

Caleb Femi

NEW COMMISSION

All the Dreams Have Anchored Me Here: Lockdown i-iii



A rising star on the British poetry scene, Caleb Femi's debut collection *Poor* considers what it is to be a young, working class Black man, living in South London in the 21st Century. One of two poets shortlisted for the 2021 Rathbones Folio Prize, Max Porter describes him as 'a poet of truth and rage, heartbreak and joy.' Caleb is a poet and director and has previously been commissioned by organisations including the BBC, Channel 4, Tate Modern and The Guardian. From 2016 – 2018, he was the Young People's Laureate for London.

In early 2021, Caleb Femi was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a new series of poems exploring the impact of solitude during the pandemic, touching on themes of the inner and physical self, friendship, joy and imagination as a coping tool. Caleb performed the poems for the first time at an online event hosted by fellow poet Vanessa Kisuule. The event was available to watch from 8 -15 April 2021 on MLF's Crowdcast channel.

This is one of a series of New Commissions written especially for Manchester Literature Festival and supported by an award from the DCMS Culture Recovery Fund.

www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

Copyright © Caleb Femi (words) 2021

Manchester Literature Festival would like to thank Rachel Mann at Jo Unwin, Thi Dinh and Matt Hutchinson at Penguin, Arts Council England and Manchester City Council for their generous support.



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL**

All the Dreams Have Anchored Me Here: Lockdown i-iii

the Sun has eaten
its fill of my youth
and there is nothing
for Time to take
bones cleaned through
to the marrow
but there are bristles of memory
left on the plate
all of this and for what?
I was nine the last time I taunted
the doom to visit
pressing my forehead
against the window
squinting at the horizon for
the galloping to arrive
pompous are the young
I met my first school
suspension shortly after
it took me three hours
to return home
dry throat and buckling
at the knees
doormat was already stained
with a black mud
as I opened the door to meet
what I wished for inside

*

when I woke up I found rage pulsating
on the couch and thought it braver
than me to see the sand of sleep
(how it can hide anything
vinegar and fear)
And not sink into the grains
And let dreaming erode the sticky days

I saw soft castles and barking cats
and it was populated with dangerous people I love
There is an old woman who delivers my mail
I call her *Auntie* – naturally
she brings me the news from the world
And then asks how I am
I lean on the threshold of my door and tell her
I am most lonely when the shadows leave at noon

*

a disaster exists only when it's measured against another
I live alone unable to become a disaster

*

if I were a collapsing balloon
if my index finger was held by the entire palm of a newborn
if I were a glass of sparkling water
if I were the seed of a pomegranate or
if I was a crocodile in a half-filled tub
if I came with assembling instructions
if I was peckish for a breakfast (for two)
if I was an unpaired slipper
if I were a vineyard
if I was beautiful

if I was forgiven
if I was forgiving
I would have forgiven

*

I stand at the foot of a mountain
begging to be swallowed
I want to be made by Stonemithing
It is a good work – an honest sharpening
what the wind takes
and the water

to make, in the end,
a smooth pebble at the gums of a lake
picked up by a small boy
who will show his mother and say
pretty, I like this one,
it's pretty

*

how full is the world
when stripped of colour
You people do not talk enough
about grey sunsets
ask anyone from the endz
we swear by them
the only thing we agree
with politicians about
grey suits
party poppers
bonfire night – grey sparks
the plenty of oneness
we are in this – *together*
a grey rapture of hands
clapping at a grey 8pm

*

when my cats grew bored of my tears
and my fridge
my books and their soaked pages
the carpet and its month-wet patches
I took my daily walk between the fingers of midnight
the city was drunk and muffled
and chorused my sobbing as if it were my first
ten thousand and three steps my phone said I took
and the whole time
the pavement hummed
as if what poured out from me
was worth its weight in hope

*

shoutout to my friends who held me down
when gravity loosened its grip
though my feet still haven't touched the ground
I have not ascended too far up
not to see what's poppin' on the endz
I see Hailey is still up to her old bullshit
and Mo has got a new hustle
(I'll make dua for him)
when we buss the lockdown
we'll meet atop the canopy of lampposts
do the maths on what we've lost
then pour oil down our throats
and power a good portion of
the city for half a night