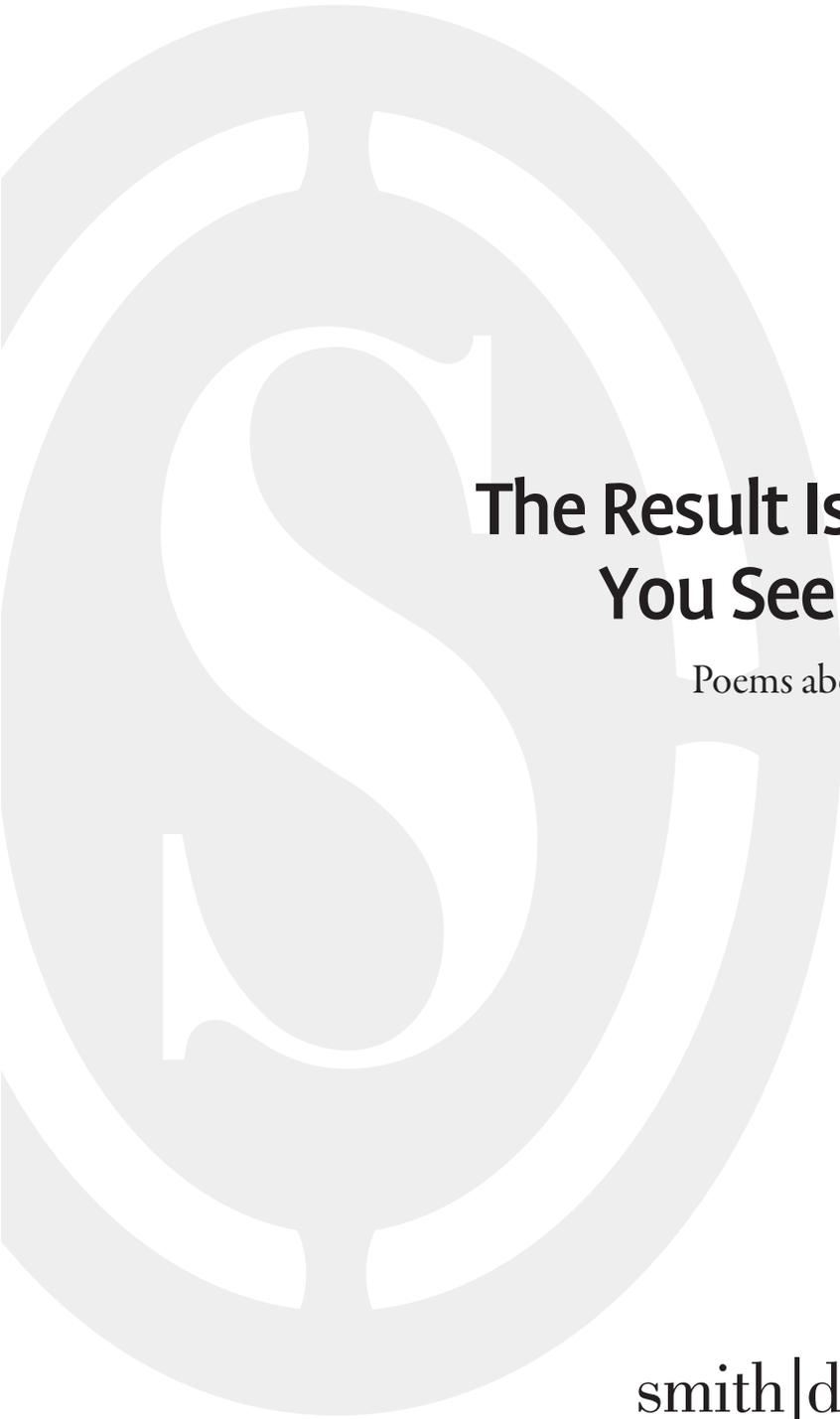


The Result Is What You See Today



The Result Is What You See Today

Poems about Running

smith|doorstop

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Diane Leather

The first woman to run a sub-five-minute mile.

1933 - 2018

Introductions

Kim Moore

I've been working as a freelance poet for the last couple of years which involves a lot of travel and overnight stays in hotels. Although I love my job, perhaps some of my most enduring memories from the last few years come from the times in between running a workshop or giving a reading. Invariably I go out for a run as a way of finding myself in a strange city. I go alone if I have to, but I prefer to find another poet-runner to go with. As you can see from this anthology, there's a thriving community of poet-runners around, if you know where to look.

Throughout the editing and selection process I've been thinking about the similarities between running and writing – how I use both to find out what I think about something, or what I know-without-knowing. They both have a contradiction at their heart, rooted in the individual act, yet for me at least, they have to take place within a living thriving community.

It's been a real honour to read the hundreds of poems that were submitted. Each one felt like a window into another life, another run, another race. They are poems about running, but they're about so much more. They are about freedom and the body, about pain and our relationship to the world around us, about childhood memories, friendships and ageing, politics and gender and society, self-image, dreaming and limits.

Many of the poems contained within these pages circle round the central question of why we run at all, and the conclusion must be that there are as many reasons as there are runners. My own relationship with running changed whilst working on this anthology as I became more and more pregnant. My runs got slower and shorter. I stopped worrying about getting faster, and instead started to enjoy running as a privilege which enabled me to ground myself in the world around me, and feel more connected to my changing body and the strange passenger I carried inside.

This idea of running being a transformative act is explored in the fourth section of the anthology: 'I won't stop until I've travelled from one life to another.' There are poems that explore the idea of the self being transformed by running, as well as the many ways our relationship with running can be transformed. The third section of the anthology 'Our bodies gone to our heads' examines the role of the body – how it carries us through pain and difficulty, and how it can let us down. The second section of the anthology is titled 'Against the rising light' and examines perhaps one of the central reasons why many people run – as a way of being present in the world and connecting with the environment. Finally, the first section 'What I was born for' is made up of those poems which seemed to us to

try and articulate the reasons for running. Many of them concern themselves with being 'in the moment'. Of course, many of the poems could have sat in different sections – we hope these possibilities and connections will keep readers moving through the anthology.

Finally, we hope you enjoy reading the poems as much as we enjoyed reading, discussing and selecting them and that they inspire you to run, or to write a poem or both.

Paul Deaton

I live in the dynamic, frenetic, creative city Bristol: a place currently going through a running renaissance judging by the swell in numbers at my club and the running events in and around this city. Bristol is an ethnically diverse, generally alternative, sea-faring, self-made place; that's been down, as many cities have, but now given an influx of recent nationalities particularly from the Latin countries Spain and Italy, it's on the up. It is a place a stone's throw from London that attracts people who like cities but who wish to live an outdoor-type-life: climbers, cyclists, triathletes (Chrissie Wellington lives just outside) and runners, who abound along the broken pavements, the worn parkland limestone trails, the industrial hinterlands, the canal, the cycle-paths, the wide expanse of the Downs, the various city's Victorian steps, the floating harbour, and the Avon's snaking towpath and port-way out to the Severn.

I happen to run with one of the Bristol clubs, Southville RC. (It hasn't always been this way. This club. Or me running with one). I've heard it often said by people at my club, when I've been chatting one on one, in a quiet reflective moment, that the runner declaims 'they don't do clubs,' that they are not, in spite of running out with the club, a clubby-type-of-person. In fact, I'd stretch this admission, which might well be my projection, that most are and feel themselves to be, as far as clubs go, to a degree outsiders – or more positively, one might say, people who have found in running something similar that holds them fast to the varied life experiences they've encountered. Now the second thing I've noticed, which no doubt won't apply to everyone, but does apply to many people here, is that running is in some way a personal 'cure' to experiences so powerful that they've had to, in some way, refigure their lives: illness, bereavement, break-ups; all sorts of hard, put-upon, life changing hurts and ups and downs that have resulted in reassessment, that have resulted in running. Here they've found a stress-busting outlet, a structure that allows them expression to live well and live again, and with each run – again and again – to move forwards in life that strengthens and does not reduce them. So yes, my club is a club, but you'll find in general it is a club run by and used by people, individuals, who say they don't do clubs, perhaps the word community would be far better. The community thrives on this difference of the individual – a collective dis-cohesion – and this is similar, perhaps even the same, as this anthology of running poems.

Here you'll find a collection of poems that we have savoured, but it is a collection of poems by poets who have faced something in themselves, beyond the running and beyond using words and being poets; the poetry and the running are merely the means, the transmutation of getting back into, and re-entering a fluid-flow with life. It is, to quote northerner Tony Harrison, a 'ceremony of articulation,' and in this ceremony, all of life appears to surface.

So here read in full that saturated with life fluid-flow: regrets, triumphs, losses,

epiphanies, memories, streams of consciousness, absorption into nature, into one's body, a wholeness, and rich beautiful fleetingness into the universe, that pulses both in and out of focus, appears at times in HD as the blood has pumped through veins, in the zinging, endorphin-enriched brain, and the self that appears suddenly, like sunshine after rain in technicolour, in unspeakable brilliance, this might be as simple as sunlight falling on a decaying wall, or the way the leaves in the sycamore tree are waving like small shaking hands. Here are poems with just these small details. Once you have felt this fullness, the running buzz, then here becomes the positive addiction. You want it again and again. The perfect easy run. The poem that says it all or says all it can about one moment. These are poems not on the way to becoming but that have achieved their goal. A collection of varied, disparate and individual voices. But all sharing the same root cause and a liberation in an activity that at its best transcends circumstance and brings the person back into the heartfelt truth of themselves and the nearby, closely-experienced earth.

Poetry and running. Perfect bedfellows. A perfect test of who we are. Byron knew of such a test when, in 1810, he swam the Hellespont, and regarded it his best achievement; the test offered an enlargement of who he was. Byron style – and who he thought he was! It was this test, crossing from Europe to Asia, though, and not his poems, he most alluded to. The poets assembled here would know about this. And Byron, knowing what he found in swimming, perhaps, well, he could've been induced to run regularly the local parkrun or more probably an ultra-marathon – but sadly, he had a club foot.

Enjoy the poems. We did.

Ben Wilkinson

Running is pointless. Where our Stone Age ancestors ran great distances across the plains in pursuit of food – scavenging and so-called ‘persistence hunting’, i.e. tiring out less hardy prey – we now live in a mechanised world that allows us to travel and transport at speeds and over distances incomprehensible to early man. In fact, when it comes to speed, as a species we’re not even particularly good at it: the average warthog could beat Usain Bolt at his 100m-world-record-setting best. Even elite athletes generate more energy as heat than as forward motion. Looked at like this, running can seem tiring, frustrating and unnecessary. Anyone who runs will have faced the question at least once: *Why do you bother?*

Bill Bowerman, University of Oregon running coach, was fond of philosophising to his fresh-faced varsity recruits. ‘Running, one might say, is basically an absurd pastime on which to be exhausting ourselves’, he would suggest. ‘But if you can find meaning in the type of running you need to do, chances are you’ll be able to find meaning in that other absurd pastime: life’. So the question of why we variously run is really the bigger question of why we do anything at all, in a world that – unless you’re deeply religious in some way – can look to be without much meaning.

I’m writing this at a time when running, in all its forms, is in rude health. Two million adults in England alone go running at least once a week. The parkrun initiative – free, weekly, timed 5k events open to all, and likely in a park near you – started as a small get-together in 2004; 15 years later there are over five million registered parkrunners worldwide. As my co-editors Paul and Kim also suggest, there might be as many reasons for running as runners themselves: for fitness; for self-esteem and recovery; for competition (with yourself and/or others); as a brief, clarifying escape from the pressures and demands of modern life. But I’d also like to propose that most runners who return to running throughout their lives tend to do so because it helps them, as Bowerman suggests, to ‘find meaning’ – to make sense of themselves and the world around them. And in that respect, running has a lot in common with poetry.

Haruki Murakami once claimed that most of what he knows about writing he learned by running every day. There’s a long history of running writers: Jonathan Swift, Joyce Carol Oates, Andre Dubus, Don DeLillo, to name a few. For me, running and writing poetry have become two sides of the same finisher’s medal. Despite the sometime company and camaraderie, both are fundamentally solitary pursuits. With running it’s you versus the path ahead, you versus your ambitions. In poetry it’s you versus the blank page, you versus the many ways in which words and language might fail. But it’s also, in both disciplines, you pitted against yourself, your angels and demons, your hopes and fears and dreams. Writing a poem, you’re trying to reach beyond the borders of speech, the limits of words and their meaning, and the best poets somehow manage it, putting into words

what can't be put into words – until it is. Running, you're trying to stretch beyond the limits of the self, your apparent capabilities, and watching the best athletes, at amateur and professional level alike, they seem to outrun the constraints of the human mind and body – they almost transcend the physical as a great poem almost transcends the language. The margins for success can be slim, the chances of failure high. With that in mind, the unlikely communities that running fosters are much like those among poets, and probably spring up for the same reasons. Solidarity, mutual recognition of determination and effort, achievement in the face of the odds. No wonder we need clubs.

But all of that is to talk in terms of running and writing as a kind of purposeful achievement: in pursuit of 'success', however personal and relative it might be. The poems in this anthology are successes, but they are also a wonderful and much broader testament to the ways in which running and the creative act of placing words on a page coincide: routine, connection, insight, transformation, joy, even defiance. And play. Running, like writing a poem, might sometimes be done for the sake of something else; in that respect, it would be typical of what the philosopher and runner Mark Rowlands calls 'our narrowly instrumental age'. But if the poems we've gathered in these pages collectively test a single idea, it's that poetry and running – rhythmical, escapist; in part, always rebellious – are best and truest when done purely for their own sake. In the first and final instance, runners run as writers write: because they want to, and because they can.

CHARLES HAMILTON SORLEY

The Song of the Ungirt Runners

We swing ungirded hips,
And lightened are our eyes,
The rain is on our lips,
We do not run for prize.
We know not whom we trust
Nor whitherward we fare,
But we run because we must
 Through the great wide air.

The waters of the seas
Are troubled as by storm.
The tempest strips the trees
And does not leave them warm.
Does the tearing tempest pause?
Do the tree-tops ask it why?
So we run without a cause
 'Neath the big bare sky.

The rain is on our lips,
We do not run for prize.
But the storm the water whips
And the wave howls to the skies.
The winds arise and strike it
And scatter it like sand,
And we run because we like it
 Through the broad bright land.

'what I was born for'

MICHAEL BROWN

Lap

Suppose in the rain when you run
you think of breath,
the kilometre kiss-kiss of rubber
on asphalt,
your own cage of pain –

what if no thought
of else or other
comes to enter
the repeated metres repeated metres
lapped in limbic dark?

ALISON BINNEY

Night Run

The thought of it has trailed me all day
like a cooped-up dog, and now my tea's
gone down, I've washed up, watched
the news, I could check my emails again
but know if I give the sofa an inch
it will take a mile – three, actually,
those three I've promised myself
since I didn't go yesterday or the day before,
so it's on with the fluorescent top
and I'm pulling my calf socks up,
thinking I've done the hard bit now,
anything else is a bonus, coaxing my toes
into trainers and out of the front door.
The air's cold enough to gnaw on,
the street so quiet I'm running in velvet
slippers, and it's already worth it,
taking the blind corner a little too fast,

playing roulette with the cyclist
who's never there, endorphins pumping
my arms into superhero fists, feet skipping
the cracks I can't even see. I'm all breath
and blood. Frost prickles my thumbs.
I dart between amber pools, slick as a fish,
know as I leap from the kerb there won't be a car,
not when I'm this invincible, yes, for this
is what I was born for, this bright air,
the whole tingle and spring of it all,
flinging me into the night.

JOE CALDWELL

People Who Go Running

can be recognised in various ways;
but don't worry, they'll tell you. They're forever
synchronising their complicated watches,
or shopping for expensive trainers that
a physio said would be good for their arches.

They dream of fast courses and negative splits,
though not for too long as they've set the alarm
to go trail running as the ripe sun
spreads itself out across the Peak District.

If you live with them, they'll forget to make dinner
as they're busy signing up for half marathons
in Clowne and Stamford. They'll bookmark Strava
on your laptop and commandeer a drawer
for vests and gels and spiky massage balls.

They'll come home from long runs in winter
and breathe joy into the cold air, morning
fizzing through their veins and sweat settling
on their skin like a beginning, like glory.

TRACEY HERD

What I Remember

is not the race itself but the evening
which disappeared in a tangle of diving
sunlight and nerves as I hugged myself,
chilled, and waited for the starter, bent
forward, the tang of mown grass
sprayed like water and the white lines
freshly painted on the spongy red track,
breasting the tape, alone and splendid,
queen of my own universe, then the medal
like a tiny sun catching the last of the light,
and feeling as if my heart would burst.

VICKI HUSBAND

Something more considerable

*... For my friends who run long distances, these tiny fragments of levitation
add up to something more considerable; by their own power they hover above
the earth for many minutes, perhaps some significant portion of an hour ...*

– Rebecca Solnit

Begin by leaving yourself behind; forget what you know
and start to run. Be quick to tune out the slap of your feet
on tarmac, and the respiratory soundtrack, that remind you
of the force you fight to maintain an act of hovering.

Focus on the small but significant space between you and
planet earth. Briefest aeronaut you have a unique perspective
you could almost make a life within this near-earth orbit, station
a second home in its high hinterlands, grow aeroponically, foster
as many clouds as you dare: watch them leave home by the hour,
hear from them years later happily trapped in arctic ice.

But levitation – as a destination in its own right – should be free from encumbrance, your mind untaxed, unornamented. Contemplate instead the quanta of air that you tread on: not each solitary one so much as their more considerable sum.

JON MCLEOD

Running – a bucket list

Early Cretaceous, gentle jog amongst tree ferns and a herd of grazing Iguanodon.

Cave system at Lascaux, circa 15,000 BC, quicker pace this time but slow enough to be depicted as a stick figure in ash and ochre.

Hill run with Moses, stone tablets providing full body workout.

The battle of Prestonpans, 21 September 1745, joining the Highland Charge, downhill sprint session, avoiding musket fire.

The foredeck of a supertanker, mid-Pacific, pace intervals in the sea fret, bottle of whisky.

The ninth circle of hell, club run led by Dante and fellow sinners, difficult footing on icy lake.

Jupiter, a tricky half-marathon, taking it easy in the swirling gas vortex.

The mind of the Zen monk, Wumen Huikai, steady run through the Gateless Gate, home for tea.

NICKY HALLETT

The Experienced Huntsman. With instructions for
Hunting the Buck, the Hare, the Fox, the Badger,
the Marten, and the Otter (1780)

he who undertakes to be a huntsman to a lord or gentleman
ought to be an active sharp expert fellow
to be a good horseman
and be fleet of foot

by reason that very often he is obliged to go two or three miles
running
to find game through mountains bogs mosses and rank coverts
where a horse cannot ride

and this the obligation to a man
with one leg or with two
as well as those supplemented pinionly by their mounts' limbs
whether riding or on Shanks' pony

that even the wood-legged cross-countrier
might pursue as best he can
out-pace all manner of creatures
and not only those animals listed but others as yet unknown by name

that he may assume the qualities of those brutes
to entirely empathise
to blood-boundedly brother them
and by cunning utterly understand what makes them tick

that he may on foot outwit them
as he does on horse
that he may race them
to their deaths

if not his own

NELL FARRELL

Running on Silloth Beach on Christmas Day

Counting hawks like magpies; three for a girl
curves like a comma, tucked in from the wind
on a bare branch by the road to Skinburness

and all the other place names catch your throat
like peat smoke: Calvo, Kelsick, Langrigg, Causewayhead.
The beach is wide and empty, snow glitters

on the hills across the Solway Firth.
I work my injured ankle like a racehorse
and the sand gives just enough. Sweating

I unravel arms from sleeves, billow, balance,
crush nothing, even though the ground is pocked
with purple mussel shells and icing sugar cockles.

I catch myself scanning for a stone,
the perfect souvenir, then think *Just run*.
The only thing you need from this is this itself.

CYNTHIA X HUA

Mile Time

I keep running through canyons, past houses,
the brain busy, hoping for the meaning
to appear in front of me like a flashcard.
I'm not sure why I left my job,
but I say over drinks at Black Flamingo
that something solid turned into a gas,
color flapped down onto the table,
and I wanted to be happier. I jog

unsteady, unsure across the overpass and wild turkeys
drift across the page like sheet music.
In the yellow pages,
it says to call and call soon, that
there's a reason for the order
we gave twenty-six letters. Today,
it looks like all the roadside flowers
are vanishing,
but it's hard to tell when things began to end.
A man I loved back then told me
that we're just dust particles
here to remember the beginning,
diagrams in the
textbook of physics.
When my mother calls,
I tell her I've taken up jogging,
that I'm making progress.
And I feel this body changing,
the leaves reddening.
On the phone, we agree to keep working at it,
that the equipment's complicated,
and we connect
somewhere on the inside
where it's harder to see the wires.
Meanwhile, the temperature drops
and the marathon runners
don their winter tracksuits,
neon pinks and greens,
swerving past me on the west loop,
holding down the ever-changing pace, the minute, the second,
like a hot air balloon. Vapor forms from breath,
and look how I've held on
to the time, the time, though I can't see it,
the numbers, the propane,
the looming end to another year, sharp tacks
rising with the air in my chest.

ALAN PAYNE

A Local Legend

I know a man who runs every day,
a tarmac addict, a city eccentric,
on the back of his faded tracksuit
a legend: URBAN AND SOBER.

He's been passing *The Fox and Hounds*
and *The Crown* for twenty-five years,
ever since he left a bottle
on the pavement outside *The Red Lion*.

He draws pictures of scenes he's seen on the streets,
gives them away to rough sleepers,
children playing truant, refugees,
anyone, like him, running for their lives.

WENDY PRATT

Fuck You

Yes, I'm fat, with a crooked nose
from an accident with a lamppost
and a slightly lazy eye and I look
(or so I'm told) the spitting dab
of my grandmother. I'm thirty-
seven and a bit. I am scarred, I am
scared, I am falling down drunk
on a Saturday night and too hungover
to leave the house. But I run. You
see me running, or jogging, or
dragging my fat arse along, puce
in my moon face, eyes watering,
fists clenched, sweating under

each swinging tit, gob gaping
because I'm fat and I am running.
Once upon a time I wore skirts
and bare legs and danced
in clubs and once upon a time
I wore skintight jeans and looked
so hot I set the house on fire. At twenty-
five I could have passed for sixteen
and when that cute little drug habit
kicked in I was the skinniest I've ever been.
And I remember that, like a drunken
dream. Not the stomach in knots
and the fingers down my throat
and the desperation to be thinner,
but the loose hips, lightheaded
high-as-a-kite girl with legs so long
they hurt your eyes and auburn hair
like Anne Boleyn. So, yeah, I've done
my time getting through and fighting on.
Now I am grown up and have a house,
and have a man, and when the things I loved,
I mean, the things I *really* loved, were gone,
despite me being so fucking good, all those
rearview mirror dreams, I fought. I fight on.
This? This training, this getting fitter,
this bringing myself back to something
I half recognise? This is nothing. Not to me.
So go on, laugh it up, turn away, whatever.
I don't give a fuck.