

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION 2014

JUDGE: JACKIE KAY: PRIZE WINNERS

The standard was unusually high, some of the commended come very highly commended indeed and nearly made it ... I think the poems are terrific and cover such a wide range of themes and styles, and pack a powerful punch, and are quirky and intelligent.

Jackie Kay



Short Poem First Prize Winner: Margaret Beston

By Heart

Once she had to memorize the chemical elements
of soil, learn how to measure the height of trees
using sine and cosine and how to address a letter
to a bishop – information lost now in dusty
box files in a corner of her brain, with lists
of Latin verbs and conjugations, the Attributes
of the Virgin Mary and which feast days a priest
wore rose or purple. But she remembers maples
graded from cinnabar to porphyry stretching
across the Laurentian hills like reels of Sylko
in a haberdasher's drawer; the rustle of raven wings
through cedars as an Indian canoe skims the surface
of a turquoise lake; castles carved from blocks
of ice, snow on the windshield as she left.

Long Poem First Prize Winner: Kate Foley

The Other Side of Sleep

(extract)

‘It’s a profession, you know...’
Tracy Groom wafts a hand at her framed Diploma:

Certified Dream Walker:
Death Coach.

Basil’s freckles shift, small brown islands
on his too thin skin. He frowns.

‘Coach? Sounds like plumes
and black horses to me.’

[...]

It’s winter. Basil’s death has grown,
white and quiet as a whisker of frost.

Still no dreams, or none
he’ll tell...

[...]

but Tracy, obstinate as ever,
still hopes, still chants,

still watches his deep, unfathomable sleep
as if he were written

in ancient undeciphered script.
‘My Sleeping Tablet’ his pet name for her.

They’re both eroding, gently,
his life, her fierce certainties.

[...]

She makes the fire up.
Scarlet flames stitch the dark

behind her eyes. Her lids close.
The subdued tweet and whistle

of Basil’s breath threads the cavern
of her ears,

she’s turning, turning,

her fingertips graze a rough, wet wall.
Her feet – she doesn’t think it strange –

are luminous. This is a dancing floor

all she has to do
obey.

[...]

‘Oh! Don’t cry’ says a voice, deep
as a coal mine.

A smell,
concentration of deep salt, fruit, blood, wine,
shit, and yes, roses.

Tracy steals up to the figure of a seated man
– is it a he? – and presses his bare nipple.

‘No, my dear. You can’t light me up.
I’m not your actual electric torch.’

‘Who are you, then?’ ‘They call me Asterion
but I’ve never seen one.’ ‘One what?’

‘A Star.’ In the feeble light
Tracy sees his big, mild bull’s head appear.

His eyes are milky, one of his horns is chipped
and on his forehead a broken white star,

matted and bruised. She points.??...
‘That was the stunner when they tried it last’

‘Why?’ ‘Because you can’t kill death
but they keep on trying.’

‘Is that what I’m trying to do?’
‘How would I know?’

I’ve only seen your feet.’

[...]

Second Prize Winner: Pippa Little

How Helen Steven, Activist, Scratched An Adrienne Rich Poem On Her Cell Door in Dumbarton Police Station, Scotland

A cell's got nothing but time in it
and a night that never grows dark.

You sit on the slab and stare at the door,
slammed from outside by a warder

who wouldn't meet your eye.
The door's scratched Pictish snarls,

first names, gang names, sex-oaths and enemies
force you to focus. But by 2 a.m.

you can't rewrite these broke-back alphabets,
need to leave more for the next woman and the next –

words itch your palms, you
look about for some instrument –

keys taken, but you've got your jeans
so you step out of them for the zip's

metal tag and make a start;
hours it takes, most of the night, fingers

sting from the carving, but near to morning it's
complete, as much embedded in the wood

as the poet's concentrated gaze
all the while, white-hot upon your back.

Joint Third Prize Winner: Sue Davies

Double-take

A loose photo tucked in the dark. I view
familiar faces as if through a nightscope –

your great grandmother, grey as flint,
apron whitely starched. A baby on her lap

glares down the pin-hole with a dour look.
Beside her, great grandfather, tilting

forward, a tower fortified by a slate suit,
his wing collar and watch chain white-hot

in the infrared light. I gaze, astonished how
their eyes pour their dark energy into my own

from aeons of dead stars. And before
I know, they're rising, crunching raw coal

underfoot, shuffling their way back to the house
for tea and laver bread, while I search

for them in censuses, Births, Marriages, Deaths,
your grandmother Sarah-Jane preparing tea

with the crippled hands of a coal hewer, her
heart atrophied by grief – two lost babies,

a doctor too dear to call out for help, to ease
grandfather Ted's lacerating cough. I taste

Sarah's bone-white terror for her sons' future
her prayers breaking the spell of Merthyr's Fault –

a rich seam of boys' stunted growth, and colliers' bones –
bargaining with her Calvinist God, insisting on the

downing of picks and cutters for a love of learning,
writing, and precious books. Now in the daylight

I return to Llwydcoed, to the washed-out sunlight,
a line propped high, bed sheets pegged, and catch

grandmother's smile of accomplishment
blown like a white feather across her lips.

Joint Third Prize Winner: Ann Alexander

Watching my mother turn into a wasp

Tiny and yellow, suddenly furious –
she settles on the chair, clutches her bag,
and rages; but her voice is muffled, small,

as if under glass. We watch her
scrabbling to get at us, angry with the world.
Nobody nobody cares. She's terrified.

She will not eat. She says *oh let me die*
and then *I hate it here.* Whispers her rosary,
the first few words, droning from half closed lips
HolymarymotherofGod, take me Jesus....
The eyes are small and black, unfocussed,
inward turned, seeing the terrible future,

the threatening shadows moving beyond reach.
She brushes off my hand. In her mind,
she hurls herself against unyielding glass,

to find a crack, a gap, a clean escape,
something, anything, half alive to sting.