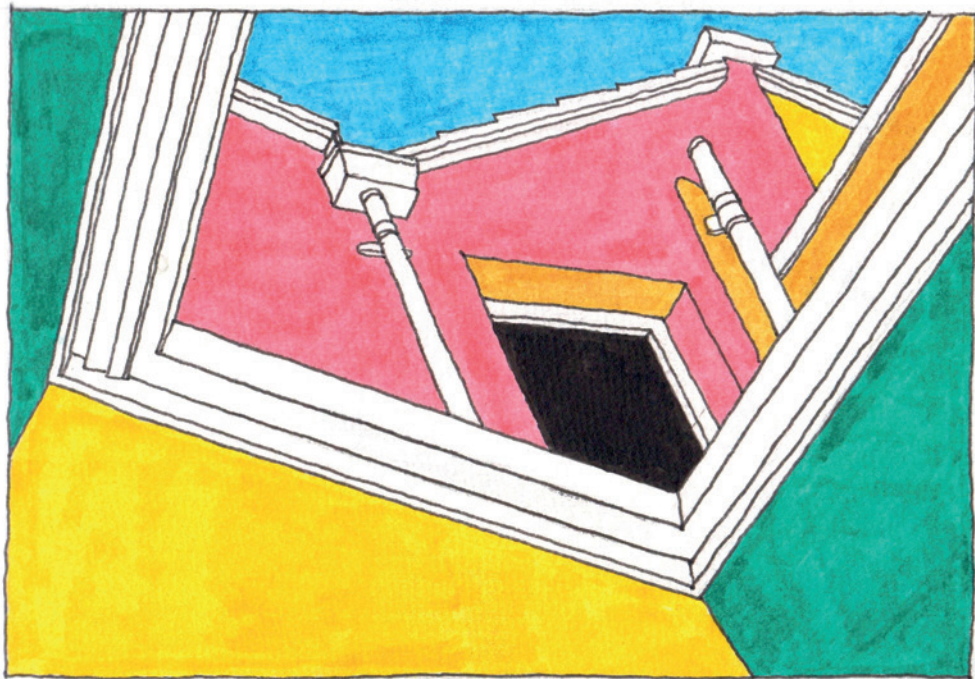


An initiative of Bristol Cultural
Development Partnership

Bristol Festival of Ideas and
The Mayor's Office present



The View From Above and Below

By Vanessa Kisuule



The View From Above and Below

By **Vanessa Kisuule**
Bristol City Poet 2018-2020



Published by Bristol Cultural Development Partnership 2020

This book has been published to mark the end of Vanessa Kisuule's term as Bristol City Poet with the generous support of the Mayor's Office, Bristol City Council.

Mayor of Bristol

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Designed by Qube Design Associates Ltd.

Printed by The Complete Product Company Ltd on FSC certified paper.

Published by Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, Leigh Court, Abbots Leigh, Bristol BS8 3RA.

Bristol Cultural Development Partnership is a partnership of the following organisations:



For further details of Vanessa Kisuule's work visit: www.vanessakisuule.com

Contents/

Foreword/	4
Introduction/	5
Orange Man/	11
Carnival/	12
Global Parliament of Mayors/	13
Tale of Two Cities/	14
Every Child Needs Christmas/	16
Brick Me/	17
100th Anniversary of the Addison Oak, Sea Mills/	19
Star and Garter/	21
Summer Looks Good on You/	22
State of the City/	24
City of Hope/	26
Tommy 2020/	28
Hollow/	30

Foreword/

Vanessa Kisuule has been an inspirational City Poet.

She has understood and communicated Bristol's soul. She has challenged the city and engaged people from all walks of life. She has crafted poems and phrases that have opened up iconic moments in Bristol's story – and the meaning of those moments – to ourselves and to people across the world.

There are words she has put together that will always be with me.

In 'Brick Me', written to accompany the demolition of the old Sorting Office that stood as a derelict eyesore behind Temple Meads for nearly a quarter of a century, she describes it as 'The chipped tooth in Bristol's smile'.

In 'Hollow', the poem written in response to the pulling down of Colston's statue, she ends the drama and emotion with the simple but profound observation,

Countless times I passed that plinth
Its heavy threat of metal and marble
But as you landed, a piece of you broke away
And inside, nothing but air
This whole time, you were hollow

In 'City of Hope', written as part of our commitment to survive and flourish through Covid-19, she shares:

Bristol will carry this hope into the future.
I'm not sure what that future looks like
but you should meet me there

It's this craft – the product of hard work applied to an artistic gift – that will ensure Vanessa's work will remain with Bristol, to be drawn on to better understand ourselves.

I am delighted to be able to present to you this anthology, which contains Vanessa's official commissions as well as some of the additional work she has created during her time as City Poet. It provides an excellent and lasting account of her two years in office.

I am grateful to all those who have worked with her.

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, 2020

Mayor of Bristol

Introduction/

Vanessa Kisuule was appointed Bristol's second City Poet by a panel of judges in May 2018. This publication is a celebration of her term of office.

As City Poet, Vanessa has written and performed poems for a wide range of organisations and occasions including: the 100th birthday party of the Addison oak tree in Sea Mills; two State of the City addresses; St Paul's Carnival; Every Child Needs Christmas; and the University of Bristol. She has run workshops in libraries, worked with children in care and distributed handwritten extracts of her poems around the city for residents to discover. This anthology contains her ten official City Poet commissions and a selection of other poems written during her term of office.

When Vanessa first took up her post she wrote the following manifesto:

I am absolutely honoured to represent this humble metropolis that I have called home for the past eight years. My love for this city and for poetry happened more or less alongside each other: I was only a year into a burgeoning spoken-word career when I moved here for university. As I've developed the fondness and frustration for this place that only comes with knowing it deeply, so has the writing, reading and teaching of poetry become an integral part of who I am.

I know that many people don't like or care about poetry. More often than not, people's lasting impression of poetry is a faint residue of memorising poems for exams. Forcing pupils to underline and analyse literary devices before cultivating a love and joy for poetic language for its own sake is the quickest way to turn people against the art form.

Cold, lifeless dissection of sonnets written by long dead white men has been a mainstay in our curriculum, and it has done little to instill a love of poetry in young people. Yet under our government, there has been no attempt to shake this up or advocate for poetry's relevance. Indeed, there has been a regression in the variety and diversity of writers that school pupils study. Jingoism has tightened its chokehold, with a narrow focus on British literature that venerates anything pre-1900 and treats contemporary and Western voices as peripheral.

Now, more than ever, it is so important to offer varied and invigorating poems, especially to those who are not frequently exposed to it. I consider this post a fruitful opportunity to demonstrate the social function of poetry, not just as a creative exercise, but a tool of political inquiry and resistance. I have seen and experienced how poetry can be a means to self actualisation and empathy. At the risk of sounding

sentimental, I genuinely believe poetry makes the task of being a human more bearable, more honest and more compassionate. It is the only arena in which language can speak to the liminal strangeness of being alive. In a time where language is so often at the behest of our strict agendas, it is a space where words can question and bear witness.

There have been some grumbles about whether our Mayor can justify spending money on a City Poet when brutal cuts are being made to essential council services. I agree that it's a hard equation to justify. The assumption that this role is mostly ornamental isn't unfounded. I would hate to be nothing more than a pliable voice puppet who reels off sanitised propaganda for the city. This role can and should be about more than that.

I fully understand the responsibility of being paid council money for this privilege. Consequently, I want to make sure that this role serves the people of this city in real and tangible ways. I don't want to just perform poems in central venues that many Bristol citizens can't or don't often access. I don't want to just run workshops for those who already have the means to access art easily. And I certainly don't want this post to just be about me and my opinions.



Vanessa Kisuule – Ailsa Fineron.

The City Poet should endeavour to represent the multiplicity of experiences, feelings and positions of its citizens. The Bristol I know as a former University of Bristol student and current resident of Redland is different to that of a young Somali mother of two in Easton, a born and bred Bristolian in Yate or an elderly person in sheltered accommodation in Fishponds. I consider it my duty to honour our differences and spend as much time listening and engaging with the community as I do writing and performing.

Some of us have a fond relationship with this city. Others of us feel frustrated, silenced and left behind. Whether because of gentrification, inadequate housing, lack of school resources, or the failures of the mental health services at universities, many Bristol dwellers have grievances about their quality of life. I intend to give space for people to express these issues, as well as celebrating the many things that make this city such an incredible place to live.

So consider me at your (partial) disposal! As I'll still be working as a freelance writer and performer on top of this role, I sadly won't be able to do half as much as I'd like and there's only so many engagements I can commit to. However, I will try my utmost to create meaningful engagements with as many of you as possible. I am especially interested in hearing from those of you who don't usually engage with the arts. Feel free to use the contact box to send in your requests for poems about Bristol. I will select the most interesting requests and create bespoke poems that will be published online. I have plenty of ideas up my sleeve for events and projects, but your input is essential to the success of this role. This is, first and foremost, a collaboration. Here's to filling this fair city with poetry. I hope I do our home justice.

Looking back in 2020 on what she has achieved in the role, she wrote:

'So what does the City Poet do, then?'

A middle-aged Cameroonian woman asked me this during my residency at Avonmouth Library. She was clutching a form in her hands that she'd printed through the library computer. Where would she have gone to do this otherwise? She wanted help filling it out, something to do with her asylum-seeker status. She referred to me, casually, as her daughter.

'So what does the City Poet do, then?'

The woman, whom we'll call Grace, told me her life story in languorous trails. She showed me pictures of her children on her phone and spoke about her many years in England cleaning houses, how her body was ravaged by an illness that nearly killed her. It was God that saved her, she declared emphatically. I proffered my fledgling atheism with the requisite guilt of a second-generation kid. I seek succour in poetry

the way she would in the Bible. But the Bible, too, is filled with poetry, allegory, metaphor.

‘So what does the City Poet do, then?’

She implored me to return to church. I had to fight the urge to lie to her and tell her I would. Even as she chastised me, she spoke with the musical lilt of a rousing sermon. In the poky recesses of the library, she was both a poet and a poem, though she had no interest whatsoever in the anthologies I’d displayed on my tiny table.

‘So what does the City Poet do, then?’

This question was hard to answer in the face of the struggles she faced, the immediacy of her needs, those innumerable indignities that a migrant so often endures.

So what can a City Poet do? And what can poetry, at large, do?

This question was asked of me a lot. Sometimes with curiosity and other times with a slight archness, a subtle suspicion. It’s an important question, and after two years I can’t claim to have a definitive answer. There are times where I have felt able to offer something, no matter how small, and for that I am proud. Through leading workshops, encouraging people to re-ignite an early love for writing or the poems I have written for various occasions, I have had moments of vindication. Other times, I have come up against the inevitable limits of the position. As I hand over the role to the brilliant Caleb Parkin, I also hand over these impossible questions:

What can a City Poet do?

In these two years, I have taken the opportunity to know Bristol better. I have ventured beyond the Bristol of the tourist brochures and visited the tiny local libraries of Fishponds, Knowle and Hartcliffe. I went to Sea Mills to witness the celebration of the 100th anniversary of council housing. Throughout, I’ve been continually moved by the number of community groups that thrive in and around Bristol, often outside the official sanctions of government funding and support.

There is the Bristol Drawing Group, diligently run by two young sisters. They have created a weekly group that anyone and everyone can join, no matter their experience or ability. It is that all-too-rare thing: a non-judgemental space to create and socialise. It is at this group that I met Steve, a retired architect whose drawings always elicit coos of admiration from the group. It’s to him we owe the lovely illustration at the front of this book. This is my small nod to the resilient and quietly selfless people who create and sustain community ties even in the face of an increasingly disconnected society.

I also took on residencies at a small cluster of local libraries. I met a young mother home-schooling her children, a former teacher with a lifelong love of poetry, an artist relearning how to express himself after a recent brain injury. It’s overwhelmingly clear how essential libraries are and how much strain they’re under to cater to a growing list of needs as other community services are decimated.

What can a City Poet do?

Well. I handed out biscuits. I listened. I commiserated. I laughed. I had many chats that were not about poetry at all. At the very least, I hope my presence has interrupted the prevalent image of the poet as old, as dead, as white, male, unanchored from the concrete realities of life. All the conversations I’ve had have further proved what I always believed to be true. Poetry must be democratic, fluid, responsive to the world it purports to reflect.

Inevitably, I have changed as a poet and a person in the past two years, and so has Bristol. As I hand over to the next poet, we have seen the city go into lockdown as Covid-19 rocks the very foundation of our global priorities. We’ve also seen the statue of slave trader Edward Colston toppled after 135 years. But even as these seismic changes have created huge ripples, it’s sobering to remember that many systemic issues in the city have remained the same or been exacerbated by these complicated times.

Our experiences of this city are splintered. From the top of Cabot Tower, nestled as it is between Hotwells, Redland and Clifton, Bristol seems idyllic. From there, the coloured houses, bountiful trees and wide sky dotted with balloons is the fodder of glossy brochures. But the Bristol you see from below is a different and often darker story. It’s hard to cultivate imagination when you are focused on the bare essentials of living: getting a job, paying bills, keeping your family afloat. From above, the scope of life seems boundless. From below, it’s all too easy to feel hemmed in by tall flats you can’t afford to rent, huge crowds of indifferent people, a mercenary government that puts the bottom line before the people they’re paid to serve.

‘What does a City Poet do, then?’

Perhaps: they are honest, even when the truth is ugly or damning. They shed light on hope and unabashed joy, without leaning on platitudes. And they try, when they can, to offer more than just one vantage point.

The City Poet simply shows the view from above and below.

In June 2020 Caleb Parkin was appointed Vanessa’s successor as City Poet following an open-call for submissions. Caleb is a poet, performer, facilitator and filmmaker with a particular passion for inclusive

environmentalism; wellbeing; arts, culture and heritage; and LGBT+ pride. On the announcement of his appointment – which he will hold for two years – he said:

I'm flabbergasted, fizzy and delighted to be taking up the role of Bristol City Poet. Vanessa Kisuule has done a magnificent job over the last couple of years, with poems which celebrate, commemorate and challenge – and I'm honoured to be inheriting the post from her. We're living through a period of great uncertainty. As a writing-for-wellbeing practitioner, I know that poetry has a role to play in comforting those in need. It can also challenge us to imagine different futures and ask useful questions about our city. I hope to write delicious poems for the people of Bristol, which embrace the city's playful spirit – and to create spaces which give voice to our kaleidoscope of experiences. Remember: especially on a sunny day, Bristol is already a poem.



Caleb Parkin – Paul Samuel White.

The Poems/

Orange Man

The first official commission, performed at the City Poet hand-over event at City Hall, 2018. Context feels important for this piece. At the time, there was heated debate about the selling of Hamilton House in Stokes Croft. The space above the Canteen was once owned by community group Coexist and held, amongst other things, affordable studio space for artists. In the summer, a group of artists created a protest work that displayed a cluster of bright orange clay figurines outside the building.

They were born under careful fingers
the colour of colonial summer walls
and breakfast juice.
Soon enough, they'll be rendered
to the dust from whence I came
passing through careless history
And careful footsteps
No pilgrimage with no homeland,
They inherit pavements of parched fire.
crude metaphor wedded to the concrete
Defying the arrogance of language

Carnival

Commissioned to celebrate St Paul's Carnival, 2018

Carnival has claws
And yes, it has teeth
see the long line of dominoes
cascading down the street
an elder sat quietly in his room
ambles down memory lane
He hums a rocksteady tune
in search of a name
the heat of a first glance
skippety-skip of his heart
asking a pretty girl to dance
radiant in her green dress
She smiled big and wide,
of course she said yes

For legacies of yesteryears
You only need to look around
Ghosts of carnivals past
dance through the crowds
What would they reckon
to carnival's changing face?
Would they be proud, distressed,
Even recognise this place?
We can only wonder –
As airhorns pierce our ears
beats rumble like thunder
In a world that teaches us
to keep our distance
fear foreigners, fear change,
fear time, fear difference

Old ways of distrust
won't hold a claim to us
Our kids play double dutch
In the same streets
dismissed as dangerous
This celebration was born
in defiance of defeat
And so it will remain
this is not a sleeping beast
Carnival has claws.
Carnival has teeth.

Global Parliament of Mayors

Written to mark the gathering in Bristol of more than 80 mayors and city network leaders from six continents in 2018

A single line in a poem
Sets a forest alight,
Whilst a no man's land
of sprawling voices clash
In splintered Esperanto.

One person in one city
Spins like a dervish
An intricate dance
of balance and bargain

cities make up countries
which make up nations
rumbling, sick and splitting,
ripping fissures beneath
our weary feet.

Yet more borders drawn
of land and language
tongues sealed off,
traded for the brute
slang of violence

I lied before.
A line in a poem
Is not like a lit match
kissing the trunk of a tree.

But imagine a city built
like quivering verse
Each paving stone,
regal church and ghostly alley
Interlocked, humming, true.

Tale of Two Cities

Performed at the State of the City Address 2018

And here:
Academic Mecca where
cheap drinks flowed down gullets
freedom never tasted so neon
Those brief affair with basics vodka
the overripe fruit of fast friendships
each of our heads wreathed in
The scratchy leaves of possibility

And here:
the long shadow of loneliness
A girl stares at the screen
and its blinking cursor.
'These are the best years of my life'
she says to her bedroom wall,
It neither confirms or denies,
the future unfathomable
behind its thick, mystic fog.

And here:
Polish shops squashed between
falafel huts and Caribbean joints
sharing square footage and cultural clout
as white boys walk by, their Aladdin pants
billowing like blown glass Home-County
vowels checkered with the patois
they borrowed from the Rastas
fringing the pavement.

And here:
everyone has the world on their
plate but not in their neighbourhood,
borders unspoken but strict as silence
the true soundtrack bubbling beneath
Bob Marley's call for one love

And here:
idyllic metropolis
blessed respite from breeze block
commerce and heart starved concrete
people up sticks and start again here,
in the fabled place of ice cream
houses and Banksy, always bloody Banksy

And here:
Bristolians pay for this success story
As familiar streets turn slick and suddenly
Cafes dot corners that lay barren
for years. Who are these tall glasses
of marked up froth for? Not for those
Who deep-dive sofa-backs for bus fare.

And here is a tale of two cities
morphing on the tongue
that tells it and there is
No stranger, better place
than here

and here

and here

and here

Every Child Needs Christmas

Written in 2018 for Every Child Needs Christmas, a South West based volunteer-run initiative delivering gifts to children in need

As December holds us in its frosty grip
We start giving and receiving gifts

Some love the rush and glitter of this special time
Spend too much money, drink too much mulled wine

Kids write long lists for Santa, pleading for the latest gadgets
Parents pay the price, rushing round the shops in panic

The pressure for a perfect Christmas is sometimes tough
We wonder if what we do, cook or buy will be enough

Some kids wake up to gift towers higher than their heads
Others wake up to no stocking on the end of their beds

Many families put hopes of a happy holiday aside
Austerity robs children of joy, their carers of pride

Those of us with plenty could spread some cheer
To more than just our own families this year

Not for the pull of pity or fleeting charity
But because it could so easily be you or me

To each other's humanity we all bear witness
Remember that every child needs Christmas

Brick Me

Written in 2019 to mark the demolition of Bristol's old Sorting Office in preparation for the new University of Bristol Temple Quarter

The weight of the monster's head
Sent to grind me down
To dust is 14.7 tonnes
And its long neck stretches out 42 metres
No blaze of glory, mushroom
Of bilious smoke. No almighty crash,
My demise won't rip through the sky
Or shift the boards beneath
Nearby family homes
I'll be nibbled on, a utilitarian canapé
The salt and silt of me will linger

I've been everything and nothing
Place of honest work,
Den of deviant pleasures
Filled with words and orphan feathers
History dribbles out from the strict
Things in which we try to house it
Eroding through steel and concrete,
It reinvents itself, asbestos unfurling
Queer and twisted as shame and
Its crooked brother
silence,

A locked safe
Writhing with the torture of its contents
I'm an inconvenient crevice,
The chipped tooth in Bristol's smile,
I greet commuters' trains as they whistle by
Pitted like the moon, full of ache and howl
The harshness of my vowels, the
Smear of asphalt I leave on the skyline
Ominous skull with six hundred
Stories rotting in my sockets
Tales too subtle and wicked for
Written language

So brick me, then
Sore symbol of bygone times that I am
Rooted ghost of things best left
Muttered under breath
Footnoted in forgotten books,
I bow out as gracelessly as I clung on
A gritty legacy to chew on
A monstrous thing to
Digest.

100th Anniversary of the Addison Oak, Sea Mills

Written to mark the centenary of the Addison Act and the start of building large-scale council estates in Bristol, 2019

Close your eyes
Picture the house of your dreams.
Is it nestled in the wooded ribs of a glade,
laced by the gentle sound of the sea?
Perhaps perched on a hill overlooking
The twinkling lights of the city
Looking down at those that
live side by side and top to toe.
When we imagine perfect homes
They're tucked away on private acres
Unsullied by the bonds of social living
Yet we lament the rise of loneliness
the sickness making graveyards
of us long before our last breaths.
The underclass is frowned upon,
their livelihood a punchline, a
cautionary tale told with half
its chapters missing.

Their grievances are many,
but too few of us listen.
So many facts too often forgotten:
the good faith that built these dwellings
The rich communities that flower here,
every family behind every window
With a story unique as a fingerprint
These buildings once trembled
with the soft glow of utopia.
In the aftermath of war, a bold law was passed:
An act to build homes that would last.
Fertilised by green space and great hopes,
Owned and enjoyed by those in need.
A young man hollowed out by
The horrors of combat could return
To a home 'fit for a hero',
A low-earning mother could
raise her children in a house
with working lights and running
water.

This was not a given.
It still isn't. We have yet to make
good on this 100 year promise.
We've neither the space or
luxury to be islands, not whilst
Waiting lists for houses get longer
And the life span of the homeless
Gets shorter. Let idealism
Gleam on the horizon once again
as it did in 1919, bolstered
by the lessons we've learnt
Let's meet the ever urgent
need for all of us to live
amongst and for each other
In a city where everyday living
Makes heroes of us all.

Star and Garter

Performed at the re-opening of the Star and Garter pub, 2019

This,
this is where we go
When all the other drinking holes call last orders,
then sweep us into the restless night, writhing
and reckless and ready for round two.
When you're down on your luck, up for another,
looking for the last glug at the bottle,
one last wheel up from the DJ.
When our veins itch
for another song, another sip,
when all your mates wanna dip
but you've still got another in you.
When you want a cold one
Not in a gastro pub, or a pub/cafe,
Or a pub/cafe/barber,
Or a pub/cafe/barber/tattoo parlour/sloe gin distillery
When you want to be your simplest, silliest, most sacred self.
When it's too early to go home, or there's no home to go to
When you wanna skank with the city's misfits
make good on the gospel of the baseline chaser
worship at the altar of a well-stocked bar.
Where the DJ is your dad, the drop is your god,
where the party goes on as all the others stop.

Summer Looks Good on You

Written in the summer of 2019, with handwritten extracts left around the city to be discovered by residents

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol.
Hours billow like fresh sheets,
shimmering open and shut with
the moth wings winking at dusk.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
Each season is endless until it ends.
May we never learn this lesson,
but float on, oblivious as bubbles.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
The sky begs to be stroked,
balloons scattered in its folds.
Puffed jewels airborne and brazen
As childhood dreams left to the
whims of wind.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
On your summits we often sit,
take in the Tetris sandwich of roofs.
Sometimes, the stories squatting below
peek out from the windows and wave.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
We're forced to wear our shoulders lower,
worship the inelegance of sweat.
Slick skin bare as birth
and just as precious.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
Evenings do not land like guillotines,
instead light bumps into dark
like a favoured old friend.
They linger a while,
in aimless twilight embrace.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
We worship the sun's slow magma,
Sometimes forgetting ourselves,
navels and bald heads exposed,
slow roasting in simmering fields.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
The Harbourside clinks with padlocks
etched with wind-worn promises
We dance in the warm breeze.
feet dangling over water like
an empty threat, a misremembered
lyric on the tongue.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
Sugar hangover. Sticky pint glass.
Wasps dancing needless ellipsis.
Drunk butterflies swim through
the sorbet in our stomachs.

Summer looks so good on you, Bristol
building strength in my hill-shy thighs
All I want is to watch kids' bellies
gurgle with laughter and sing myself
ageless. A seagull steals
my tuna sandwich, a busker borrows
my time. I do not mind. Under a
watchful sun, it is easy to be kind.

State of the City

Performed at the State of the City Address 2019

The cars cough tar
and the air hangs thick,
the trees sigh slow
as our kids get sick.
Our fears hang loose
as the warped clock tocks,
it tock tick tocks
and our slack jaws lock.
We flex our wrists
cough clear our throats,
heads come together
as we see what floats.
We swallow our fear
though it haunts our ribs,
solemn vows of change
hang heavy on lips.
The cars cough tar
and the air hangs thick,
the birds sing grief,
And our mouths house grit.
Some thick fat tongues
speak sound-bite clouds,
We have no faith
in those empty sounds.
We drive through town
In our speed-shaped shells
Then drive back home
Overwhelmed by the smell
The cars cough tar
and the close air gasps,
Will this now be
Bristol's epitaph?

We can't hang back
And we can't give up
Can't lean on chance
Or rely on luck
We must serve all
Not just Clifton folk
It's the poorest parts
That will feel the choke
Think broad and fair
It is bigger than us
Those on the edge

Matter just as much
Give the homeless hope
Don't just move them on
They too have a pride
And the right to belong
The streets are ours
So let's treat them so
Do not think dark
Where there's light, there's growth
Let's dust off bikes
And our walking shoes
Make all streets safe
so we can walk through
But change must come
From our leaders first
For they hold the strings
To the public purse
In Lawrence Hill
Parents can't catch trains
No ramp for prams
And no signs of change
If we must ditch
All the toxic cars
We need cheap travel
To get near and far
The bus must be
on budget, on time
The bike paths smooth
as a seamless rhyme.
We dream big dreams
For the kids we've birthed
Now let's sow seeds
In the patient dirt
Perhaps naive
To believe in more
But live on we must
But what on earth for?
To stroll in groups
In the rain and sun
As the kids breathe deep
and the sweet air hums.
Our pathways wide
As the trees are tall,
The city's lungs swelling
As a new dawn calls.

City of Hope

Written in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020

Bristol, this plaque says, is
a City of Hope. I wish hope
was as strong and certain
as the stone this was carved
in. But life as we knew it
tilts on its axis, each day
a sickening lurch, the minutes
brittle with worry and fear.
But when I chase hope down
the long halls of my brain,
I recollect Bristol from
behind my eyelids and soften.
Tower block windows winking
from a humble summit.
College Green on a lunch break.
The Harbourside fringed with
giggles and shrieks. Top 40
Dribbles from taxis. All that fruit
jewelling Stapleton Road.
Kids shedding feathers and joy
for carnival. That small thrill
of swapping smiles with strangers.
Hands held, doors knocked,
the scrambled shape of a friendly face
behind frosted glass.

It's not been long, yet all this seems
to belong to a distant past.
And for many these pleasures
were always elusive, forever
slipping between deeds and actions,
warm rooves and cold pavements,
hope and her dead-eyed twin despair.
Where is hope when the ground
sinks beneath you, the sky no more
than a misremembered dream?
Hope bends into many shapes
in patient hands.
A dented can of beans,
A wilted carrot, that mid-week phone call
That brings you back from the brink.
The evening air crackling with pride
palms and pots in fevered percussion.
Bristol will carry this hope into the future.

I'm not sure what that future looks like
but you should meet me there,
under your favourite tree or a
lonely streetlight and we will
greet this city, our old friend
with new stories, a chorus of
feathers on her shoulders.

Tommy 2020

Written in 2020 to mark the 250th anniversary of the death of Bristol-born poet Thomas Chatterton

Tommy sits.
Chews a pen.
Tongue stained
black, mouth a
private abyss.
He wonders what
rhymes with
loneliness.

Tommy watches.
His mum is
folding flyers.
Four-fifty an hour
to slide them
through each
letterbox within
a mile radius.

Tommy squints.
When the leccy's
paid, she plays
the radio: 80s hits.
But not tonight.
Cash-strapped,
the house is dark,
robbed of song.

Tommy writes.
Not on his phone
that's never
topped up.
He favours
ink and paper.
Biro sturdy,
thumb snug.

Tommy wanders.
Kills time in
the local library.
It's warm and safe,
costs him nothing.
In shards of
shy light he
reads old poems.

Tommy finds
Chatterton.
Ginger, poor
and pissed off,
just like him.
A mother broke
and struggling,
just like his.

Tommy reads.
Chatterton
hated school,
called a dullard,
chucked out.
He knows the
feeling, teachers
say he's thick so
he believes it.

Tommy cried
when writing
club got cut.
The only place
he felt safe,
could trace the
rhythm of his
racing thoughts.

Tommy's lost.
No good at sports
or video games.
A recipe for
friendlessness.
All he's got
is books and their
patient margins.

Tommy zones out.
Lets the future
leave him behind,
his whole spine
a sigh, dreams
he's alive in a
different time
and thriving.

Tommy thinks:
he'll run away
like Chatterton.
Make money for
his mum, enough for
her to sit in sturdy
light, soft-eyed
and humming.

Tommy hopes
people read his
poems one day
look past his youth,
and skinny frame.
An old soul in
cheap trainers,
his words as
ancient and true
as wind through
grass.

Tommy knows kids
choke on their own
silence every day.
Chatterton's due
finally came
through the grave,
only safe and sacred
as romantic tragedy.

Tommy is more
than a sad story.
A biro propels him,
his mum humming
to Annie Lennox,
The librarian's nod
as he shuffles in
from the cold.

One word is not much,
but in a chain they're a
sentence,
sentiment,
declaration
of presence.
Tommy writes.

Tommy lives,
Tommy lives,
Tommy lives

Hollow

Written in response to the removal of the Edward Colston statue by protestors during a Black Lives Matter rally in 2020

You came down easy in the end.
The righteous wrench of two ropes in a grand plié.

Briefly, you flew, corkscrewed, then met the ground
With the clang of toy guns, loose change, chains, a rain of cheers.

Standing ovation on the platform of your neck.
Punk Ballet. Act 1.
There is more to come.

And who carved you?
They took such care with that stately pose and propped chin.

Wise and virtuous, the plaque assured us.
Victors wish history odourless and static.
But history is a sneaky mistress.

Moves like smoke, Colston,
Like saliva in a hungry mouth.

This is your rightful home,
Here, in the pit of chaos with the rest of us.

Take your twisted glory and feed it to the tadpoles.
Kids will write raps to that syncopated splash.

I think of you lying in the harbour
With the horrors you hosted.
There is no poem more succinct than that.

But still you are permanent.
You who perfected the ratio.
Blood to sugar to money to bricks.

Each bougie building we flaunt haunted by bones.
Children learn and titans sing
Under the stubborn rust of your name.

But the air is gently throbbing with newness.
Can you feel it?

Colston, I can't get the sound of you from my head.
Countless times I passed that plinth,
Its heavy threat of metal and marble.

But as you landed, a piece of you fell off, broke away,
And inside, nothing but air.
This whole time,
you were hollow



From 2018 to 2020 Vanessa Kisuule served as Bristol’s second City Poet, taking over the role from Miles Chambers. This publication celebrates her term of office.



An initiative of Bristol Cultural Development Partnership



Supported using public funding by
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