

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION WINNERS

Kate Foley: *Nineteen parcels:* fat with poems, lying on the doormat, when I arrived home. Daunting? Not half! And having opened them I'll say what I'm sure every judge thinks – 'how on earth?... so much good stuff...' To begin at the end of the comments I want to make, the standards were very high. If you didn't win and were not mentioned it may well have been only by a whisker.



Doing justice to such a task means articulating to yourself what you really mean by a 'good poem'. What is a poem, especially when some are prose (while recognisably being poetry) and others, from sonnet to sestina, rely on traditional forms? Innovation or tradition, the chosen form, like a well-made pair of shoes, must carry the poem where it needs to go. A good poem has a life and trajectory of its own, and how, at this time in our history, we need the illumination that poetry can offer... Thank you, poets, for the privilege and pleasure of allowing me to follow the thought, dreams, histories and directions of so many of your poems.

First Prize, Short Poem Category, Kathy Miles

The Music Room

This house is leaking music.
Spiders spin arpeggios in corners
and walls are drenched in minuets,
sonatas surging under the door.
They gather in the kerb in pools of sound,
splash quavers over passers-by
as streetlamps hum their *a cappella*
in a sudden fall of dusk.

A small walled garden, where birds
soft-pedal into dawn. Here, shadows
dance in three-four time, ghosts
strum the dust with practised fingers.
I imagine the housekeeper,
keys jangling at her waist, shaking
notes from the curtain folds
as she draws the morning grate.

A tenor drowned here once,
his lungs bubbling with scales
as his heart slowed its frail vibrato.
They watched as he was carried out,
doctors still trying to stem the ballads
that trickled from his mouth.
Even in rigor mortis he sang,
his body tuned and tightened.
They buried him in lead to stop the noise
disturbing his neighbours' rest.

And when the house is pulled down,
foundations razed for a block of flats,
a charm of madrigals will rise,
quintets of bricks, escaping to the air.
String quartets will float on rooftops,
playing teatime Brahms above the park.
A flood of symphonies; so loud,
crescendos will evacuate the town.

First Prize, Long Poem Category, A C Clarke: Poet at War

i

He is snatched up
in the turbulence of laughter
which falls dead
like the notes
of an untuned piano.
He will burn the yesterdays
which drop from his branches
long since deserted by birds,
step into the graveclothes
of a *copain*'s uniform,
swing from his belt
a tin water bottle,
over his shoulder
a rifle for killing doubt,
in his pocket the pen
which will set him free
and three crumpled letters
signed with Russian kisses ...

iii

*Soldiers march through the tall corn singing
in full bloom, singing, trampling it down.*

At practice when he hits the target
it doesn't bleed. He sticks his bayonet

into a stuffed sack. It's easy.
Yesterday he killed ten dummies.

*Soldiers march through the tall corn singing
in full bloom, fieldguns lumber behind.*

The sky is so blue.
So terribly blue.

v

He and his mates smash branches
to set light free. The forest closes in
like skin over a wound. They knife
their names into the bark of nameless
trees for squirrels to read. The soldiers' song
falls dead among the leaves which stifle
the thump of boots. They could die in here,
no-one the wiser. For all that, his nerves vibrate
like a tuning-fork to the deep chords under the soil
where roots sing to each other.

ii

Plodding through quarried fields where
clover darns bare patches pink and a fat
partridge scuttles away under the rich
light of a harvest sun, he thinks of men
strolling the pavements at evening
in the city where, defying regulation,
his girl lays down her rules in white and black.

Nothing in the war-cracked world will stop
her daily letters. He holds her
close to his uncensored heart
through long marches, sends replies
from bivouacs, from improvised desks,
making his own rules too. But war
shouts loudest. Its orders must be heard.

iv

Warming himself at the fire of comrades' love
he finds cold duty discharged
the sky expanding.

If he were to show ...
If he were to have ...
If he were to dream ...

Today he passed the ruins of a man.
A brood of fledgling ringdoves cooed
from the tree which shadowed him.

vi

Men build their palaces in air,
the limp grey air
that wraps these dying fields.

His palace hovers
on the edge of sight
refuses to settle.

Is that a woman beckoning?
She has hung his heart
like a lantern at the door.

The *Poet at War* draws on the themes and imagery of the sequences which the French surrealist poet Paul Éluard wrote while serving in the French army during World War 1. Italicised lines are direct translations from his work but the poems themselves are not translations.

Second Prize, Harriet Proudfoot

Ginkgo Biloba

Survivors of Hiroshima

We are old. Paleolithic.
Two hundred million years.
Tall, one hundred feet
unique species. Maidenhair tree.
Our fair hair floats in the little wind.

Six of us near the hypocentre.
Pressure, five tons, temperature
three hundred thousand degrees.

We knew we were resistant to wind
snow, insects, disease, to frost.
We found we can live through fire.

Leaves gone, twigs. Branches like claws
Bark melted into rivulets, parallel currents.
We are hibakusha, eyes fused shut.

Slowly we creak off the shock.
Re-find our trunks. Begin
to recognise their changes.
Dare to think of growing.
Sap inches through the branches
dares to resurrect the seed.

See our green skirts of aerial roots
excited by disturbance into life,
the pale gold light through
our two-fold fans –
these hold our story now.

Third Prize, Margaret Wilmot: Manhattan, August 1974 (excerpts)

Sunday

Fly the flag. This icon. This idol. This thing in itself.
Which we worship
I worship *you*, Jasper Johns, you've freed
the flag

Outside the Modern up and down Sixth Avenue
banners pennants a gaiety of silken sails gusting

17 nationalities
4 continents –
like my melting-pot class one
hot noisy summer session
no air-conditioning in South Hall

[...]

Tuesday

Late
panicked and jumped onto the wrong train, first stop Harlem
flew along 116th in a buoyancy of dancing bodies radios balls kids
playing games it felt like
everyone was playing so joyful

Paused for the red light (river of traffic
and a little old woman who reached to about my waist asked
Whare ya goyn, honey?

Columbia, I said not catching her eye
You goyn to cross that thare park, honey?
Now I did look straight at her (as the traffic poured on
I woulden cross that thare park, honey, I woulden, she said, *not*
not

if I wanted to come out aLIVE, I woulden

[...]

Friday

Unbelievable –
the shiver, the physical reaction

This is AMAZING. It's happened. Nixon's resigned.

Just sometimes the system works (like the Pentagon Papers: I felt proud!)

No pride now just relief

These walls are too small . . .

And the city too large...

I shot outside wanting to share!

Wave flags!

Red-and-white bunting!

7th Avenue as ever

People just sailing calmly on