

## Frankenstein Poems 2016

As part of the Bristol800 Weekender on *Frankenstein* (Fri 22-Sat 23 April 2016), six poets were commissioned to each write a new poem inspired by Mary Shelley's novel. They are reproduced below.

**John Burnside**

### 'Self Portrait as Frankenstein's Monster'

However, my argument is this. Nothing comes to pass in nature, which can be set down to a flaw therein; for nature is always the same, and everywhere one and the same in her efficacy and power of action; that is, nature's laws and ordinances, whereby all things come to pass and change from one form to another, are everywhere and always the same; so that there should be one and the same method of understanding the nature of all things whatsoever, namely, through nature's universal laws and rules.

Spinoza: *Ethics*, 3

#### **I        First Panel**

I was never concerned  
with questions of 'good and evil'  
or 'man playing God',

but given the plight  
of having no body to die in  
(no body, that is, of my own)

I knew right away  
how it felt to be just so much less  
than the sum of one's parts;

and electricity was nothing but a trick,  
a frog's leg in spasm  
as soon as the wire was applied

- then nothing, save the gap  
where soul should be,  
enlivened by its own implicit light.

And later, after I'd  
stepped through the last foxed page  
of allegory, I found myself

in bright daguerreotypes and Penny  
Dreadfuls, anomie  
as gracelessness, my old

obsession with revenge  
gorgeous and medieval  
like the tools in my surgeon's

field-kit: the bone-saw edged  
with little more  
than shade, the scalpel

tipped with a perfect bud  
of age-old  
scarlet.

Romantic to the last, you bring me  
robins in tiny cages,  
Whitechapel match-girls and petulant

beauties from Timisoara,  
who barely struggle.  
I think of them as gifts, for old time's sake,

then creep to the window,  
the lanternlight dazzling my eyes,  
though everything I see and hear is you.

## II

It's the scar on the lip of Boris Karloff's  
monster that makes him look, not

pensive, so much  
as disdainful,

like one who has known all along  
that being alive

is cause for regret.  
It is, of course;

but beauty intervenes  
in ways that are often

surprising, even for those  
who know themselves

already damned;  
and isn't there something more

that we wish he could know,  
and cannot say?

Something we picture, now,  
as a pale green flame

that, even in this unrelenting cold,  
persists in everything, a stubborn warmth

we barely paraphrase with alleluia?  
There is, of course,

a tenderness in this  
that cannot be

discounted,

even when the scar itself precedes

such memories  
he thinks to call his own,

and that is why we're quick to understand  
the random surge of anger and dismay

that makes him kill – not  
willingly, perhaps, but

curious, and captive  
in the moment, as

a child is,  
when he looks at what he's done

and calls it good  
because he made it happen.

**Kathleen Jamie**

**'The Diamond Pane'**

In my 'eyrie of freedom',  
that house of the mind, high  
above a small Fife town  
of fisherfolk and weavers,  
I, my mother's daughter,  
took up a pen, hard-nibbed  
and therefore equal  
to the task, and etched my name  
    - my maiden name -  
on a diamond pane of glass.

Through those same narrow  
casements, closed tight  
against Arctic winds, I beheld,  
like a seer his weird sights,  
ice-floes, death-pale, choking  
the gold-fringed Firth, far-off  
snow peaks, clouds chased on  
by westerlies; and so there flew  
from that falcon's lair  
my 'airy imagination' :  
I'd ramble over frozen fields  
till sunset - so early! -  
sent its roseate glow;  
our fireside conversations  
swooped through books, and hope and liberty.

That pane where I made my sign  
- one of many admitting  
a pallid light to a passage  
of white closed doors -  
was it marked like a card  
with a fate which, unknowingly,  
I'd chosen? In June,  
when the 'crimson midnight sun  
skirted the northern horizon'  
I bade my friends farewell, and climbed  
the gangplank of the *Osnaburgh*  
ready to sail south, and soon  
again run to the warm south,  
entering my 'age of promise'.

## Vanessa Kisuule

An extract from *Frankenstein* that refers to the moment Frankenstein's mother first encounters his cousin Elizabeth who at this time in the story lives in abject poverty with a family that have adopted her.

Among these there was one which attracted my mother far above all the rest. She appeared of a very different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants; this child was thin, and very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold, and despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness that none could behold her without looking on her as a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features.

She is 'fairer than a garden rose among dark-leaved brambles'.

On re-reading *Frankenstein*, this paragraph that I had not noticed before immediately struck me. It speaks not only of a disconcerting binary of what is 'ugly' and what is 'beautiful' but also attributes colonialist ideals of white as right and black as wrong. As a woman of colour who loves literature, I have been faced with this again and again in my study of the canon and have found it difficult to address this in a detached, academic fashion. In this piece, I address the very personal response that this paragraph sparked in me.

### 'A Different Stock'

of a different stock,  
you surmised  
could not have been more perfect  
had she been stitched together  
with your own  
fair  
hand

the deviance of dark stretched taut  
your eyes wide as colonised globes  
you look from us to  
her  
a strange and hideous habitat  
for the musk of difference to  
settle

a precious flower cranes its stem  
To feel the sun's warmth  
only ugly things cower from the light  
so  
wrench everything else from the soil  
lest it grow to choke the buds  
of all that helpless beauty

of a different stock  
we are familiar with this  
history's  
stilted  
waltz of paraphrase  
the gnash and rampage  
of things that refuse to fit  
twisted limbs  
dark and sinful skin

fizzing with nameless evils

a callous discord  
compared to  
such serene idyll  
how cloudless the sky  
of her untroubled eyes  
a neat and pliable thing  
divinely made to please  
look!  
at the ease with which  
she smiles

a garden rose  
amongst the brambles.

\*

it cut, to read this  
in parts i believed immune  
to incision

i have walked countless paths  
in the wake of petals  
have wished to be a cliché  
an unquestioned symbol  
of love

i have grown spikes  
in the absence of softness

i have grown language  
in the absence of words

yes,  
perhaps,

we are of a different stock

but  
aren't we all stitched together  
with the same thread of fear

the fear of being less  
than the sum  
of these parts

these parts that we  
did not  
choose

these parts that we  
can not  
shed

## **Helen Mort**

My poem is inspired by an episode in Mary Shelley's life before she wrote *Frankenstein*, exploring a loss which affected her deeply. After an illicit trip around Europe in 1814 with Percy Shelley (who was married with a pregnant wife), Mary Godwin discovered she was expecting his child. At the time, she was penniless, ill and estranged from her father. In February 1815, she gave birth to a premature baby girl, but the child did not survive past March. The start of this poem quotes from a letter Mary wrote to her friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg on 6th March 1815. The end of the poem echoes a phrase used by Mary in her letter - 'for I am no longer a mother now.'

### **'A Godlike Science'**

Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?- *Paradise Lost*, X, 743-45

My dearest Hogg, my baby is dead.  
I wish to see you. Come quick as you can.  
It was perfectly well when I went to bed.  
I hold the absence tightly in both hands  
and don't know how to put it down again  
or when to sleep in the promoted dark.  
I wear my face as others wear their names,  
check my complexion for the telltale mark  
the loss must leave. I watch with my eyes shut,  
see better for the guttered light, closed door.  
My thoughts are pages of neglected books  
and turning them dilapidates them more.  
I have this ink. Words break across my brow.  
I write to you. I am no mother now.

### **Fiona Sampson**

Mary Shelley's creature is a sacrifice: a kind of perverse Fisher-King. Created by a mixture of idealism and mysterious rite, he's been hauled back from death to serve ends that aren't his own. Lazarus was hauled backwards through death by Christ, in that miraculous New Testament story, passing through death again in order to come back to life. But it was to his own life that he returned. Frankenstein's creation isn't so lucky: half-completed, he remains within the repeating orbit of death. This has so many religious overtones that I couldn't resist calling on the European myth of ritual bringing-to-life that is the golem. I used a two-step line (sometimes those footfalls are heavy monosyllables, sometimes they race) because Shelley's creature is a migrant, endlessly pacing across half the world. I'm peculiarly grateful to the Festival of Ideas for this chance to integrate the work I'm currently doing, on a biography of Mary Shelley to mark the bicentenary of her most famous creation, with – what feels very far away indeed – lyric verse.

### **Frankenstein's Golem**

Who is this  
passing through darkness  
passing swiftly  
through the shadows  
in a landscape  
not yet given  
shape by daylight  
slipping shapeless  
as a shadow  
through the dark  
and unknown places  
wearing the dark  
next to his skin  
wearing a pelt  
of pine and stone  
who is this  
atoms seething  
on his skin  
passing electric  
through the dark  
where he was buried  
and from which  
he was lifted  
not by love  
by power alone  
lifted from death  
and forced to pass  
again through his own  
dying who  
slips away  
between the rocks (as  
waterfalls  
electrify  
the dark) who is this  
on the mountain  
where each morning  
dawn breaks  
along the rocks  
orange then pink  
then terracotta  
the light new



and tenderly wrought?

## Adam Thorpe

Reading *Frankenstein* again, I was struck by the physicality of the book, despite its philosophical digressions. I saw the Monster as someone enduring a major operation, emerging bruised and mutilated. He has also been interpreted as a projection of Mary Shelley's own precocious experience of childbirth, the blood and the pain producing a separate creature, whether stillborn or living. The sexual charge running through the novel is ambivalent, to say the least.

### 'The Monster'

*The cold stars shine in mockery*

1

My master-surgeon has drawn hieroglyphs  
over my flesh, marks of the arcane:  
one long ladder, five sets of dots in a square.  
But why did he leave me nerves  
if they can only thrill to pain?

I will stagger from here like a corpse  
trailing bags of glory, drips  
that feed me with awareness  
of my cobbled-together state.  
His minions bathe my wrinkled lips –

yet another incision. All is wound,  
my brain still swirling with formaldehyde  
so my dreams struggle to be heard,  
as unfamiliar as these very words in my alien  
room of a mind. I'm bound and bed-tied,

I'm told, for my own good; I cannot disavow  
the master who has patched me into life,  
who has sliced and joined and stitched me  
free from darkness. I am my own  
candle, like a fallen angel. I need a wife.

The mirror shows me as pale and wretched,  
bowed as if old. But I am a new-born,  
naked on the bed as they wash me,  
the four of them giggling at something that lies  
like an extra thumb stripped of its nail, forlorn

on my shaven groin, that I know  
from my borrowed memories will swell  
and do such things as shall terrify  
in its towering completeness, stabbing  
and goring until all is well.

2

There is a sweetness at the back of my old mind,  
like a walk-in larder unlatched to a nest of mice,

cake in dented tins, the helpful suggestions of cinnamon;  
the new one has the frenzied blindness

of a nettled wood at night, of stumping through it  
as best one might. The hidden roots, the drifts of leaf-fall.

Never any knowing it. Hope rewired to itself  
because there's nothing else: such sparks of illusion!

That my body cares for me, will be on the look-out.  
The fizz where blood should be, and the clawed owl

of confusion, its sudden swoop  
through the gnarl and twist of neurons.