

**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](http://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