs, but at least I could afford it.

I watch behind clearer pains of glass as my previous classmates clamber and clasp at mirage like straws in the form of waiting lists, waiting listlessly for the chance to ask to start to get better.

We need  
to do better.

---

*I was shocked when I became the most mentally stable I had been in the past five years over lockdown. Knowing that the majority of my closest friends were mentally suffering due to the pandemic made me feel guilty. I am one of the lucky ones who could afford to get help after finally being persuaded to do so by a close, concerned friend. Access to effective mental support should not be a privilege, but a basic human right.*

## Untitled #1

Grace Collins

worry  
fear  
worry  
fear

round and round in my head  
can't sleep  
can't stop thinking

bills  
eat  
bills  
eat

round and round in my head  
the voices say, *what should I do?*

*shut up*  
*shut up!*

*hunger*  
*shame*  
*hunger*  
*shame*

round and round in my head  
*are they judging me?*  
I can't ask for help

*hope*  
*guilt*  
*hope*  
*guilt*

round and round in my head  
food boxes  
thanks  
feed the kids

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

worry  
fear  
worry  
fear

round and round in my head  
every week  
nothing changes

joy  
understanding  
joy  
understanding

round and round in my head  
a helping hand  
no judgement passed

peace  
relief  
peace  
relief!

---

*When the food box arrived during the first week of lockdown, the feeling was of such relief. It was embarrassing to admit we needed help, but for us as a family, it was the inability to be able to book a delivery slot, and get hold of the essentials. As a carer I felt the weight of responsibility fall completely on my shoulders and it was such a relief to have that shared*

## Dawn Chorus

Matt Sowerby

Urgh!  
These birds would sound beautiful,  
if they didn't start singing  
so stupidly early.

I know that they're meant to be  
louder at this time of year,  
but I swear they're not usually *this* noisy.  
Perhaps it's that everything else  
is so quiet.

I mean, listen.  
There is no whirring of engines.  
No tyres going over the cattle grid.  
Society is holding  
its breath.

I know I'm not getting back  
to sleep now, so I get out of bed  
and turn on local radio. It's amazing  
to hear what people round here  
have been up to  
recently.

Someone's Nan's been sewing PPE!  
And then they're talking to a volunteer  
who has been doing food deliveries  
to those that are  
shielding.

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

Finally, I listen to the story  
of an NHS worker.  
She's talking about how hard  
her team are fighting to provide  
quality end of life care to patients,  
despite everything.

It's weird to think about,  
all the people that we will probably never meet  
who are working so hard,  
to make life safe and easier  
for the rest of us.

Out of sight but undeniably  
having a massive impact  
on our mornings;

Sort of like these birds.  
Maybe it's because I've had  
my coffee now,  
but they're not annoying me as much.

I close my eyes, and for the first time,  
*really*  
listen.

---

*As part of BBC Local Radio's 'Make a Difference' campaign, 39 radio stations commissioned poets to create poems inspired by those making a difference to the lives of those in need. My piece 'Dawn Chorus' was commissioned as part of this project by BBC Radio Cumbria. A poem for England titled 'Lockdown Lines' was written by poet Ian McMillan in response to these regional pieces. I wrote 'Dawn Chorus' in early May, the time of year when birdsong is at its loudest. The 'chorus' was especially noticeable this year because of an increase in biodiversity and decrease in noise pollution brought about by lockdown.*

## **“Luton man charged after woman threatened with a knife in Bedford”**

Sarah Murray

I live in a town where sin lights the roads like street lamps.

They stole my mother's engagement ring from her drawer while we celebrated my brother's 3rd birthday.

They stole my brother's bike as he rode it, taunted him as they took his birthday present away.

“36.7% of children in Luton live in poverty”

Poverty breeds crime breeds poverty.

A 16-year-old boy once told my mum he had no need for school, since he can help his dad sell crack for more money than his Health and Social Care diploma will ever make him.

“Man threatened and pushed in racist attack in Luton”

There is hatred here, it makes the air taste acrid and yellow.

My friend's mother told her to take off her hijab at work so that she would be safer on her walk home.

“100th birthday party goes on despite lockdown”

There is hope here if you search for it.

My brother runs around with the neighbourhood children.

We give them eggs from our chickens, they stroke our dog.

My mother helped an autistic boy get into college and he's a teacher now.

Not all cycles are negative.

I sit in the garden with my mum,

drinking cold cocktails in the last of the April sun

and there are birds here. They sing in the trees above us.

The neighbour's children laugh on their trampoline and my dog is at the door.

“If she wants to go in she knows how” says mum,

blinking behind her sunglasses. I open it for her anyway,

watching her tail wag as she enters the cool shade of the house.

The sun's rays fall in patterns through the trees.

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

---

*I wrote this piece inspired by how people in places that are considered deprived or in poverty can find joy despite these seemingly negative factors. I was never really considered 'poor'; however, growing up in quite a poor area means that poverty has impacted me growing up in different ways. The quotes I used are real headlines written about Luton taken within roughly three years. I wanted to highlight how media perspectives on these places can often suck the hope out of these communities, and as someone who is both without and within my aim was to show that there is still joy and happiness here.*

## Same Boat

---

*A study from the Office of National Statistics reported that in 2018, 10% of British people were 'internet non-users'. When lockdown came into effect many professional, social and educational conversations moved online, excluding many of those who live in poverty. Because the call-out for poetry for this book was done online, it does not feature the poetry of those experiencing digital exclusion. We have left this page blank in recognition of this.*

## 100 Days

Earl Charlton

100 days now of lockdown and stress.  
When are the government going to get a hold of this mess?  
There are people like me who have been shielding wanting to see  
their family!  
Come on! We have feelings.  
It's been 100 days now since I made an income.  
These 100 days haven't been much fun.  
But being homeless before and living in social isolation,  
give me the knowledge and sense to beat this complicated situation.  
Routine, routine, is all I say.  
Don't let your mind take you away.  
I for one was nearly there,  
when I thought that we'd become homeless again,  
but with the help and support of our local sources,  
North East Homeless, Mercy Hub, Hope and more,  
It's made it easier to hang on a little longer.  
Come on July the 6th I'm back to make an income.  
These days are hard these days are dark,  
but it will be easier as we put these dark  
times behind but not forgotten in our hearts.  
Let's stand the fight, let's come together.  
We need each other now, more than ever!

---

*I did this poem because I myself know what it's like to live isolated on your own. Even on the busiest of streets you can feel alone. Mental health, addiction and homelessness definitely fits into loneliness. On the 100th day of lockdown I found out that I was able to go back to work and make an income, leading me to reflect on them 100 days. A very good friend of mine, Jeremy Cain, mentioned this poetry book to me, and encouraged me to write this poem, so I sat down and 10 mins later my feelings were once more on paper.*

## Stella

Ben Pearson

"I love you so much"  
I don't think she heard much of the call  
My neighbours did  
"How's work?"  
It's Sunday  
"Butties are on the tray love, cling filmed"  
I hear about her butties every day  
"How many have died today?"  
I hear about her butties every day  
"How's work?"  
It's Sunday  
"Sorting my pills, lots spare"  
I hear about her butties every day  
Bloody butties  
"I'll change ears love"  
Bloody love her to bits

---

*I wrote 'Stella' during lockdown after a phone call with my grandma. We speak on the phone every day but usually I'd visit once a week. Living with dementia and poor hearing, phone calls aren't always that easy and trying to explain why I couldn't visit or why her carers had to wear masks was challenging. I wanted the poem to reflect our repetitive conversations, conversations that sometimes make me laugh and other times cry, our close relationship and how fortunate we are compared to many, and the humour we share, for me very much a coping strategy.*

## Breathe #1

Matt Sowerby

If you are tired, then yawn contagiously.  
Did you know in the beginning the word  
*yawn* meant *to dare to ask for something better?*  
*Pant* comes from a word which means *to dream*,  
which comes from a word which means *to shine*.  
The word *gulp* means *opening* in another language.  
*Lung* used to mean *light*. Did you know *choke*  
was the original meaning of the word *anxiety?*  
*Ventilator* comes from a word which means *to toss*  
*into the air*, means *to set in motion*. They say  
God breathed into the first man and gave him life.  
Did you know that the word *spirit* means *breath?*

---

*Breathing can be very symbolic, as the way a person is breathing will normally tell you what they are feeling. Breathing is also strongly linked to both life and speech. For this reason, I guessed there would probably be a lot of words in the English language associated with breathing that have very metaphorical origins – poems in disguise! After doing some research, I came up with this list.*

## **My Mask**

Melanie Rogers

My mask keeps me safe.  
It stops others asking if I'm OK.  
It stops me having to lie  
and prevents tears from coming.

My mask protects me.  
It stops others seeing the real me,  
the me that hurts so much,  
that's shattered inside, held together on the outside.

My mask keeps me shielded.  
It saves me from feeling vulnerable.  
It saves me from being hurt,  
from history being repeated.

My mask is a lie.  
I'm not OK.  
The tears are there, they're just hidden.  
The pain is there, it's excruciating.

Not many people recognise my mask.  
Not many people know me well enough;  
I don't let them.  
Those that do terrify me.  
I can't bear to be hurt again.

---

*I've worn my mask since I was a teenager. I've used it to hide the internal pain and distress I've carried with me since then, from those around me, be it family, friends, colleagues or professionals caring for me. I wear it well and I'm able to hide how distressed and/or ill I am, there are very few who can see past my mask. Just before lockdown I began to consciously let my mask slip in front of my therapist but as lockdown unfolded, so did a traumatic, personal life event and I had to stay strong, so my mask one again became fixed. But, I also began to recognise how my mask protected me and this led to me writing my first poem in years, 'My Mask'.*

## Untitled

Ellis Howard

It is Sunday afternoon. Every window is pushed open and usually we can hear the sounds of shouts and tears from Number 46 as they routinely explain to Sarah that the country is in lockdown and why that means she can't play footie on the field, even if she does Dettol the flies away, but today is quiet. There's a stillness.

All I can hear is me Mam boiling water in the pan to make minestrone cup-of-soups for me, her and me Grandad. Cup-of-soups are a delicacy in our house but the packed croutons are hastily whipped out because today is the 1966 World Cup Final and me Granddad, sunken into the couch, remnants of wotsits all over his t-shirt, is ready to relive his youth.

I'm not much of a footie fan. The astroturf has been turned into offices and so me Grandad says I didn't catch the bug young enough. But I still can't help but feel Martin Peters started the combover revolution five decades before Justin Bieber. Half way through the game, me Grandad is shouting and busting a gut, me Mam looks terrified that his dodgy kidney will flare, but to me it's hilarious. Before lockdown I'd sit in the library and watch old people kicking off on TikTok and think they were the funniest thing I'd ever seen.

I reckon if I had an iPhone, me Grandad would go viral, we'd be rich and we could eat cup-of-soups and get as many combovers as we wanted.

---

*My text/poetry is mostly concerned with giving a voice to the glorious and complex lives of those who surround me in Liverpool. This piece is an insight into how those living on the breadline have been forced to make do during the pandemic. I am wholly inspired by my family and friends who met COVID-19 and Conservative policy with energy, humour and kindness. This poem is a love letter to those brave souls who history continually tries to undermine, but we don't let it. X*

## Untitled #2

Grace Collins

In my head, silence.  
No one to enjoy time with.  
No plans to make,

confused  
scared  
lonely  
hungry.

Outside the sun shines,  
the rain lashes,  
day turns into night  
then day again;

hope  
life  
new beginnings  
fresh dreams.

When this is over  
we will emerge different but the same.  
Changed but strengthened,  
united in a separate yet shared experience.

Fear replaced by hope,  
worry replaced by dreams,  
grasping life with both hands,  
welcoming our new normal.

---

*I have never written anything before, except essays for exams! But in writing this poem I drew on my experience of trying to survive on benefits, and the worry and distress that can fill your head during every waking moment when you don't know how you are going to provide for your loved ones. These feelings were enhanced during lockdown because of isolation and boredom. With nothing else to fill your time, and no one to share your worries with, it's easy to let the voices in your head take over and leave you in a dark and empty place.*

## Utopeea

Jayne Gosnall

Peeing on my outside throne with cobwebs and no door  
the queen of my own garden  
exposed only to the wild world  
(not the wide world of weary, windowed humans  
filling kettles and squinting into the day that offends them  
with its audacity),  
observed only  
by the happy black dog with white whiskers  
and languidly wagging tail  
wondering when her bowl will be filled.

The blackbirds pause  
Wriggling breakfasts held in beaky limbo,  
beaded eyes checking if the source of the waterfall they hear  
is safe to be near,  
before sharing the bay location of their open-beaked young  
as the cowbell chain draws gushes  
from the gravity cistern.

Once forgotten I smile gratitude for the hands of the lover  
who likes old things and arcane names.  
My stubby hands turn the brass tap.  
How the hissing of summer lawns would require more space,  
a desire for uniformity and neatness I do not share  
with the mowers, the pavers and deckers  
The tidy-away-at-the-end-of-the-day-ers.

## Same Boat

The blackbirds sing their *thank yous*,  
endorsing this love of new life  
as the hissing hose  
becomes a thousand drops pelting the ground.  
Our urban jungle drum beats its sound of food to come  
and this is how the sound of popping corks lost its lure  
and punching lost its fear.  
The plopping of frogs now draws me near to the pond  
dug with my boy, filled with my girl.  
The sheltering duckweed almost conceals  
the depths of feeling of a recovering family –  
resurgent spring growth in every season

---

*My perfect time of day is early morning, when the birds are awake, but most humans aren't. This is when I write my gratitude lists and notice the results of slow gardening and my family's healing.*

## **Super Saturday**

Salena Godden

pack a pub  
give 'em beer  
pints of virus  
shots of fear  
watch 'em fall  
gutter sick  
cull the poor  
kill 'em quick  
parliament let  
nurses down  
clapclapclap  
for the clown  
last orders  
covid beer  
pour libations  
costs us dear  
lies and shame  
drink or bust  
ashes to ashes  
dust to dust

---

*'Super Saturday' was a poem that started as a tweet I posted on the morning the pubs opened in the UK for the first time during the coronavirus pandemic. The poem contains the fear I felt that morning. I can only add that the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives, their work and homes, their spirit and mental health is immense, unsure and escalating, especially for poor and black communities, the most vulnerable and high-risk members of society, the nurses, health workers and key workers, all people forced back to work when things are still so very contagious and uncertain. There can be no denying that hundreds of thousands of lives could have been saved in this global pandemic if we'd had world leadership that cared more about people's lives and humanity than the protection of profit and banks.*

## Breathe #2

Matt Sowerby

try to keep breathing Father, even, if it's the last thing you do.

in and out

like the child of an inner city, taught not to see the seeping smog that never really cleared. If he has asthma, he would be twice as likely to have an attack as his middle-class cousins, but with the factories abandoned he breathes a freshness he has never felt in his throat before, like iced water after football practice.

out and in

like a princess after climbing to the height of her tower block, a bag for life balanced on each of her fishhook fingers. Nipping out for a few things has become an act of violence so she is carrying seven days of rations home to her children with no horse or carriage. Panting upon the pale air, she manages the final flight – isn't it strange we refer to this scramble as flying – and collapses.

in and out

Breathe knowing that somewhere a green thing is holding your breath safe for you, protecting your children from the gases you exhale. That growing goddess, that green lung turning black like a smoker's.

out and in

like an NHS nurse, catching at breaths escaping like balloons, with only a skeleton crew, while back home in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the health system has collapsed, and sick people are fighting each other for dwindling medical supplies. He is afraid the same will happen here.

in and out

breathe like George Floyd couldn't. A corruption kneeling on his throat, and there is no metaphor I can imagine for what that must have been like, but I know it was nothing like how I am kneeling before you now.

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

Father, why did it take a respiratory disease for us to realise that none of us could really breathe all along.

---

*In 2020 the act of breathing took on new significance for two reasons. Firstly, a respiratory disease identified in Wuhan, China became a global pandemic. Secondly, "I can't breathe" (the final words of a black man named George Floyd who was murdered by a police officer) became a protest cry for those looking to end systemic racism in the US, the UK and elsewhere. These two events prompted me to look closer at the symbolism of breathing/suffocation in a range of political issues, using brief snapshots into the lives of five characters to do so.*

## End Hunger

Sarah Grant

Three little children  
four little rooms  
two busy parents  
one cosy kitchen  
what's missing  
bread and cheese  
sausage and peas  
milk and honey  
or even the money  
it's not just the time  
it's not just the rhyme  
it's no joking  
the situation is choking  
the story needs telling  
three little children  
four little rooms  
hungry tummies  
hungry eyes  
sleeping on empty  
not how it's meant to be  
mum can't concentrate  
dad can't focus  
the cupboard is bare  
no bone for the dog  
a home full of people  
but the oven is off  
how did this happen  
a twenty first century  
epic tragedy  
some people so full  
when others have none  
is this the war  
we have won  
the game is not over  
people don't live in clover

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

no one should go to bed hungry  
your defence is a parody  
but no longer a comedy  
you need to hear the rhyme  
three little children  
four little rooms  
five hungry mouths  
please end this need  
take a look at your greed  
it shouldn't be happening  
it shouldn't be true  
we need to change  
and look after you  
we ask you to consider  
we ask you to stand tall  
be counted in the fight  
to End Hunger once  
and for all.

---

*This poem reminds me of the sixties film, where hardship and difficult choices were shown in a very black and white way. Sadly decades later, the story remains the same. We still live with poverty every day. Some people just get by, whilst others share the best they can. Human nature remains the same. Sadly too many people are driven by greed.*

## Keeping in Tune

### Yo Tozer Loft

January's new beginning, ten guitars given  
Ten souls circle, Food Glorious music spinning  
Off into this, a learning curve of four chords forward  
*Childhood dreams and more fulfilled.*

February fed us, fingers on a fretboard  
Music friends and food, tunes book baptised in tea  
Using a tuner, Eddie ate dynamite on *difficult days*  
*Goodbye Eddie, good things done together.*

March on, we can play a song and brave it in The Hand-Washed Nave  
Causing applause now nervous, not performing but breathing  
The virus arriving and we ask our coughing friend to leave  
*Everything cancelled and closing, going home.*

April isolation weird and worrying, will I see you again?  
*Without internet, we rota the phone and walk without life in the way*  
WhatsApp Ten-thirty Thursday, no teacher what chord?  
*This call, its vague sense of normal helps me structure my day.*

May go on a long time, *Lockdown days very difficult*  
*Fear of losing loved ones, focus on holding my guitar close*  
*Learn and progress; I was low, you were kind and went the extra mile*  
*I can't go out but I'm not alone, beautiful people on the phone.*

June bursting into tears, *wishing we could sit without fear*  
*Long walks ups and downs, learning my kind of songs and sounds*  
And coming out of comfort zones, the gift of a Slipknot song learned  
Screenshot smiles shared, four guitar musketeers.

July time flying, finally meeting people at four gazebo corners  
Guitar playing 'Happy Birthday' joined chords and cake  
Waving to neighbours "Have you come to entertain us?"  
Hoping together for more with a homecoming showcase.

---

*This year, we expanded the 'Food Glorious' offering by creating a 10-place beginners guitar group; sourcing everyone a free guitar to keep and fundraising for songbooks and teaching.*

*During lockdown we have had 16 weeks of Zoom calls, a WhatsApp guitar group, a YouTube video ('A Whole New World, Sheffield UK') and an end-of-term distanced live sing with tears and longing in the park.*

## Sadly

Shaun Kelly

When all this is over, this slow terror timeslide  
will we still feel that need to fix down  
the feelings of loss for those who – sadly – died,  
gave everything so we who are left might live?  
Will there be memorial events, serious and inclusive  
like after that Great War a hundred years ago –  
a woman in a gold chain reciting Yeats  
a choir broken into pieces of two metre spaces  
singing ‘Lean On Me’ or ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’?  
A mural painted by an ex-soldier’s wife  
whose husband – sadly – never made it through  
or a wall shrine made from recycled visors  
used so often in the Care Home behind  
and lit at night once new licensing laws begin?  
What I remember most is the sheer crassness of it,  
those slick daily briefings by Oxbridge smooths  
supported in a supine way by scientists and medicos,  
assuring us again and again “We follow the science”  
as though daily Casualty Lists are mere data  
and a needful price we all must pay –  
briefings of liars led by donkeys! Sadly.  
By then the Care Homes had become a No Man’s Land  
of salients in a victory push against the foe,  
cheerful oldies kicking a football towards enemy lines,  
pals battalions lined for sacrifice but shouting  
“Come on Tommy” or “We can make it Janie”  
then – last seen – being proned by ghosts in blue,  
their used bodies uneven and silent and draped  
across the barbed wire agonies of family memory.  
Sadly.

---

*The poem uses the First World War as a metaphor for the COVID-19 crisis, as the catastrophic losses of older people in care homes, and medical staff seemed to be a sacrifice that we didn't have to make.*

**cocoon**

Matt Sowerby and Stef Benstead

Before, when they called our *hungry* greediness,  
we called it an insatiable craving for life.  
We called it proof that our stomachs still remember fullness  
enough to mourn it. Some days this painful miracle was all we had.

Now, we lie in our separate homes, cocooned in a threading blanket,  
thick thoughts and filth.  
All disabilities are now invisible,  
camouflaged far from the eyes of birds.

Once confined within the chrysalis,  
the caterpillar begins to digest itself.  
They won't come to see any of us anymore,  
to clean the silks, chop the vegetables,

chase the shadows away. They will sign the DNR form for us,  
if they can.  
I will keep this short.  
I lack both energy and time.

In truth, we have always been chrysalides,  
hanging piñata to the wind.  
Now stripped of hard earned silk we hold on tighter,  
tuck away our stunted wings to try and forget the sweet song of gravity.  
We will hang

like this, here, while you soar into the distance.  
Remember us while you are grappling the sky.

---

*Early on in lockdown, some politicians used the term 'cocoon' instead of 'shield' to refer to vulnerable people self-isolating. This poem extends that metaphor and explores some disabled people's experience of lockdown.*

## **Adrift**

Chris Reeves

We are all in the same boat they say  
but don't believe it means  
that we're all going the same way,  
there's still a line between.  
We get told we have equality  
by politicians and lawgivers  
when those making the rules  
aren't even on the same river.

They make so many promises  
that just never get delivered,  
expected us to wait with bated breath  
when Boris caught a shiver,  
rewarding with our applause  
the Angels of this age  
when all they really need of course  
is to be paid a decent wage!

Their story changes from day to day  
while underneath the COVID cover  
they're still stealing from the poor,  
the disabled and many others.  
As the divide gets even bigger  
between the haves and the have nots  
it's easy to be triggered  
into stealing from the shops

More women selling sex these days  
and it's not to get a fix  
it's done simply to make ends meet,  
go home and feed the kids.  
More men committing suicide  
and more sent to the jail  
as they try to privatise our lives.  
Ha! It's not in my boat that they sail!

## Same Boat

Pandemic paranoia, the news just feeds us fear.  
We're all in the same boat they say,  
but there are no ports round here.  
We only have the concrete,  
and the gangs and drugs and guns.  
There is no doubt, we missed the boat  
so where we gonna run?

---

*The poem is my response to a writing prompt sent out by Church Action on Poverty, 'are we all in the same boat?' I continue to make my way in the world, living with the consequences of my addiction, through healthy and damaged emotions. Writing is such a powerful release and I do it because I need to.*



## Ashes and Starlight

Andrea Walker

One day we were here  
then it came to pass  
we moved into the starlight  
from the remnants of our ash.

So many of us  
all left at once  
within a breath of time  
we were all gone.

A great wave erupted  
and there came a swell  
on those that it struck  
a shadow fell.

But we are still close by  
we aren't too far.  
Look above you!  
check out each star!

There are new formations  
every single night  
beautifully sparking  
their heavenly light.

A dominion of angels  
who fill the sky  
so look above you  
don't look down and cry.

We will always surround you  
we will help you fight.  
From the ashes of our lives  
we become your starlight

and the moon will guide you  
and we shall glow  
and the heavens will open  
and you'll all know

## Poems on poverty and lockdown

life doesn't end  
there's no dimming of our light  
for it's eternal  
we shine for you each night.

Don't give up now  
don't let our loss be in vain.  
You can come through this  
and rise again.

Remember us with love.  
We are all here together  
helping you all survive  
one universe forever.

We are remembered.  
From our ashes came starlight.  
All pull together.  
For you we burn bright.

---

*During lockdown, I lost my uncle to the virus. It saddened me that I couldn't attend his cremation due to the lockdown restrictions. Being confined indoors reminded me of those final months before I went bankrupt, stuck with no money, too embarrassed at my failure to venture out. So I wrote this poem to encapsulate my grief and loss, as well as my hope and love! Poverty taught me that money isn't my God. If you have your basics, everything else is 'stuff' – the people in our lives are the riches!*

**Dear Diary,**  
Charlotte Killeya

I travelled on the 83 bus today, no facemask needed.  
It feels like so long ago since we had to wear them.  
COVID-19 is a distant memory now.

A woman sat next to me.  
We got talking, as you do.  
We do that well round here.

She grew up near here.  
Turns out that our parents were in the same class at school.  
She struggled during COVID.  
She ran her own hairdressing business.  
Universal Credit took a while to kick in.  
Family and friends helped her through, as best they could.  
"Never thought I would need to claim, though.  
I had my own business."

We sit and look out of the window.  
"A few years ago, this bus was in the paper," she tells me.  
"If you follow the route of this bus, people born in some areas have a  
Life expectancy 10 years more than others.  
Imagine that.  
It's not right."

But since COVID, things got better.  
People didn't just hand out food.  
They campaigned.  
They shared stories.  
For once, people in power finally listened.  
She pressed the bell,  
Said goodbye,  
Gave me a card.  
"If you need a haircut, here's my number.  
My business started up again.  
But, I don't work on a Friday. I volunteer on that day."

---

*This poem was based upon a well-known bus route in Sheffield, I thought it was an interesting way to set a 'story' on that bus journey as a way of talking about inequality. I wanted to explore how life could be different after COVID-19 and what that may look like on an ordinary day, through an everyday conversation in Sheffield.*

## Poet profiles

### Stef Benstead

Stef Benstead is an independent researcher in disability and social policy and is author of the book *Second Class Citizens: The treatment of disabled people in austerity Britain*. Stef has a 1st from the University of Cambridge but had to leave a PhD at the same university after becoming severely ill with the genetic connective tissue disorder, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Through the Spartacus Network, Stef joined with other sick and disabled people to critique the government's approach to sick and disabled people and later she was commissioned by Ekklesia to carry out research for the purpose of designing a new sickness benefit. Stef is currently working with the Chronic Illness Inclusion Project and Church Action on Poverty.

### Earl Charlton

I ran away from home in South Shields at 14 years old. By the time I was 19 years old I became a heroin and crack cocaine user, alcoholic and methadone user. This continued for 20 years, until in 2016 I came back home to South Shields. I was on and off street homeless. I'm now four years clean, three years dry and two years off my methadone. I do the *Big Issue* which I have done for 15 years. Since coming home and me being a *Big Issue* vendor, we're three years in our own place, private rented! I'm looking forward, for once in my life, to a brighter future. I found my gift of spoken word-poetry in 2010 when I was in Norwich prison and my girlfriend was in Peterborough prison, Becky used to look forward to her post and used to read them out to the other girls in her cell who would copy them and send them to their boyfriends. Swings and roundabouts.

### Grace Collins

My name is Grace. I am a carer to my two autistic adult children. I am also a volunteer teacher, with St Mary's Timebuilders project, where we support those who need to learn English as they want to integrate more in society.

You will often find me with dirt under my fingernails as I am passionate about gardening and growing fruit and vegetables. I belong to different community growing projects where I love to share my knowledge and enjoyment of providing food from seed to plate.

## **Liz Delafield**

Liz Delafield is a primary school teacher. She lives in Stockport, Greater Manchester with her family: Stewart, Jennifer and Robert. She enjoys writing in her spare time. She has had some prayers and reflections published by Wild Goose Resources, and is an Associate member of the Iona Community. She is one of the organisers of the 'Good Society' gatherings at Dialstone Lane Methodist Church.

## **Rachael Ensell**

I am 20, and am on the verge of stepping into the big bad world via Leeds Art University. 2019–20 has been my gap year. I'd been spending less and less time at home by waitressing 40+ hours a week, becoming more independent and frankly ready to leave the nest. Although I have a lovely family, being suddenly cooped up with them felt anticlimactic and mildly claustrophobic, particularly at the start of lockdown, when I wrote 'Quarantine'.

I use poetry to verbalise such emotions. My writing process often starts with me waking up in the dead of night with a line going round my head before I write the line in my notes and proceed to tap my phone-screen in a blurry-eyed state until something vaguely cohesive emerges.

## **Salena Godden**

Salena Godden is a high-profile poet based in London. She is also an activist, broadcaster, essayist and memoirist whose work has been widely anthologised. She has had several volumes of poetry published including *Fishing in the Aftermath: Poems 1994-2014* (Burning Eye Books), *Pessimism is for Lightweights* (Rough Trade Books), literary childhood memoir *Springfield Road* (Unbound) and spoken-word album *LIVEwire* (Nymphs and Thugs) which was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Awards. Most recently Canongate pre-empted world rights to her debut novel *Mrs Death Misses Death*, described by the publisher as an "electrifying genre- and form-defying firestarter." It will be published in February 2021.

## **Jayne Gosnall**

Jayne is in long-term Recovery, which means she hasn't used alcohol or any other drug since 2012. She still has issues with eating, hoarding, and has received help for her mental health including PTSD. Jayne has had mixed experiences of financial security and poverty. In

2016 she became a Salford Poverty Truth Commissioner. Through that she's been trained in Paulo Freire's Popular Education and introduced to her passion, Self-Reliant Groups. Her other passions are the rights of women and children (who often suffer the most during times of hardship or conflict), sharing skills, working for a circular economy and to slow the 'progress' of climate change... to her, they're all interconnected.

### **Sarah Grant**

Sarah Grant has lived most of her life in Cornwall, having spent her childhood in Northamptonshire. Always lost in a book, here she begins her love of poetry. As a mum of four she understands juggling a family, and keeping food on the table.

Following a period of travelling, Sarah has returned to her beloved Cornwall.

She has now found her own voice, producing many poems, some reflecting this strange uncertain time we are experiencing.

She will tell you her development as a poet has been supported by Newquay Community Orchard, encouraging love, life and sustainability through the appreciation of mother nature and the importance of friendship... Oh, and food... always good for the soul.

### **Ellis Howard**

Ellis Howard is an LGBTQ+ writer/actor from working-class Liverpool, and a recent graduate from The Guildhall School. Ellis has been working as an actor at HBO, The National Theatre and the Barbican alongside creating his own work. He began creating political theatre with 'Brass Razoo', a verbatim piece about poverty, which launched national policy around child poverty in 2015 and was performed at the Houses of Parliament, Webb Memorial Trust and Bright Blue thinktanks. During the COVID-19 lockdown, he created video diaries on how the pandemic disproportionately affected working-class communities such as his own. These videos spread across media channels and reached an audience of over 1 million people.

### **Shaun Kelly**

Shaun was born towards the end of the war, so remembers rationing and people having the skills to make do and mend. He's mainly lived in Trafford and Salford, and has been everything from a youth worker

to a builder and has also known poverty. Shaun's always had an interest in words. He's currently a member of All Write on th' Height SRG, a Self-Reliant Group which meets to write, perform and share their writing via hand-made cards, using photographs of the local area, and he's written a book.

### **Rahela Khan**

I have always enjoyed writing poetry and have clear memories of reading some out in Junior school assemblies when I was seven years old.

I first had two poems published in the 1980s which I wrote as part of a political campaign against the Primary Purpose Rule. I then had a poem published in the *British Poetry Review* in 1995.

I enjoy writing in both English and Urdu. I recently entered a poetry competition and look forward to continuing with enjoying my creative writing.

### **Charlotte Killeya**

I rediscovered my love of writing a few years ago when I joined the creative writing group at Parson Cross Initiative (PXI) in Sheffield. I had always enjoyed writing, but over the years I lost inspiration and confidence. The group really helped and supported me. I enjoy writing about the things I observe and the people that I meet in my everyday life. I am also a volunteer and trustee for PXI.

### **Sarah Murray**

I grew up in Luton and then moved to Birmingham for university. Where I grew up is considered to be a deprived area and the poverty that I was surrounded by at different times in my life impacts the way I write. Poetry has always been considered a rather middle-class art form and although I don't consider myself to have ever been impoverished I would like to use my art as a way to tell the stories of the people around me who aren't as lucky as I am to be able to share these moments.

### **Emily Parsler**

I usually write poems as a way to work through difficult or confusing emotions, but sometimes just profound ones. It allows me to explore these things and try to make sense of them. Although I love reading and writing poetry, I'll admit I know hardly anything about it. In my

eyes, my poetry is just me describing what is going on in my head the best way that I can.

### **Ben Pearson**

Ben works on the Food Power programme in partnership with Sustain, supporting alliances to involve those with grassroots lived experience, activists and allies across the UK, and overseeing the peer mentor programme. He's a member of the Global Solidarity Alliance for Food, Health and Social Justice, and is also responsible for coordinating a programme of creative activity at Church Action on Poverty. Previous to his current role he's worked in the arts, advocacy, health and social care and mental health. He's an associate of the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation at UCLAN and a passionate activist and campaigner.

### **Chris Reeves**

My name is Chris Reeves. I am 62 years old. For most of my life from an early age, I was a drug addict. I got clean at 59 and though I had always written poetry, it was then that it really took off. Poetry and music became for me the tools to survive in this strange new real world that I knew nothing about. To be published in this book is an honour indeed, but this is not why I write. For me it is pure therapy and spiritual connection. Words have become my medicine.

### **Melanie Rogers**

I'm a single mum to three teenage children and I've suffered from a significant mental illness for the past 18 years. I currently work for a charity, as a project worker, that provides therapeutic gardening and art groups for adults suffering from poor mental health. Before my own illness I worked as a midwife. I enjoy being with my children, my dog Toby, socialising with friends and travelling. I have a dream to return to university to study Psychology.

### **Brody Salmon**

Brody Salmon is a 20-year-old film-maker from Blackburn, Lancashire. Growing up in a creative household and attending festivals from an early age, his love for art grew quickly. This was accelerated by an alt collective he helped found aged 15 between his friends who all loved to skateboard, graffiti, write, make clothes and produce film and music. In the process, Brody's passion for telling the 'small stories' of

subculture, working-class youth and the 'hidden' characters of society began. After a year of being on an English Literature and Creative Writing course at MMU, he dropped out to make films instead.

### **Kate Srichandra**

My name is Kate Srichandra. I am a spoken word artist, poet and LGBTQ+ activist. My poetry usually consists of content describing my experiences as a lesbian woman and/or my struggles with my mental health. Writing poetry allows me to process and separate myself from my thoughts when they become overwhelming or indistinguishable. I love to use rhyme and rhythm within my poems, especially if I am performing them to a beat. My favourite form of poetry is free flow. However, I will always have a soft spot for a cheeky haiku.

### **Matt Sowerby**

Matt is a spoken word poet and activist from Cumbria. He has performed in the Houses of Parliament, at TEDxDoncaster and at The Poetry Society. In 2018 he became a National Youth Poetry Slam Champion. In 2019 his poem-play *Kids These Days* premiered at Greenbelt Festival. Matt is currently studying at the University of Birmingham and is co-founder of the community activist group KASTLE.

Throughout lockdown, Matt has been the Poet In Digital Residence at Church Action on Poverty. During this time, he ran a series of workshops and open mics, as well as coordinating the creation of this book.

### **Yo Tozer Loft**

Coming from a performance, singing and teaching background, I've been running community choirs in Sheffield since 2012. This includes running the 'Food Glorious Food' choir at a local food bank for the last five years. The choir was researched for the creation of the National Theatre play *Faith, Hope and Charity*. They have also performed at Sheffield Food Festival, Peace in the Park Festival and at the End Hunger UK campaign launch in Sheffield Cathedral in 2019.

### **Andrea Walker**

My coercive marriage ended, along with our joint business, leaving me financially destitute. I was left raising two kids for four years, on benefits, waiting to go bankrupt. I was humiliated when during the final winter, our boiler was condemned! No heating, no hot

water! Our local community heard and offered salvation, blankets, heaters, even a huge tea urn to boil bath water. These selfless acts from strangers restored my faith in humanity. I was a survivor. I finally went bankrupt and started over. I'm still struggle financially but I'm grateful for everything I achieve now.

### **Penny Walters**

I have worked alongside Church Action on Poverty, Sustain and Food Nation on the Food Power programme for over three years. During this time I have used my own lived experience to campaign both locally and nationally on food poverty issues. I've co-designed participation tools as part of the Leapfrog project with Lancaster University, attended the 'Closing the Hunger Gap' conference in North Carolina and spoken to MPs, alongside local and national media. Since COVID-19 I've given evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, whilst also becoming involved in online creative workshops, giving me another way to express my feelings during lockdown. I'll continue the fight against poverty both in Byker and across the UK.







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Poems by Stef Benstead, Earl Charlton,  
Grace Collins, Liz Delafield, Rachael Ensoll,  
Salena Godden, Jayne Gosnall, Sarah Grant,  
Ellis Howard, Shaun Kelly, Rahela Khan,  
Charlotte Killeya, Sarah Murray, Emily Parsler,  
Ben Pearson, Chris Reeves, Melanie Rogers,  
Brody Salmon, Kate Srichandra, Matt Sowerby,  
Yo Tozer Loft, Andrea Walker and  
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ISBN 978-1-9999669-6-6  
[www.church-poverty.org.uk/sameboat](http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/sameboat)

