

McLellan Poetry Competition 2024 - English Competition

First Prize:

Chris Hardy for "Clear As Day"

Second Prize:

Di Slaney for "Curse of the Orchard House"

Highly Commended entries:

- Louise Greig for "The Toy Farm"
- Steve Pottinger for "Magic, Stafford Street, 9:43 am"
- Jane Pearn for "Plague"
- Sharon Black for "In An Antiques Shop"
- Sharon Black for "I am Writing a Book About Fire"

Congratulations to all of our very worthy winning and highly commended poets.

We would also like to extend our grateful thanks to Billy Letford and Jim Mackintosh for all their hard work in selecting the winning entries in this year's competitions, and to all the writers who took the time to enter the competitions and to trust us with their words and work.

Our Judge: William Letford



William Letford's work has been adapted into film, projected onto buildings, carved into monuments, adapted for the stage, written onto skin, cast out over the radio, and performed by orchestras. He has helped restore a Medieval village in the mountains of Northern Italy, taught English in Japan, and been invited to perform in Iraq, South Korea, Lebanon, Australia, Germany, India, Poland, and many more countries.

Visit William Letford's [website here](#).

First Prize: Chris Hardy for "Clear As Day"



Chris has travelled widely. After years in London he lives in Sussex. He is the Secretary of Chichester Poetry Stanza and reads, and accompanies poets on guitar, at literary events and festivals. His poems have been published in Stand; The North; The Rialto; Poetry Salzburg Review; Poetry Review, Ink Sweat and Tears and many other print and online magazines, and been highly commended and short listed in the Poetry Society, Live Canon and other competitions. One poem is currently riding around Brighton on the 21 bus.

He is in LiTTLe MACHiNe, performing their settings of well-known poems. The most brilliant poetry band in the

world. (Carol Ann Duffy).

His latest collection 'KEY TO THE HIGHWAY' is published by Shoestring Press. A guitarist and a poet Chris Hardy consistently hits the right note, never a false note. (Roger McGough).

Our judge's comment: "A lightning bolt slowed down becomes a poem on the page. Suddenly the delight of language, and the crackle of fresh perspective."

CLEAR AS DAY

From a blue sky
the bolt two centimetres
wide killed
a sea gull
on the roof
and punched a hole
through black slate
into the villa
above Lyme Regis
where the sea lay
in its bed.
A ball of
white fire
hovered in the kitchen
beside the knee
of my mother-in-law
who was reading
a recipe
propped by the toaster.

For a second
the orb
shimmered in
the quiet
sunlit room
as stars do
in the dark
then slid
sideways
through the wall.
Every socket burst
leaving a perfume
she recalled
from her father
shooting crows.
Thunder far off
the sun shone
she stood
silenced and
alone the
dead phone
in her hand
as beneath
the bay
stone drank lightning
in the afternoon.

Second Prize: Di Slaney for "Curse of the Orchard House"



Di Slaney lives on the edge of Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire where she runs livestock sanctuary Manor Farm Charitable Trust and independent publisher Candlestick Press. She was the winner of The Plough Poetry Prize 2022, Slipstream Open 2023, Four Corners 2015 and Brittle Star 2014 poetry competitions. Her poems have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, widely anthologised, and highly commended in the Forward Prize 2016 and Bridport Prize 2020. Journal publications include Poetry Wales, Popshot, Magma, The Rialto, The Interpreter's House, lamb, Raceme, Brittle Star, Long Poem Magazine, Humana Obscura and Modron Magazine. Her first collection Reward for Winter was

published in 2016 and second collection Herd Queen in 2020, both by Valley Press. Her third collection Hard Graft is due early in 2025, along with pamphlet January Conversations, with Dogs, both also from Valley Press. She is Poet in Residence at Nottinghamshire Local History Association.

Our judge's comment: "I entered this space, moved with each stanza and travelled generations. I loved how the poet let words run together to create a lexicon specific to the narration which built the world layer upon layer."

Curse of the Orchard House

before

Listen, there's a splintermoment
when happiness has capacity to shift
to sorrow, and if you're not quick
you miss it like a bird, feel cut adrift
but don't know why. I was like this,
one minute lavish with the gift
of trees, their fruits, their leaves,
their stubborn twisting bark lifting
whispers to the sky, sinking mumbles
to the earth, my earth, warm drifting
days and huddled nights, all green
of us together in my space, no rift,
blossom/swelling/dropping/resting
till something awful came so swiftly
then

we had no time to say goodbye, their
bravewood cut and cut, each blow
an echo through my layers, each rip
and tear and tug and pull a rootwoe
in my heart. Then trees were gone
and I was raw and barren, knowing
nothing good could ever happen now,
that no amount of busybricks or show
off foursquare, rising red and sharp
from my sorebutchered lowering,
could ever guiltypay the soil debt
of this loss. A softening of pitysnow
covered up the shame that winter,
while I festered darkalone below

and then

a weight of house. When the first
couple came, I felt an anger rising
through my dirt, a loamheat curse
no one could escape, my lonely
days and nights would be the thirst
to drain them of delight. And so this
came to be, he tried in vain to nurse
his silly planted patch, sprayed off
my pretty flutterfriends and worse,
killed anything that looked like life
beyond his square. She rehearsed
their youth's romance and found
it lacking. They argued, drank, burst
each other's love like heavy clouds

now

in June, moved out, split up, drank
more. A family came next, glistening
plastic dreams and brickambition,
adding to their walls and gates, prison
of their making, never mine. Mother
resented trees and hedges, christened
scanty grass with goalposts for her boy
who thumpthumpthumped till riven
fallouts with the neighbours tallied
the level of my rage. Father, given
to shallowblaming others, drinks
himself a backbone, boozestiffens

his resolve, but they won't stay much longer. Watch them now, and listen.

Highly Commended: Louise Greig for "The Toy Farm"



Louise Greig lives in Aberdeen with her husband where she writes children's picture books and poetry for children and adults. She has enjoyed various successes with her poetry including winning The McLellan Poetry Prize in 2017 which was an unforgettable highlight.'

Our judge's comment: "A wonderfully bizarre poem that lands with a graceful note of truth."

The toy farm

I bought a toy farm. I wanted it badly.
I am an adult but I wanted a toy farm
because it thoroughly charmed me.
It does not have plastic animals or fences
or a gaudy barn. This is my farm:
1X timbered house + 1X tree + 1X cornfield
+ 1X pond + 1X bird + 1X hare + 1X gnome.
Everything is wooden except the pond
which is a tiny round mirror (clever!)
and the cornfield (the bristles of a brush!)
My farm does not go moo and oink
and there is no roaring machinery.
My farm is very very quiet and calm.
It is a simple farm, and yet, because there
are 5040 different permutations for the placement
of 7 items, I can, by moving things around,
give my gnome farmer an extraordinarily varied life.
A momentous life.
He can only ever have a house, a tree, a pond,
a cornfield, a hare and a bird for company.
But I can say with certainty on his behalf, it is enough.

Highly Commended: Steve Pottinger for "Magic, Stafford Street, 9:43 am"



Steve Pottinger is a founding member of Wolverhampton arts collective Poets, Prattlers, and Pandemonialists, and has performed the length and breadth of the country. His work regularly appears online in CultureMatters and the Morning Star, and has won prizes or been commended in Bread & Roses, Prole, Poetry on Loan, Plough, Guernsey International, Arran, Verve, Welsh Poets, Write By The Sea, and Poets & Players poetry competitions. His seventh volume of poems, 'snapshots from the fall of home' published by Ignite Books, is out now.

<https://stevepottinger.co.uk/>

<https://ignitebooks.co.uk/products-page/steve-pottinger-books/>

what other poets have to say about Steve:

'muscular, passionate, emotional, rational, compassionate' Brenda Read-Brown

'pathos, grace, and stone-cold contempt for the powerful and immoral' Laura Taylor

'ready as needs be to caress or deck humanity in all its beautiful stupidity' Jonny Fluffypunk

'Bostin.' Spoz.

Our judge's comment: "It's a fine talent that can draw the mystery out of the common place to highlight the beauty within the ordinary."

Magic, Stafford Street, 9.43am

He sits outside the cafe in the morning sun,
practises the art of becoming invisible

it is not that he is still – though he is –
nor that he has ordered a bacon roll

and has been drinking instant, hot and milky
from a mug that steams in January cold

it is not that the table he sits at is flimsy
nor that the chair missed out on better days

has one leg shorter than the other, wobbles,
is a triumph of necessity, hope, and tape

it is not that he is hidden beneath a flat cap
older than you are, nor that his hands

swell at joint and knuckle, that there is dirt
under the nails, that half a finger's gone

it is not that he is rolling himself
a cigarette from the tin in his pocket

it is not his distant, watery eyes,
nor the whiskers he missed with the razor

it is not the ash falling onto his coat
nor his teeth like tombstones

it is not that one day you will pass, see
the table is empty, though the sun shines

it is not that you will wonder what is
now no longer there, nor that you

will puzzle over just what it is that
is missing from the morning, while

somewhere he is fixing his pale eyes on
something none of us can see,

mastering his art.

Highly Commended: Jane Pearn for "Plague"



Jane Pearn lives in Selkirk, in the Scottish Borders, with a cat called Florence. She has been twice long-listed in the National Poetry Competition, and has had poems published in several magazines including Ink, Sweat & Tears, Brittle Star and Spelt. She has published two poetry collections, and is currently working on a third. She can be found on Facebook at [JanePearnPoetryetc](#)

Our judge's comment: "The sound within the poem brings the earth to life and has the strange quality of painting a reality that is alien, and recently familiar."

Plague

At first they were afraid. They stayed behind their walls and they covered their faces. We took to their streets, loping, sniffing, exploring, tasting. Our roots split their concrete. They were still here, but not so many. And it was better: bats took the credit.

The few that remain alive are easily dealt with. But their leavings litter our space, stink the air, clog the seas. Now beetles and microbes get to work. The sky lightens, lifts, invents its own clouds. Blossoms erupt and six-eyed butterflies swim.

By little their paths close over, by little their buildings crumple, by little our tendrils reach. Trees grow where trees will. By little we reclaim. We do what we need and nothing more. Snakes go about their muscular business and apples are eaten for their flavour.

There is glisten and shine, shell and scale, feather and frill and fin, carapace and fur. Spotted, striped, reticulated. Tail and mane and tufted ears. Shoals and drifts, flocks and swarms and roaming packs. Hatching, dying, decaying, budding.

The nights are dark again and quiet. Quiet with the sound of insect feet, the whirr of wings, the fall of petals. Quiet with the pad of paws, and the rasp of teeth. Quiet with trickling water, the chafe of sand, a raindrop on a leaf.

Fresh rivers run to meet the sea and fish dance in coral reefs. Rocks boil and tilt and settle. Clean winds sculpt, water returns to ice. Moon-tides lap our shores, earth breathes

Highly Commended: Sharon Black for "In An Antiques Shop" and "I am Writing a Book About Fire"



Sharon Black is from Glasgow and lives in a remote valley of the Cévennes mountains in France. Her poetry is published widely and has won prizes including the Guernsey International Poetry Competition 2019 and The London Magazine Poetry Prizes 2019 and 2018. She has published 4 full collections of poetry and a pamphlet, *Rib* (Wayleave, 2021). Her latest collections are *The Last Woman Born on the Island* (Vagabond Voices, 2022), set in Scotland and exploring the landscapes and heritage of her home country, and *The Red House* (Drunk Muse, 2022), set in her adopted homeland of the Cévennes. Since 2016 she has been editor of Pindrop Press.

www.sharonblack.co.uk

Our judge's comment for "In an antiques shop":

"The detail builds marvellously to the surreal appearance of the subject of the poem, and a lifting of the heart."

Our judge's comment for "I am writing a book about fire":

"If you lay your hand over this poem you can feel the heat, and the blistering pop of wicked humour."

In an antiques shop

twenty-six years after her death, I find
her sideboard, teak with sliding glass doors.
I wipe away the dust, thumb the indentation
on a pane, slide it open. It's
all still there: the mottled cowrie shell
whose narrow mouth I fingered
for secrets it wouldn't give away;
the tennis trophies; the sequined peacocks
that gemmed her tree each Christmas.
One by one I pincer out the tinfoil ballerinas
I scrunched and twisted into life:
tutus, raised arms, pointed toes,
like extras from Swan Lake. Behind,
the face puff with a satin bow
I'd lift from its ceramic bowl, brush
across my cheeks: it made me sneeze.

And here's her handbag: sturdy
leather, off-white with a tarnished clasp,
stuffed with Terry's Oranges, Yorkies,
packs of KP Crisps for Saturday nights
while we sat glued – The Generation Game,
Starsky and Hutch – then round Frustration
with its Pop-O-Matic bubble. I drag out
the creaky leather sofa, dimpled, forest green,
and the matching swivel chair
I'd spin on, head thrown back
to a swirl of stippled Artex.

Now the gas fire, five bars hovering
between orange and neon blue:
I'd sit cross-legged in my school uniform
while she lowered her slight frame
to the armchair, listened as I told her of my day.
What I needed was her patient ear,
her quiet acceptance: I gulped them
like the Quosh and Jaffa cakes she brought in,
clinking, from the kitchen with its hatch,
its attic ladder to Dad's old bedroom.

Further in, I gather up her garden, slide
them to my chest: the rows of rhubarb,
strawberries cosied under nets, cabbages
whose leaves we creaked back carefully
for the caterpillars nestling at their hearts;
the apple tree as high as next door's chimney
that we four cousins climbed each August,
tossing fruits to Mum and Auntie Sheila
who nursed them into boxes on the lawn.

And finally, from the very back I bring out
Grandma herself, in her knitted cardie,
tweed skirt just past the knee,
her hair spun floss, white as cotton
and smelling of talc and Yardley's lavender,
tiny in my arms
as I ease her through the gap,
wondering where I've been all this time,
why it took so long to find her.

i.m. Catherine Robertson Glass (1910 - 1998)

I am writing a book about fire

I am writing a book about fire
because there are so many types and
I want to know them all:
the thin blue of the Bunsen burner,
orange fist of a struck match,

or a body deep in snow, fevered
by avalanche or white-out –
the ten-day hike across the Andes
after the crash, the black
of guttered fingers.

I load the wheelbarrow with logs,
lull them onto last night's embers
that my lover sparked from cuttings;
light a candle for our coffee
at the kitchen table. I could write

about how the body starves, the flare
of muscle consuming itself, organs glowing
as they rise like Chinese lanterns
before sinking back to earth.
Or the quiet flame of running

for your life, lap after lap,
of gin gulped from a bottle, enough,
almost, to raze the building.
The mind's blaze as it rips through words
and parched ideas. Or the day

I found my husband was on Tinder,
the trip of that old fuse, the surge
and swift inferno in my chest
burning burning
as I swept further into the wild –