

## The best new poetry books to buy for Christmas 2021

It's the poets' party – and no subject is off the menu. This year's best verse featured cannibalism, Catholicism and a very kinky Catullus

By [Tristram Fane Saunders](#) 20 November 2021 • 3:00pm



From left: Gail McConnell's *The Sun is Open*, Maia Elsner's *Overrun by Wild Boars*, *The Forward Book of Poetry 2022*

Here we are again, at the poets' Christmas party. Pour yourself a mugful of mulled wine and try not to get stuck in the hallway with the sort of **Men Who Feed Pigeons** (Bloodaxe, £12), inimitably skewered in Selima Hill's bite-sized portraits. "Familiar, inert, he's like a table," she writes of one. "Watching him eat brandy snaps, I'm learning/ not to keep expecting to be heard."

Was that the doorbell? **A God at the Door** (Bloodaxe, £10.99) brings mixed tidings: responses to harrowing recent events in Indian poet Tishani Doshi's home country, but also strange disjunctions, offbeat humour, flashes of hope.

Catullus is in the basement, but he's a bit tied up, literally – Isobel Williams's naughty translation **Shibari Carmina** (Carcanet, £12.99) puts the Roman poet in a bondage dungeon. Leave him to his ropes, and instead follow the sound of music upstairs to meet Miguel, whose "allegiance is to a Hammond B3/ that, if you play it right, will disclose,/ by sympathetic magic of its stuck key,/ the traces of a blacker melody". Miguel's is one of many lives touched by HIV in an arresting crown of sonnets from Kayo Chingonyi's elegiac [Blood Condition](#) (Chatto & Windus, £10).

A louder racket comes from another sonnet sequence next door, where Smashing Pumpkins singer Billy Corgan is jamming with – could it be? Surely not! – W B Yeats. Their worlds collide in Stephen Sexton’s fleet-footed and irrepressibly charming [Cheryl’s Destinies](#) (Penguin, £9.99).

Sonnets are everywhere. Just ask Luke Kennard, whom we find “in the kitchen with a man who says he can recite any of Shakespeare’s sonnets”. Ignore that show-off, and read Kennard’s [Notes on the Sonnets](#) (Penned in the Margins, £9.99) instead: a wise, funny, devilishly clever book of prose poems, all set at a house party rather like this one.

There’s a scoop of Kennardishness in Jenna Clarke’s **Museum of Ice Cream** (Bloodaxe, £9.95), its humour belying her subject; the toll of an eating disorder. You must **Eat or We Both Starve** (Carcanet, £10.99) warns Victoria Kennefick, in a debut that approaches that same theme via the Irish Famine, Catholicism and Freudian fantasies of cannibalism. Faith and flesh are also fruitfully explored in Jude Nutter’s thoughtful, sensuous [Dead Reckoning](#) (Salmon, £11).

The dining room may be **Overrun by Wild Boars** (Flipped Eye, £6.95), but Maia Elsner is still there, celebrating “Christmas in diaspora” with her Polish-Mexican family, “our usual Chanukah candles/ on the tree”. Elsner explores trauma through imagined visits to Mayan temples; Alice Hiller puts Pompeii to the same use in **Bird of Winter** (Pavilion, £9.99), its ruins a powerful symbol for the poet’s buried memories of abuse. Reading Hiller’s cut-up snippets of other texts, the reader becomes a fellow explorer, sifting the wreckage of the past; a similar effect comes from the redacted reports on a Romanian orphanage in Maria Stadnicka’s [Buried Gods Metal Prophets](#) (Guillemot, £12), and Gail McConnell’s [The Sun is Open](#) (Penned in the Margins, £9.99), which draws on newspaper cuttings about her father’s murder by the IRA.

Indecisive? You’ll find poems from all the above (bar Williams) in the stocking-sized **The Forward Book of Poetry 2022** (Faber, £9.99).

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