

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION WINNERS

Myra Schneider: I drew up a long list of 180 poems from the many hundreds submitted. Among these, I found many well-written poems that were repetitive, did not travel far enough, did not bring enough of the poet's own to the material, or were well-developed but read like condensed prose. I chose poems that not only used language and rhythm well but excited me because of the way the material was used and developed. I was struck by the wide range of subject matter and writing which revealed the very diverse backgrounds of the entrants.



(see full Adjudication Report online at www.seconlightlive.co.uk/news.shtml#Comp20)

First Prize, Short Poem Category, Lucy Hamilton

Messengers

How apt it is that this upper pictogram could be an insect
the oracle bone drawing not tree but a bee's exoskeleton

the first two upwardly curving strokes not branches
but forelegs| the second not twigs but middle legs

the downward arching lines not roots but hind limbs
How fitting that the lower images of a river and a boat

symbolise people pulling together to overcome a crisis
of even global proportions| Here on the steep tea terraces

I won't tell the latest sickness or bereavement nor yet
the recent extinctions| I want to imitate the bees

to be an envoy of the visible to where there is *neither a here*
nor a beyond but the great unity| Soon they will fly out

from the workers' box| brush yellow dust into tiny baskets
as they hum in the shrubs| pollinating sweet-scented flowers

I touch a pale tea bud| plump as a bumble bee's abdomen
thinking about *the side of life that is turned away from us*

Wei Ji • Not Yet Fulfilled



illustration by Sophie Song

First Prize, Long Poem Category, Justina Hart (extracts)

Set 9,500 to 9,000 years ago before Doggerland, a once-fertile landmass in the North Sea, was inundated. The poem focuses on one of the last remaining small tribes before they leave for good. The poem was a Weatherfronts climate change commission.

Doggerland Rising

I

Float above the North Sea,
part its thick skin, peer through.

On the bed: flint blades, ancient seeds,
rotted wood carved as a hull.

Imagine voices. Listen for voices.
Laughter, shouts. A splash!

A man hallooing as if to himself
paddles through shallow waters.

He looks ahead, squinting;
he can almost see you, you him.

You dabble your hand in wavelets,
clink the cockles piled in his boat

dip fingers in his brain, pull him alive.

(from) II

In my boat
dead fish eye the light and wink saying
This is where the old world begins ...
I paddle over its crumbled black ribs
to ancestral islands that rise like ghosts,
fringed with bright grass that hurts
my eyes even in mist. Arms reach out
bubbled in slime, dead men tall as hazel, ash.
Tying my bark, I wade in mudflats
up to my knees, bow to unhook my blood-
stone pendant. Leave it at their keening feet.

(from) III

The water's more dangerous now.
There are new channels.
The shallows shelve steeply
into the deep north
where evil spirits hide.
My husband's wedded more to sea
than me: even in our house
he has that faraway look;
in bed, his sweat and tears
are saltier than others' –
I taste saltwater running
freely from his pores.

(from) IV

We are the forebears buried on land
who lie underwater. When the current
sways, our bones jump up and clatter
to attract shadows on the surface –
seagulls, cormorants – the black
thrust of a log boat seeking us.

Yet once we were kings who strolled through
plains rich as paradise to the uplands beyond.

V

(In various voices – the whole tribe speaks)

Peel the skins off houses. Throw the struts in a heap.
Who has the flints, the scrapers, the bone needles?

That was a feast of feasts. I've got ash on my face.
He's turned sour now we've chopped and burnt the boats.

O my head! Those mushrooms. We danced for hours.
Is the fire out? Fetch more water. Kick over sand.

I loved the stories – how we climbed out of the sea,
lost our tails. But it's swollen with telling us to leave.

The other day the waves took a whole family
while the sky swirled with violent pinks, blues, greens.

Are those two staying? The sea is all they know.
They're half-lame, blind. Stubborn, won't leave their dead.

You're shrieking like hens with a fox on the loose.
Stop it or I'll bang your heads! Hold those babies safe.

Haven't we always moved? Yes. No. Not like this.
The weather's right for it. It's a sign we're still blessed.

Second Prize, Marion Oxley (extracts, from pt I beginning and part iii, end)

The Sleeping Princess, The Boys and The Monk

after the legend of Jao Mae Nang Non and the Tham Luang cave rescue in 2018.

She had lain here so long
long before fear was planted
long before wrong doers met their death
long before the lese majeste

long before they came to slash and burn the forest
long before her head was swathed in Northern haze
and the poor were told to grow maize

and the air she breathed became poisonous
and the earth star mushrooms grew between fingers and toes
and the chattering gibbons left her hair
to stare at tourists in bars
and borders were closed
and ideas shrank as she sank
underground.

She had lain here so long in this kingdom

of the banished
of the disappeared
of the murdered
of the vanished.

Where the stateless ones stay hidden in the forests of the forbidden.

... / ...

She felt them moving excitement bursting like raindrops running woken in
bright pearls of light gathering. Young skin untouched by the dark stretching
squeezing through rocks. Tender bones bending slipping passages.

He carries a picture of the King. He is being led
by the steady hand of a government official.
Everywhere sky-blue shirts, yellow neckerchiefs, the royal insignia.
He's guided through crowds, flash flooding of paparazzi, men in combat fatigues,
the mud, the oxygen tanks, the pumping water,
the waiting parents.

They say he came from the forest.
They say he is the reincarnation of the stable boy,
the lover, the father of the unborn child.

He says the boys are still alive.
They are safe.
They will soon be found.
The rain will stop.
And it does.

Joint Third Prize, Rebecca Hubbard

Night hunters

We venture into the domain of the Dark Dagger,
the Silver Hook, the Blood-vein, the Death's Head,
spread out our white sheet and wait
for the creatures of the night – the Shark and the Ghost –
to flock in a dry blizzard of wings, laying siege to light.

We crouch, intoning their names to the darkness –
Lackey, the Red-necked Footman, Rustic, Chimney Sweep –
our words vibrate with lost worlds, lost sensibilities –
Ermine, Sable, Lace Border, Brocade
Spindle, Wainscot, Lutestring –
and we fancy the smell of tallow
and burnt wings as the dance ends.

We sit around the white pool, a fire lit in the darkness,
and we listen to their blunderings like coals
rasping and shifting, and the sound grows,
thousands of wings beating, protesting murder,
wafting in the stench of the ancient story, reports
of a massacre, ghostly squirming babies boiled alive –

Charmeuse, Chiffon, Crepe-de-chine
Organza, Velvet, Tafetta, Slub –
flightless *Bombyx mori*, a prisoner, millions of dancing
larvae cocooning themselves in white,
mouthing a filament, a single silk one mile long, that
one morning slithered its way from the fragrant tea cup
of the Yellow Empress through looms, across deserts,
over mountains, to the Mediterranean Sea, to dress us in silk.

Joint Third Prize, Kathy Miles

Constellations

This spring a chain of satellites
is spawning through the evening sky,
a bright ellipsis circling the earth.

And here, a glut of tadpoles in the pond,
strands of black Chantilly lace pleated
between the reeds and flowering rush.

Some already with a bud of legs,
but it will be weeks before new fingers
have learned to grasp the edge of a lily-pad

and haul themselves up to the sun.
They'll meet again, but never the same
as when they slipped from the silence

of their locked globes; a brief cluster
before that taste of freedom sent them
scattering like a broken string of pearls.

One day a constellation of eyes
will shine up from the surface. One day
they will bear the weight of worlds

on the green slope of their shoulders.
Above them satellites swim in orbit, a litter
of baubles shrouding the glint of stars.

The blackbird hops small odysseys
from branch to branch, the planet
of his eye alert to worm and snail.

I see him land on the edge of the pond,
reach to pluck a dark pearl from the water.