

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION 2023 WINNERS

MYRA SCHNEIDER, adjudicator comment:

It was heart-warming to discover the very high standard of the entries and the seriousness of the subjects which women poets are tackling at this difficult time. Of course, this made it very hard to compile a long short list of about a hundred entries, reduce it twice and then pick winners, commended poems and poems for the final shortlist.

Congratulations to the winners and everyone who entered the competition.

First Prize, Short Poem Category, Jenny Hamlett

When this is Over

I want to watch the grass grow
and not feel I have to hear it.
I want to know that the winter squirrel
has found his cache of nuts and cracked one open
without seeing him do it.

I want to feel the rush of air
in the almost dark
of the sunken lane as bats dart across
between the hazel banks and not mind
that their speech is too high pitched to understand.

When this is over I imagine joining in,
an impromptu party perhaps,
in the middle of town holding up
all the traffic and even me becoming the 'life and soul'.
Laughter without effort, without exhaustion.

Maybe I will run away to the high land,
watch the sun rise in the north,
expand to a red fire. I will allow the importance
of unimportant things. Each wrinkle in the oak bark
will grow to a ridge between fields and streams.

Each bark-beetle will become powerful enough
to pull a train.
Each droplet of rain will put an ocean in flood
and my pen will be my speaker, the paper my friend.
Then I can allow the last of my hearing
to be washed away.

First Prize, Long Poem Category, Kathy Miles

The Museum of Past Culture

Exhibit 1: Woman from the Anthropocene

The Ugly Woman
on show in the museum
sits with folded hands.

Her mouth is downcast
as we file past her glass case;
part of the freak show

they have on display
showing how life used to be
in the bad old days.

No need to offend
the eye; body transplants will
change the plainest girl,

replace hair or face,
all blemishes smoothed away
by synthetic means.

The Ugly Woman
is made of wood and resin.
People point and laugh.

She cries to the moon.
The alchemy of its light
turns her into gold.

Exhibit 2: Starling Tree

Just here, the Singing Tree.
Mechanical birds, of course;
real ones are now rare.

You can stand beneath
the metal branches, and hear
how dawn used to sound.

Pull this lever out;
a fledgling will appear by
magic from a branch.

Listen hard enough,
you'll find wingbeats can be heard.
As the evening falls,

the system will switch
over to murmurations.
Stay a little while,

marvel as the birds
whirl round in their formations.
The background music

is by Vivaldi,
played endlessly on a loop
for your enjoyment.

Exhibit 3: Bone

Nothing much to see;
just the bowed arch of a spine
from a captured stag.

Here are the antlers,
velvet, his head of treasure.
He smells of heather,

lichen, tormentil,
of that soft leathery hide
once burnished to rust.

He came from the mist
with his coronet of tines,
as if he had sprung

from the forest's wings,
a mummer in a winter
masque, stepping into

footlights of shining
aconite, bold shoulders shawled
by a scut of cloud.

Hold his bones with care,
remember he was a god,
could leap to the stars

wander through the sky
in their ruts of trailing light.
Remember the chase,

the hard hunt of him,
how his eyes were always fixed
on this extinction.

Second Prize, Justina Hart

To the Ravenmaster at the Tower of London

Release your black charges from their cages –
Gripp, Harris, Rocky, Merlin, Erin, Jubilee –
six to save the country, as Charles II decreed:
with a spare, Poppy, born and bred for Brexit.
Glue back their primary feathers for balance.
Feed them blood-soaked biscuits, gralloch,
whole rabbits complete with fur and bones.
Whistle to them, await the rich metallic caw.

Now see your charges soar above the nation,
alight on a billowing blue flag, peck out
gold stars. Watch them swoop on Westminster,
pluck out the tongue of every MP. Observe
how they descend in an unkindness on Britain's
soft belly, biting green fields till they're bare.
Then cry as the White Tower of London tumbles,
the White Cliffs of Dover crumble to the sea.

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Third Prize, Pat Marum

My Mother was a Chinese Vase

My mother was a Chinese vase. Beautiful –
but I did not touch. I did not hold.

Could not approach,
nor trace with my finger.

A museum piece – cold, hard.
Sometimes the colours of her flower patterns

were fiery orange, blood-red,
sharp vermilion, thrashing crimson.

The blue flowers deepening
at their centre to dark balefulness.

She did not reverberate – bell-like
with the ting of ceramic, the mellifluous sounds

of temples and shrines.
But her words ring inside my head still.

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