

**SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION 2017
JUDGE: MYRA SCHNEIDER: PRIZE WINNERS**

Short Poem First Prize Winner: Mary Robinson

Six Studies of Pillows

Albrecht Dürer 1493 (pen and brown ink)

I marvel that the darkness of your ink
should convey the whiteness of these pillows

that what you leave blank on the page
is the smell of a fair linen cloth bleached in the sun

that there should be one strong outline
to each pillow, and hatching to indicate shadows
like contour lines on a map

that the strokes are fine as hair

that the pillows should not be maid-smoothed
but lie abandoned as if by children after play

that they should be wrinkled like aged skin
and have a softness we crave in vain for those who die hard

that you observe the direction of light from a high window
while snow muffles the garden

that you dip the tip of a goose-wing quill
in soot-brown ink
and create folds of cloth, clumps of down

that you draw what is at hand
and do not forget what it was like to be a fevered child
shaping pillows into valleys and mountains of another country

that I should remember this day
although these pillows must by now be dust or ashes
as are those whose heads lay on them

that my paper is made from rags such as this linen might become

that you are playing still as I see in the creases
an eye, an ear, a snout
a frowning beast, a fish, a rhino

that I could reach out and touch them.

Long Poem First Prize Winner: Jill Eulalie Dawson

Mole

first published in Tears in the Fence, 66, Summer 2017

... the soul ... loses itself when shaken and disturbed unless given something to grasp onto, so we must always provide it with an object to butt up against and to act upon.

Michel de Montaigne, Essais, 1580

I

Fogged over by heat from my breath, I wipe the glass with my sleeve: a sheep's heart pierced with nails and pins, an animal vertebra carved with a human face, a pair of mole's paws with huge unretractable claws. Amulets, objects of solace laid in a case at the Wellcome Collection. Twitterings, small hands tug my sides: *Auntie, Auntie, come quick, there's a witch's cake...* My eyes snatch the paws, slide them into my coat pocket.

II

Limbs, severed, a once-whole body, inveterate traveller, sides streamlined, silky as a seal swimming through soil, paws like paddles, breast stroke, breast stroke, heading along a maze of tunnels deep in the earth. Things lie waiting, phrases, images, gasps of breath on a broken mirror: *That which was cleaved can cleave again to its lost self.* Paws like spades now, burrowing sideways, upwards towards the surface. Things lie expectant, a grey thought-stone once held in the palm of an old man, words, gold coins, encrusted not tarnished, all needful, awaiting a calling up to the world of light.

III

I'm searching my lawn for molehills, remembering days when my words were seeds, poems cradled in the palm of my hand, broadcast out to the world. Cracked earth now, yellowing grasses, this lawn's a shortcut for hurried trips to cinemas, coffee shops, sugared chatter. Too many footfalls echoing down into the mole's world below. He won't surface. Dry soil, ungiving. Can't dig deep, its heart won't let me enter the pathways I loved to travel. My workbook waits on the desk, its covers won't open. Where's the earth I used to hold, soft in my palm, soil for tunnelling sideways, upwards, by foot-claw, paw-pad, deep-earth travel towards the light? I grab the hose-pipe, release a torrent.

IV

Water bouncing off cracked earth, pushing its way into parched roots, loosening pebbles, falling falling into darkness. Memory-rain, unblocking the road to the past, pounding against the outhouse roof beneath my childhood window. Churchyard rain, Mother under her mauve umbrella, back stiff as a ramrod, her eyes pouring. Rain that hurts, rain that heals. I can't turn it off.

V

I slip my fingers into darkness – my jacket pocket, the right one where something is curled up, nested. Beyond the harsh curve of claws there's velvet, a body that grows each day, fuller, softer, realer. Sides that give when held between finger and thumb. The miracle of a tiny hip, its ball and socket; the impudence of a minuscule tail: standing erect in deep-earth's tunnels it sweeps the ceilings. How each part is vital for wholeness. Ever with me. Now.

VI

Lamplight dapples the walls of my room. On the mound of the pillow the shadow of a hand its fingers open, the hint of a paw its six claws resting. Things lie waiting. On the bedside table my workbook flicks itself open.

Second Prize Winner: Shirley Wright

Warfare. Somewhere.

*Gloria in excelsis Deo / Et in terra pax hominibus /
Domine deus, qui tollis peccata mundi, / Laudamus Te, glorificamus Te*

A glosa on Vivaldi's *Gloria*

I've always loved a good oxymoron
"military intelligence", "fiscal probity"
ever since Sir made me apologise
for calling Susan Parker a catty bitch
during choir practice. Truth, I've learnt, is relative,
unsayable, except for the man in Aleppo
whose said all his six-year-old wanted to do
was kill people. At school we sang Vivaldi's
praise to "holy war". You should've heard me bellow
Gloria in excelsis Deo

Our hockey captain was vicious, charging
up the pitch ready to knock someone's head off.
I was goalie, though I jumped the other way
whenever I saw the ball coming
despite wearing shin pads and face mask
and grew up thinking I was a wuss.
What lessons children learn. In Latin
it was how to make a desert and call it peace –
the rhetoric of conquerors, according to Tacitus.
Et in terra pax hominibus

RE lessons were a doss. Even Miss Eames
would nod off between questions
that demanded answers that never came,
the air ponderous, soporific. Original sin
lay in Billy's graphic hand gestures,
my smothered giggles, reality some distance from acne
and the burdens of puberty. Vishnu, Yahweh, Allah,
we dipped into gods like a goodie bag, each truer
than the last, ours the best and kept for Sunday.
Domine Deus, qui tollis peccata mundi

We watch the meltdown of humanity today
in colour on an iPhone, which they say
is progress. School has never seemed so far away.
Neither stardust nor golden, but grubby grey
we think we matter. The trees know better. They
grow and green and breathe the world. We pay
the price of hubris. Killing threads our DNA
which we share with baboons. And carrots. And we pray
across the roar of the jungle while bullets spray.
Laudamus Te, glorificamus Te

Second Prize Winner: Liz Diamond

An Inuit Father Tells His Son the Story of the Ghost Ship

In 1845 Sir John Franklin and his men set sail for the Arctic in search of the North-West Passage

The white man calls it *Ship*.
It has the size of a whale, a whale's ribbed sides.
Like a whale it moves through water, but carries men
in its belly like a woman carries a child. Wings
stretching skywards, made from hide as thin
as that which your mother beats for swaddling.
They catch the wind, these wings, give the ships
their motion, although the one of which I speak
had given up its movement, as the whale gives up
its spirit when it dies.

We told the white man of two ships:
one locked in ice, the other crushed down by it.
We told them of bodies found frozen, flesh stripped off them,
food bowls in tents that held the frozen flesh of men.
They call us liars – we *Inuit*, who can only pass on truth
as if it's something preserved in ice.

So our stories, once bone-clean
begin to change into things with hidden layers.
My story tells of a ship deep under the sea,
a madman who roves its watery decks who's grown
the lungs of a fish, a seal's blubber to warm him.
He sings like a whale lamenting of the blue ocean
that he never found where waves move freely
as if they have the souls of living things.

Judge's Comment: Around one thousand poems were entered for the competition. I read entries looking for poems which were layered as well as using words and form effectively. The standard of the winners was so high I could not divide the 2nd and 3rd poems and therefore made two second-prize awards. I also had 130 poems in the longlist. Several poems with strong material were rejected because they were not fully transformed into poems. I had to cut my first overlong shortlist by about half. Before I'd finished this the four very individual prizewinning poems were jumping out at me. The commended poems are also outstanding.



Myra Schneider