

**SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION 2012
JUDGE: KATHERINE GALLAGHER: PRIZE WINNERS**

I greatly enjoyed the challenge of judging, the juxtaposition and evaluation of short and long poems making the competition rather different. The ambition, range and assurance of the writing impressed, with the variety of subject matter. The writing skills offered a wonderful spread of voices. Poise, a taste for experiment and the sense of a poem's dramatic space came through again and again...

Katherine Gallagher



Short Poem First Prize Winner: Doreen Hinchliffe

The Newlyweds

I think about you often, how only hours after
priest pronounced you man and wife, you drowned in shallow waters.
Did you make a pact to paddle there, enticed by thoughts
of scrambling in secret on wet rocks while waiters

were busy serving wine to guests at your reception?
Were you drunk on pink champagne, as one report implies,
or like excited children, unaware of danger, daring
each other to leap from bank to bank in three great strides?

If you had only waited, chatted to the locals,
might they have stopped you, warned you to be wary of the current,
told you how, with nearby Bolton Abbey heavy with cloud,
the river gathers force and quickly turns to torrent?

I doubt it. I'm sure they would have known that newlyweds
and cautionary tales don't mix. Wishing you happiness,
they'd probably have waved, then watched you stride off hand in hand
towards your death in morning suit and bridal dress.

I'm haunted by the question of what happened next.
Was it the swirling force of sudden flood that pulled you under
or a lovers' tiff, a teasing push, that tipped you in
the weight of wedding clothes causing you to flounder

in the icy flow? Did you slip, then tumble
both at once, or did one of you fall first perhaps,
the other bravely risking everything to help? I think
of how they found you three days later, hands still clasped

and wedding rings intact. Were your final moments
snatched by fear and rising panic as you guessed that this
must be the end, or, as you clung together swallowing water,
was there time and space enough for one last kiss?

Long Poem First Prize Winner: A C Clarke

A Year In Transit

The poem is written in couplets in 12 sections, each prefaced by reference to grim public events (bombings, other attacks) which took place in 1975-6; the public events occurred during the period when the poet was involved in a doomed love affair, linking private and public unease, but also highlighting the self-absorption of the affair.

November 20 Joan Harrison is found murdered in Preston

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Good days, transparent blue's tossed back
from water to salt air, heatless and clear

as if a dome of thinnest glass is all
that keeps the island from escaping

and we might chime infinity against it,
or shattering a flaw swoop through and up

into forever. Today the sky is thick
and grey as lisle, a stocking-mask,

the roads run muted, which in sunny hours
lift, sing towards the chalk dazzle that rims

the coast. We are sole visitors
to the museum I never knew existed

until you brought us. Light crawls in and dies
beside arrangements of stuffed mice

in bridal gowns, birds strumming guitars
with grounded wings, and without explanation,

at start or end – depending on your route –
a single, severed hand, palm outwards.

29 January twelve bombs explode in London's West End

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On the chalk cliffs, rain driving against us,
we're kissing hard, can't tell

if the salt on our tongues is our own taste or the air
nor if the water running down our cheeks

is flung by the wind or whipped by it out of our eyes
our hair tangled together, we cling to each other

as if we could somehow tent ourselves from weather.
I want it never to end. Down in the bay

a grey hump-backed sea paws at the stack
arched like the nave of a ruined cathedral.

When we dry off in the pub with its smoking fire
your eyes rove over the panelling, the fake

horse brasses, looking for something. The bar
is empty. In an hour we'll drive away

rain sheeting across your line of vision
soon as the wipers clear the screen,

the cliffs behind us in their old routine:
slow attrition, random, shattering fall.

Second Prize Winner: Brigid Sivill

HA-NOI 2000

This poem of over 400 lines records aspects of the poet's experience during residence in Ha-Noi, including her own home-sickness, power-structures in Vietnam today, wealth, poverty, tourism, locations in the city recalling grim events of the past and reflecting that these same things (confusion, the massacre of the innocents and so on) repeat and repeat throughout time and in all wars...

Central – The Great Portico

And where is the king now? Is it Uncle Ho in his waxed glory
across the road sitting on a chair at the top of the stairs
where the long queues wind round and round,
waiting in hushed silence to be whisked swiftly
past this icon in his strange sarcophagus?

Or does this arched gate lead to Maison Centrale? Hoa Lo,
the fiery furnace built by the French on potter's ground.
Another thirty pieces of silver corruption.

Under the shadow of the guillotine, lines of shackled men and boys,
small farmers from the fields, who loved their buffalo
and caught fish in star pointed nets, planned and built the Revolution.

This crucible of war becomes the Hanoi Hilton,
its Blue Room tenanted by boys floating from the sky
to end up eternal tourists at the wrong address.

Rain is drifting, pouring, mud puddles wrapping my feet.
All the faces look old, the almond eyes un-fringed.
Wandering, the wet map disintegrates.

I have a craving for my own language – its long, looped syllables.
Viet is so monosyllabic, each vowel with its nine modulations laying traps.
So the VSO greets the college principal every day by praising the size of his penis.

The old professor gave me a copy of his poems. He writes in Chinese,
calligraphic poems spill. His English dedication,
full-stop a dot inside a circle, trembles across the page.

Third Prize Winner: Margaret Speak

When Katya Became Katyushka

Tonight he prepares their supper;
he has brought fish wrapped in oily paper.
He grabs the tail and with a swift pirouette,
it is topped, tailed, gutted, filleted.
His knife tip caresses the fish,
scrapes the scales tenderly.
His lithe fingers with their long bones
scatter salt, dried herbs, drops of vinegar.
Outside the balalaika player is by the metro station,
grand as a ballroom, where once people danced:
the men in long jackets, ties, waxed whiskers,
the ladies in floating skirts.

Tonight is the first time they have the whole night together.
He feels the tremor beneath her skin,
takes her hand, kisses each finger,
still with the aroma of fish, knuckle by knuckle,
her closed eyelids, her eyebrows, the tip of her nose.
Her hair is scented with vanilla: he whispers
Katya, sweet Katya, my Katyushka.

She remembers then her mother teaching her Hide and Seek.
She was four, could recite her letters, her numbers.
When they hear hammering at the door,
her mother pushes her under the table
beneath the chenille cloth with tassels.
Hide my Katyushka, silence!
Two men, brutal, push her mother to the carpet,
part her legs with a rifle butt.
They uncurl her body, take her again, grunting harsh words,
tell her to stop snivelling as they button their trousers.
Katya remembers her matryoshka, her Russian dolls
and tries to climb inside herself, nesting one in another
until she is so small, she is invisible.