

McLellan Poetry Competition 2018

The prizewinning poets are:

McLellan Poetry Competition 2018		
Place	Name	Poem
First	Char March	Street folk
Second	Chris James	Sherlock of Aleppo
Third	Sighle Meehan	New York had a ring to it
Commended	Michael Brown	The Jamestown Brides
Commended	Roger Elkin	Cupping hands
Commended	Lauren Garland	Latrigg
Commended	Lydia Harris	The Words of the Preacher to the People of the Five Houses of Sandquoy
Commended	Mary Hastilow	Willow Tree
Commended	Howard Wright	Quiz

Responding to the poems Sinéad Morrissey writes:

It was a pleasure to judge this competition. Not only because the standard of the poems was so high – in general the work was well-made, confident, and frequently surprising – but also because the content matter was so diverse and unpredictable. I often feel privileged judging poetry competitions. It can seem like laying your ear to the voice of the contemporary world, being privy to what is deeply-held, to what is exercising the minds of all kinds of people you don't know; I feel lucky to be confided in and talked to for the span of each poem under scrutiny.

The winners and commended poems here have all risen to top position in a fiercely competitive field and deserve huge congratulations. When so much of what has been submitted is competent – even accomplished – it might make the task of picking a winning cohort challenging. The strength of the poetry presented here eschewed that difficulty.

The winning and commended poems are all very different – between them they offer the reader diverse iterations of tone, voice, perspective, narrative, subject matter and of course form. But if I had to pick one thing that unites them all I would perhaps say confidence. These poems know what they want to say, how they want to say it and are superbly confident in their own machinery. Because they so clearly believe in themselves, it was easy to believe in them too.

First Prize

Street folk

after Jennifer O'Neill Pickering's painting

See theym tenements, the nicht? Theym urnae kinnufa... straucht. Ken?
Ken yon spice hus kinnufa rived me. Ken – doon the middul. Richt doon.

Wan ay me is, ken, me when I wus... saxteen ur seeventeen, ken? Bonny.
Gie bonny. Awfi serious, ken. But bonny – skin... like mulk.

Pure white – pure dead brilliant. The other wan? The other me? Aye, well
she's mair like seeventy. Fag on. Tammy on. Pink rinse, fur christsake.

I nuvver thocht I wud degenerate – is yon the wurd? – tae a pink rinse.
Face a skelpit airse. Yon scunnert mooth. An' whar's me? Just yon scarrae?

Ahm gangin' aw paulach, peelie-wallie, skinkin. Like aw theym hooses
ur brayin' richt through me – baith o' me. Aw three o' me!

Jundie jundie jundie wi' thur bricks an' windaes... An see theym railin's?
Theym railin's ur inside ma heids. Pairtin' me... frae masel.

Char March credits include: five poetry collections (*Full Stops In Winter Branches* published this autumn by VP), a short story collection, six BBC Radio 4 plays, and eight stage plays. She's been Writer-in-Residence for Leeds Hospitals, European Business Schools, Temple Newsam estate, Ty Newydd, the NHS in the North West, and the National Midwives' Conference. She lectures for Universities, runs workshops, and is an editor and mentor for publishers and individuals. Her Yorkshire parents moved to Falkirk when Char was four, so she developed a strong Lallans accent very quickly! Char now divides her time between the Yorkshire Pennines and Ardgour.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

Hard to call first prize among so many accomplished poems in the winning cohort – but this poem leaped off the page the first time I read it as the potential winner, and confirmed itself as the winning poem with every subsequent reading. It's ambitious, quirky, energetic, surprising and completely successful. The dramatic interplay between the built environment (railings, flats), tricks of perspective, and a dislocated 'I'-voice consciousness – which speaks to the transgressive subject of women ageing - is both challenging and convincing and the voice, which is the engine of the poem, edgy, confident, fresh. "Is yon the wurd?" Absolutely.

Second Prize

SHERLOCK OF ALEPPO

Two boys, Victor and Sayid, crawl like bees
through the ruined honeycomb of Aleppo.
Dust clings like pollen to their skin. Victor
has a copy of The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes
dropped by an aid worker, committed to memory.
'Now I am Holmes,' he says, 'and you are Watson.'
and smears a mud moustache on Sayid's lip.

Their home is 221b Al Khandaq Street, a bombed out
paint shop. Victor plays a violin with no strings;
his friend has fashioned a bowler from a tin of emulsion.
Mrs Hudson is an old woman called Rasha
they found living alone with her cat.
Each morning, they visit Mycroft, once Akram,
three weeks after he caught the barrel bomb.

They wear bottle-top monocles and smoke Alhamras.
'We must eliminate the impossible,' says Victor,
'and find the man who murdered our brother. I have seen
his face in the ashes.' They find a soldier obeying orders.
'We have the evidence,' Victor tells him,
'a t-shirt soaked in blood, a single school shoe,
and a poster of a dictator. I leave this in your hands.'

Christopher James was born in Paisley, Scotland in 1975, and educated at Newcastle and UEA. A first prize winner of the National Poetry Competition, the Ledbury, Oxford Brookes and Bridport prizes he is also a recipient of an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors. He has published several collections, including *Farewell to the Earth* (Arc, 2011), and *The Fool* (Templar, 2014) as well as two Sherlock Holmes novels, including *the Adventure of the Ruby Elephants* (MX, 2015). He lives in Suffolk with his family, folding bicycle and ukulele.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

It's difficult to write about contemporary subjects in poetry as the risks are huge: rhetoric, redundancy, getting the tone wrong, or the facts wrong, appropriating the suffering of others. This poem proves it can be done with tact, imagination, a light touch, and a moving sensitivity to the real-life tragedy it's taken on as its subject. The incongruity of the connection between a devastated Aleppo and Sherlock Holmes works brilliantly – it mixes sadness with humour, and humanises our relationship to *Headline News*.

Third Prize

New York, It had a Ring to it

the way the words fell in his head
a place his mother was, near the pier, maybe,
where he was not allowed to go
or somewhere people went in cars,

the way the words grew like sand in his throat
would not pass his mouth
the whispers telling him they were bad
the way his granny spat them out,

the way he walked for days to get there
out of bed at night
the guards with the words behind their eyes
his granny shouting "you'll not take him"

telling him "your mammy's gone", her arms
tough and hard about him, hot milk,
sleeping in beside her, walking with her
up to Grogan's for one of Bessie's pups

he built a fort inside him to hold
the words, an island, a long island,
a statue bigger than Our Lady in the chapel,
the sky across Lough Swilly

got lost beyond Buncrana to a place
where buildings scraped it; he learned to count
to one hundred and forty nine, the way
when he'd be big he'd count the streets and find her

Sighle Meehan has a background in theatre and television. She has been writing poetry and short stories since 2012. Her work has been published widely in magazines and anthologies, broadcast on RTE, and she has been successful in many competitions. Her bi-lingual play, *Maum*, was produced by Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe for the Galway International Arts Festival 2015. She wrote and co-produced *Brigid*, a drama documentary, which was broadcast by TG4 several times. *Words are my love, she says, in theatre, reading, writing or overheard wherever people gather; the surprise of them, like pebbles dark on a river bed turning playful when they catch the sunlight.*

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

I love the way you have to read all the way through to the end of the poem before it makes sense so that the situation at its heart is only revealed in snatches and fragments. The stop-start syntax works formally to underscore the impression of things overheard, then painfully pierced together into a picture (a mistaken picture, ultimately) — which is exactly the boy's own experience as he tries to piece together where his mother might be, in the context of secrets and shame.

Commended

The Jamestown Brides

The first settlers were male. They could not fix
themselves or plant their puffed-out chests,

looked out west. Ate snakes. Some survived,
wrote home in want of wives to root

them to the soil. Petticoats. A promise
for a better life, they came

in rickety, half-seaworthy ships. Like this:
Orphans, maids, reckless, teenaged

girls, slips, blown off-course
to *the starving time*. They knew

their place. Those unkissed lips
harboured words, made breath.

Michael Brown's work has been published widely in magazines including *The Rialto*, *Southword*, *The North* and many others. He was shortlisted for the Bare Fiction Collection prize judged by Andrew McMillan in 2015 and was placed third in the York Poetry Prize, 2015. Michael was selected by Clare Pollard for a Northern Writers' Award (New North Poets) in 2017. He has twice been shortlisted in the Basil Bunting Award and won the Wirral Firsts Poetry Competition in 2018. The pamphlet, *Undersong* (2014) is available from Eyewear Publishing. His most recent pamphlet, *Locations for a Soul* appeared in 2016 from Templar Publishing.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

The musicality of this writing is marvellous, as is its sure-fire deployment of snap-shot visuals which resonate far beyond themselves – “Petticoats”; “slips”. This poem allows a lot of white space to eat around its edges – perhaps so little of the experience of early colonisation was literary, perhaps the vast wilderness was always threatening to overwhelm speech (and life). A poem in which less is more, for all kinds of sophisticated reasons, and every word fits.

Commended

Cupping hands

.... is the way to scoop tiddlers up
flick-flacking their inching quickness
in your palms. But don't pick minnows:
their sliding green's so dull. And, anyway,
pin-thin and darting, they're difficult to fish:
know how to hide in bankside shallows.
No, go for the stickleback, especially
the male - gem of a fellow with his ruddy
tummy, his marbled flank and back,
his eyes wide as silences. But mind
that trio of spines.

Aged eight, I jam-jarred one from the copse
(the chirring burn, its rills, its froth - birches
spritting – angled bracken - and blackbirds
working their everywhere song) took him
with weed to our backyard and its Staffordshire
blue-black brick, its ivy spidering the wall.

Once decanted into Mum's enamelled bath
with the daily-changed water, we watched
his turns, his back-peddalling, his hanging still.

Five days on he gave me my first touch
of death in Mum's cupped hands, his gaze
away, body stiff, while hers heaved and stirred,
the tears silently sliding down her cheeks.

Years later learned about her stillbirth:
the lidded eyes, the wide-splayed hands.

Roger Elkin has won **55** First Prizes in (inter)national Poetry Competitions and several awards, including the *Sylvia Plath Award for Poems about Women*, and the *Howard Sergeant Memorial Award for Services to Poetry* (1987). His 11 collections include **Fixing Things** (2011); **Bird in the Hand** (2012); **Marking Time** (2013); and **Chance Meetings** (2014). Editor of *Envoi*, (1991-2006), he is available for readings, workshops and poetry competition adjudication.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

This poem manages movingly to tell a story about one thing by telling a story about something else and is a finely judged example of narrative sleight-of-hand. The language describing the fish, and how to catch them, is both slippery and specific, mimicking the way a child might speak. The punch at the end only works because so little is said about it by comparison with everything else – it's the place where words run out, appropriately.

Commended

Latrigg

A half mile higher we stop again
and look at a young silver birch sloped
sideways but caught, on its way to the ground,
in the crook of a neighbour's branches.
There's tenderness in that, the kind of comfort
you only get from spending the night
in a schoolfriend's bed. We pass the flask
between shots of coffee, you face south
towards Derwentwater, I look north
over Bassenthwaite. You tell me that you like it
when the clouds sweep fast across the sky
as though they're late for a rehearsal

and I'm glad you've thought about that,
glad we're programmed to press on the world
with all our surplus meanings. Like yesterday,
when sizing up Latrigg from town we noticed
that the pines formed immaculate flags
stamped across the hillside. Tonight, let's sit
outside the cemetery, name our constellations:
the argument, the question mark, the rocket ship.

Lauren Garland grew up in Leeds. Now based in Manchester, she works for a child mental health charity and studies part time on the MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her poetry has appeared in *Butcher's Dog*, and she has work forthcoming in *Stand* and *Poetry Salzburg Review*. Her love of reading is matched by her love of running, food and cats.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

Here, we are dropped into the middle of what is already unfolding and I admire the loose interplay between environment, speech, and commentary ("to press on the world/with all our surplus meanings"). The poem ultimately becomes about poetry itself: about how comparisons themselves – stars as arguments, question marks and rocket ships – become the very "surplus meanings" which enrich our lives.

Commended

The Words of the Preacher to the People of the Five Houses at Sandquoy

*Take a flagstone, lay it before you.
Portray upon it your houses at Sandquoy.*

Hear me, oar-handler and caulker.
On your flagstone score ice floes at Ungava.

For five doors and one, I pray you will walk the old track to Piggar, under floating green banners.

Hear me, pilot and stocking-knitter.
On your flagstone the untempered mortar is running with water.

For five doors and one, I'll teach you to twist heather rope for a wick, burn oil in the crock to lighten the shadows.

Hear me, net-mender, goose-scarer.
Groove your flagstone with lines as your cupples tilt east, as your oilcloth slackens.

For five doors and one, I'll climb Fitty, Gallo and Knucker, plant your names under the turf, hack a way down to your ocean.

Hear me, indigent Margaret, pauper, farm servant.
Your ditch flows over, your footings crumble.
The chalk on your flagstone grinds in the storm of your hand.

For five doors and one, I'll fill your bowels with honey for sweetness.

For you, Elessander, fisherman, dumb as the fish you bring home,
you'll watch *The Love* capsize, stare through the crack as your door-frame buckles.
Your flagstone is murky with ash and iron.

For five doors and one, I will wash your drowned children.

Lydia Harris has made her home in the Orkney island of Westray. In 2017 she held a Scottish Book Trust New Writer's Award for poetry.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

This poem is written in a dense, idiosyncratic idiom – the language of preaching, cursing, and prophecy – and matches biblical rhetoric with everyday, rural Scottish life to striking effect. Here the terror of Passover is evoked in the context of turf, fishing, knitting and net-mending, and the poem's success sealed by its hammer-blow images: twisted heather for a "wick", "floating green banners", "drowned children."

Commended

Willow Tree

I would have my willow tree like this one,
alone on the Common, coppiced young,

forgotten, left to grow at will, a wild girl
if ever there was one, in love with her own

interwoven limbs. Nine times richer, nine
back bones where there would have been

one, nine trunks in a sinuous cluster,
chock-full of desire. A century later,

cut back again, head-height this time,
she's sprung a flock of tentacles, babies

all leaping from her arms at once, limbs
kicking, flames licking the sky. So much

reaching out has given her a broad foot,
a large heart. Ancient and free, torn

and lovely, she's not what you'd expect
from a tree. More like a shock of hair

or a sea-anemone, she seems almost
casual - thin leaves an afterthought,

catkins shabby snags of fluff - but come
closer and you'll see how a sudden rush

of growth has laddered her skin. She is
split, pock-marked, blotched with lichen

and open-mouthed a thousand times
where the ripped bark curls back in.

Mary Hastilow (b.1958) grew up in Birmingham, then lived in London for 35 years, where she worked in social housing. She is a member of Highgate Poets. In 2013 she moved to rural Herefordshire to concentrate on writing, and playing the violin. Her poetry has been placed in the Kent & Sussex Poetry Competition, shortlisted for the Wenlock Prize, and published in the journals *Under the Radar*, *Obsessed with Pipework* and *Cannon's Mouth*. She is currently studying for a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

A wonderful poem which, just like the willow tree it describes, is also clearly “in love” with its own “interwoven limbs” of subject, allusion, and form, fantastically light-footed as it trips between its couplets. Gorgeous music propels this poem forward and the deft control evidenced throughout over the line and line-breaks is equally admirable.

Commended

QUIZ

We are worried by the guy in the duffle coat.
He arrives late and sits at the table of nine, and laughs.
His thin mate with glasses and a 'My Sharona' t-shirt
buys a drink for the team. He laughs as well, and can carry
four pints at the same time. Even the girls look hungry.

It's now we want that thing, a signal blocker, possibly
what Clinton and Bush had when visiting friendly
and unfriendly states. Students would Google no more; no easy ride
to the front of the stage for that case of Corona lime and fizz.
The first question is on Gogol. Our name isn't even rude.

A clampett at the bar calls out answers and is removed by door staff.
Mostly he got things right, though he missed on Nixon.
What comes next might be Girona. At the round table is a group
of women of reasonable age and uncertain weight.
They want solutions, and we are generous up to a point

even though all sport is a guess, and we know the word 'quiz'
is an Enlightenment invention, made up like the word 'vixen'.
Good clean fun then, except when it's not. Nip and tuck right
to Kerry Katona at the end. The picture round shows us up,
music intros pull us down; Lady-Luck leaves us alone tonight.

Howard Wright lectures at the Ulster University, Belfast Campus. He was long-listed in 16/17 National Poetry Competition, and gained second place in the 2018 Ver Poets Prize with an added Commendation in the 2018 Torbay Open Competition. He was recently published in Poetry Ireland Review, HU Mag and Cyphers. Other poems are due to appear in Stand and The Frogmore Papers. His first collection, 'King of Country' was published by Blackstaff Press in 2010.

Sinéad Morrissey comments:

Smart, wry, askance, very funny – this poem locates its reader brilliantly in this particular pub on this particular quiz night (which is also *all* pubs on *all* quiz nights) and plays out its character-drama with devastating wit (“Even the girls look hungry”) and, ultimately, charm. This poem is assured on all fronts: formally, tonally, linguistically, and displays perfect comic timing. It made me want to be there too.