

McLellan Poetry Competition 2017

The prizewinning poets are:

McLellan Poetry Competition 2017 Winners		
Place	Name	Poem
First	Louise Greig	Mrs Miniver was a fool about inanimate objects
Second	John Gallas	A Happy Man on a Bike
Third	Patrick Errington	Half Measures
Commended	Sally Davis	This is all I know
Commended	Rose Flint	September Tenancies at Witham
Commended	Giles Goodland	Instructions to my brothers
Commended	Doreen Gurrey	Sortie
Commended	Anne Milton	Glue
Commended	Jed Myers	Nomad's House
Commended	Susan Utting	My Sister's Eyes

Responding to the poems Maura Dooley writes:

Reading the poems entered for this competition was like being given an excellent and up-to-the-minute anthology of contemporary poetry. That simple fact made it so difficult to boil down the number of very good poems to a shortlist and then further to find a 'top' three and commended. Some of the poems I will long remember haven't made it to the final list because the form was stronger than the content perhaps, or the content stronger than the form. I have chosen poems where every part seems to be in working order, where there is a well-oiled machine of voice, mood and form, where the poem wants to tell me, the reader, more each time I go back to it.

How extraordinary it is to know that as a reader I can dive into a mere 10 or 12 or 15 lines on a page and come up again for air quite changed. Such is the power of poetry. Often moving, sometimes funny, clever, wise and always generally engaging, these poems considered the world in which we live but usually viewed the political through the personal. Few didactic poems came my way, few poems which dealt directly with the immediacy of our turbulent times; some poets chose allegory, others chose myth to explore or expound on the changes which challenge us.

Most poets chose free verse but those who enjoyed traditional form seemed to favour the sonnet or the villanelle. I was pleased to read voices which clearly came from all walks of life, all ages and - I'd guess - several different countries. I read of joy and of loss, of ageing and of new life beginning, some fine, detailed descriptions of landscape, some wry character studies and many good poems which defy an easy categorisation.

Overall, the work I read was of high quality and diverse subject matter - this made judging the competition extremely difficult but so enjoyable and deeply rewarding. Thank you!

Maura Dooley

First Prize: Louise Greig

Mrs Miniver was a fool about inanimate objects

This sentence wraps my heart in a poultice. Mind is now a loaf of baked brown bread, all homely and comforted. Because it is tiring enough peeling potatoes without the worry of them weeping for their old potato patch. At least they are together in a small potato huddle. Perhaps they are holding an emergency meeting. So this is how it is, with everything. How then can you talk to me about moving? Moving home is moving moon. I walk from room to room. The walls are papered in contentment. The doors are like old elephants, heavy with memory. There is goodness in these doors, goodness that only an old oak that has given shelter to a fawn might know. I cannot leave the kind old doors that loved their fawns. I cannot leave the floors. They would grieve for me but tolerate their loss with grace. And that is worse than anything. Mrs Miniver would understand. She would take my hand and together we might laugh at potatoes with potato souls, and elephant doors. There are worse things, she might whisper, than the heart-breaking beauty of the familiar.

Louise Greig lives in Aberdeen with her husband and her rescue greyhound, Smoky, where she writes children's picture books and is a founder director of a dog rescue and rehoming organisation.

She started writing seriously in 2014 and a few early successes include joint winner of the inaugural Manchester Writing for Children Competition (MMU 2014); winner of the Caterpillar Poetry Prize (2015); winner of the main prize in the Wigtown Poetry Competition (2015).

The beauty of nature, and in particular the solitude of the Scottish landscape, are strong influences in her life.

Maura Dooley writes:

Mrs Miniver, by Jan Struther, was taken from a series of newspaper columns in *The Times* and turned into a novel, just as many a blog these days develops into a book. Published in 1939 it was immediately seized upon as the basis for a film which became an enormous success as its fingerprints of loyalty, patriotism and uncertainty struck a note with so many over those years. A Hollywood movie, first screened in 1942 and starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, it has everything quintessentially 'British', a comfortable house by the Thames, a love story, the battle of Dunkirk looming, a scene where the villagers trusted-and-true gather in the village church to the strains of *Onward Christian Soldiers*. It is an idyll, it is propaganda, it is about courage and it is very moving. This poem seizes upon an aside which throws light on the nature of Mrs Miniver herself who declares herself 'a fool about inanimate objects'. What did Jan Struther, the author, mean by this? That Mrs Miniver is nostalgic, soppy about objects which somehow reify a person or a past?

The poet William Carlos Williams wrote (*Paterson* 1927), 'Say it, no ideas but in things,'. The mention of any object creates a visualised idea in our minds. We form an image of the thing. This does not happen at the mention of abstractions like 'truth' or 'memory'. Abstract words do not create images in our mind. Only 'things' create visual images.

The title of this poem tells us 'Mrs Miniver was a fool about inanimate objects'. Mrs Miniver has attached great significance to *things*, to *objects*.

This poet has taken that idea and run with it. In 16 lines she takes the reader through rooms filled with the echoes and memories of significant moments somehow held in the very fabric of the rooms themselves. She animates the rooms; the floors would be so understanding of her need to leave them behind that they would 'tolerate their loss with grace'. This is a moving, clever and original poem but also a very funny one:

'..it is tiring/ enough peeling potatoes without the worry of them weeping for their/ old potato patch.'

The last lines of the poem rejoin Mrs Miniver both in the comforting acknowledgement of their shared investment in the inanimate but also in a new knowledge. By the end of the novel, the Minivers are living in their home in the country and fostering 7 evacuee children from London to safeguard them from the bombs. At the end of the poem the poet and Mrs Miniver take hands: 'There are worse things/she might whisper, than the heart-breaking beauty of the familiar'.

Second Prize: John Gallas

A happy man on a bike lights up the village sign at Newton-in-the-Isle

At four o'clock the February sky
let loose a sudden smatch and shower like salt
shook once across the vittles of the land
I pedalled past from Tydd.

The sun lay low on Fitton End, and all the watersides,
and blinked behind the shortling waft of white.
Newton next. The flooded fields like metal trays,
and nothing rode the road but I.

The village sign, six black characters
in Transport Type on silver sheeting, softly burst
in blooms of light back in my face, with all
the quiet clamour of a cloud.

A moment, then, it blossomed : then I passed.
Why invent the truth : my eyes are headlights,
dynamo'd with fierce content, that spill some radiance
that wakes the retroreflect fire in everything.

I pedalled down the darkling street elate,
past the prettier sign, on which Sir John
and Mary in the Marsh, the dull white lion rampant,
six hushed bells, and a weed of woad are painted

and sawn out on a pole : whose particular
and huddled history, to me, was a mere Dark Age
beside the common guide, like a February island
laid in a sea of dazzle seasoned with rain.

John Gallas is a New Zealand poet, living in Markfield, Leics. 11 books published by Carcanet : no.12, 'The Little Sublime Comedy' due out later this year. Also published by Cold Hub (NZ), and Agraphia Press. Just completed John Clare's 125 mile walk from London to Northborough (see 'Mad John's Walk', publ. by Five Leaves), and biked (see the poem) All Lincolnshire.
www.johngallaspoetry.co.uk www.carcanet.co.uk

Maura Dooley writes:

Here I am, as reader, on a lovely bike ride through 6 verses of finely-observed landscape. The language here is fresh and clear:

'a sudden smatch and shower' or 'the vittles of the land' or the darkling street'. This is the kind of language often termed 'poetic' but there is nothing affected here, nothing overwrought and nothing over-used – no 'shards', 'thrums' or 'myriads'. This is a landscape filled with light and every verse captures this quality differently:

The sun that blinks '...behind the shortling waft of white' or 'the flooded fields like metal trays',
The village sign on silver sheeting whose letters 'softly burst/in blooms of light back in my face'.
All of this culminating in a sense not only of the physical landscape but of everything its personal history signifies to this poet; beautifully accomplished.

Third Prize: Patrick Errington

Half Measures

It's been years, now, since she left and even
still he sleeps on just half the bed. After all,

it really is easier to make that way, quicker
to hide all evidence of dreaming, like souvenirs

hastily put back up on the shelf. He's become
a tenant of fractioned closets, of half-portioned

recipes, of refracted light. He sometimes tells
himself, like time, there is managing in measure,

absence held in the hand-span, the half-heart,
the hair's breadth. For comfort, he remembers

seeing the great Dutch paintings – Dou, sometimes
Vermeer – the immeasurable lives made so nearly

bearable in the frame, slightness like a bird's
body in a plastic bag. As a child, he used to

count miles on telephone poles while, in front,
his parents spoke in weather-levelled voices.

When he'd told her this she pitied him. When
he would add up all the countries he wanted to

show her, she'd tell him that numbers are such
a man's way of holding the world, but, when

women love, they love innumably. Softly,
he'd said he only wanted to hold her. He'd never

admit how, against her body, he felt so desperately
proportionate, how sometimes he would lie

along the bathroom tiles as though the seams
and scale would make him somehow bearable

as a painting, would hold him. Not because
he needed holding, but maybe just to know loss

could be travelled, as he watched planes scrawl
across the unbound blue through the window.

So often, these days, he thinks of grief in terms
of distance. Carefully plotting out the lengths

involved in the longing, he imagines himself some
ancient philosopher slowly dividing the distance

toward home, thinking of a child's hands, still
sticky with the juice of a poorly-divvied fruit.

How impossibly small it all can seem, small
like distance, halved, and halved, and halved again.

Patrick James Errington's poetry has been featured in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Best New Poets 2016*, *The Boston Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The London Magazine*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Passages North*, and was highly commended in the 2016 National Poetry Competition. Originally from the prairies of Alberta, Canada, Patrick currently lives in Edinburgh and is a doctoral candidate researching poetics and cognitive neuroscience at the University of St Andrews.

Maura Dooley writes:

It seems obvious to comment on how well-measured this poem is, since the matter of measure is so much its subject but it is a beautifully controlled meditation on loss and containment.

Each new thought in the narrative is balanced against the next. It is a poem of numbers and measurements; not just the halves mentioned in the title and continued as key reference point throughout, but also the years, the fractions, the hair's breadth, the miles, the adding up of countries, the 'lengths ...in the longing', 'the poorly-divvied fruit'. With great skill the poet moves the reader back and forth in time across episodes and memories from childhood to the compromises of adult life; elegantly and satisfyingly done.

Commended: Sally Davis

This is all I know:

That you'll wake to find
the snow-blanket, pulled tight
around your duffel, scarf,
your scorched-hearth heart,

is not enough,

and you might think: *maybe*,
quiet as new growth
pushing through dirt,
maybe I could

step out of this.

And you might stand there,
threadbare against sleet,
light as light, thick as loam,
and try lifting your face

to the stars.

Sally Davis is a writer and rocket scientist. She has been paid to blow up cars, test teeny tiny parts of the satellite that rendezvoused with a comet (Rosetta), play wargames at the Pentagon, write plays, and occasionally for poetry! She also delivers award-winning dyslexia awareness training. She is working towards a first collection.

Maura Dooley writes:

Sometimes the apparently simplest of statements capture moments of clarity and profundity. This is a poem about hope; the hope for change, perhaps from depression, perhaps from something else, the hope that one can begin again. The poem's meaning might seem clear at one swift glance. However, it would be wrong to suppose that such economy and transparency comes easily.

This is a well-crafted poem whose power comes as much from its well-turned phraseology 'your scorched-earth heart' as from its form on the page: 3 four-line verses each separated by one short line of only 3 or 4 syllables.

This is a poem of economy and grace.

Commended: Rose Flint

September Tenancies in Witham

Some leaves are lucent as their young selves in May
yellow as harvest butter, last fires burning
through threads of the matrix, sky bird-egg blue.
Last week, my son saw an otter here in the river
at our front door. It entered the swimming hole,
climbed the old mill steps, going upstream
under the road to where the bridge
makes a perfect circle, framing a place of light
that shines green-gold as the promised land.
I think my son must be loved by otters
to be allowed to witness their secret lives.

High on the swoop of the shed roof
Himalayan Balsam – so many peachy baby mouths
in felicity – sways with a weight of sipping insects.
I should cut it soon, cull it for its innocent power
of disruption, but I remember the tiny white
murmuring bees that drowsed on its pollen
in a Lancashire valley of massed beeches
and bandstands. As if white bees came from far
snows, cosseted emissaries snug in a cell of ice
gliding down on a wing of cirrostratus.

We are unsettled, unrooted, and will move on,
my son soon as the third brood of swallows.
Each season has brought its own nomads: last winter
swans and great egrets, rumours of cranes,
three greylag geese on the day my grandson chose
to be born. July saw the grace of a lammergeyer
astray from south floating over. This is how it goes
since the ice thinned, and birch and aspen came in
from the arctic taiga: land and living changing colours
in kaleidoscopes of gains and losses.

I don't know who will come to make this their home
in the shifting sequences of tenancies and weather;
moving on is hard, tears at the heart, folds danger
into earth, air, water. The path out to Witham
winds up high under vines and bamboo, but here
after hard rain the river rises fast towards flood,
meringues of foam caught twisting in dry angelica.
I watch the changing light flickering like hope
on that other route out of here, the one the otters take:

trackless through drowning black deep, up
against the flow of swollen water that falls in thunder,
but still on, to slip through the lit curve into a spaciousness
that seems bright and tender as some future of love.

Rose Flint is a poet and art therapist. She has been a writer in healthcare and a teacher of creative writing for many years and is currently working on the Elevate Project for older patients in Salisbury Hospital. Her collections are *Blue Horse of Morning* (Seren), *Firesigns* (Poetry Salzburg) *Nekyia* (Stride) *Mother of Pearl* (PSAvalon) and *A Prism for the Sun* (Oversteps). Awards include the Cardiff International Poetry Competition and the Petra Kenny International Poetry Prize

Maura Dooley writes:

This deeply-worked and fine exploration of roots and restlessness, interweaves the personal with the natural world. The boy mentioned in the poem is at one with the otters and his possibilities in life are summoned as just as fluid and open to unknown influence, chance and change.

This is a poem of light and shade, of shifting moods. It is fashioned by a confident poet who enjoys the detailed depiction of plant, birdlife, landscape and animal life both for itself and as allegory and mirror of our inner worlds.

In 4 densely packed verses of 10 or more lines the poet deftly suggests both metamorphoses and hope for the future ‘in the shifting sequences of tenancies and weather’.

Commended: Giles Goodland

Instructions to my Brothers

When you arrive she will not tell your name straight away but she'll know that you are her son. She'll start to pour you a drink, but pour you a story. If you want to hear it you have to tell her you are not interested; but if you are bored, say 'do go on', and she'll pour you that whiskey. The story will involve a long description of events in an indeterminate past and will reference other children that you did not know she had. Disregard this. Next morning before leaving she'll suggest a quick drink. This is up to you, but you won't leave until she's had one. At the hospital, guide her in. At each stage of the process she will suggest it is time to go home. Hold steady, don't let her walk off after seeing the desk nurse. Try not to interrupt her when she says she won't need the operation after all because she'll be dead soon. (She will pronounce dead 'dade'). After she has spoken you can point out that being able to see again might extend her life. Do sit with her in the theatre, you may observe her hands move nervously. Hold one. This hand fed you. Watch them remove clouds from her eyes, slide in a new lens. They are telling her she can sit up. Don't let her persuade you to leave her at the bus stop to 'make her own way home' with one bandaged eye, since 'you have a long way to drive' in the other direction. Drive her home. Stay till morning. Remove her bandage. You'll see.

Giles Goodland's next book is *The Masses* from Shearsman.

Maura Dooley writes:

This poem summoning a series of relationships and moods and circumstances, so familiar to families, is finely judged. The inventory of tiny moments of interaction moves steadily and seamlessly to its denouement, well-earned.

How brilliantly executed the line breaks are in the final section of this poem:

‘.....They are telling her/she can sit up. Don’t let her persuade you/to leave her at the bus stop to ‘make/her own way home’ with one bandaged eye, since/‘you have a long way to drive’/in the other direction.’

This is a good angry poem that is also full of tolerance and wit and juggles this explosive mixture dextrously.

Commended: Doreen Gurrey

Sortie

I didn't see them at first, the mothers,
arm in arm with their middle-aged daughters,
brought out blinking into another
spring day, feeling their way, testing the water,

seeing the blueprint of a town that lies
somewhere underneath the streets they walk in,
leaving behind its clues in what survives;
a marble floor, a brass plaque wearing thin.

Later I meet them queuing with a tray,
silenced by an unfamiliar language
chalked on a blackboard; *ciabatta*, *bagel*,
dumbfounded by words that first blur, then vanish.

Back home, I wonder if they take a stand,
bake plain scones with familiar things to hand.

Doreen Gurrey: I originally taught English and drama, but after my children were born went on to teach adult literacy and family learning programmes for York council often using poetry as a way in. I have been reading poetry since I was around fourteen, being completely taken up one rainy afternoon in school when the teacher turned on the radio and we listened to a BBC schools' broadcast where Dylan Thomas read his poems, and Ted Hughes read some of his animal poems, and I knew then that there was a voice out there that spoke to me, my class and my experience.

I now teach creative writing part-time for York University's continuing education department. My own writing is often about severance of some kind; it has been published in *The North*, *The Yorkshire Anthology* and has been highly commended for the Bridport, the York festival poetry competition and others

Maura Dooley writes:

This gentle poem, the second sonnet of the group, demonstrates again how versatile that form can be in skilled hands. How familiar to us all are these doughty older women on the arm of a younger relative. How tenderly the poem reveals them to the reader:

‘brought out blinking into another/spring day, feeling their way, testing the water,’

This poem put me in mind of a poem I'm very fond of by the Irish poet Paul Durcan 'Golden Mothers Driving West'. His poem too puts the mothers back in charge. I love the subversion at the end of this accomplished poem and I long for it to be true:

‘Back home I wonder if they take a stand,/bake plain scones with familiar things to hand.’

Commended: Anne Milton

Glue

Some time last week or maybe last year
I dropped I clumsily dropped the book

that tells the story of my life
dropped it fell suddenly apart

covers buckled leaves sprang loose some vanished
down the cracks in the pavement

of course I picked the rest up at once
stuffed them into my pockets

into the zip-up compartments of my handbag
so the information is all there

mostly though some of the pages are stuck together
having become wet

and some are crumpled
so the memories on them have merged and
the little pink cardigan with cherry buttons I find
I am wearing on my wedding day

but I piece things together slowly turning
some of the pictures over and over in my hands and others

I scrumple up very small and shove
at the back of the shoe cupboard

but what remains I can collage and take out
and show with fondness to my friends

when they visit and I will know them from their pictures
in my scrapbook of days and here is the park

where we played on the big slide and now is a hot cup of tea
and a shortbread biscuit and soon I will have breakfast

under the trees I will breakfast I will sit
on the little blue chair at the special table
which my father made

Anne Milton lives on the outskirts of Worcester with several cats and a colourful and fruit-filled garden. She's a supporter of Worcester LitFest and Fringe and a member of Worcestershire Stanza, attending the monthly Speakeasy and License to Rhyme events. Her first collection, *Glue*, is almost finished. *Glue* is based on her experience of living with Alzheimer's disease and Anne is in the process of adapting it for stage to raise money for Alzheimer's Research UK.

Maura Dooley writes:

I have read many poems in recent years – and indeed novels – which attempt to capture something of the unravelling nature of the mind; changes brought about by ageing, or by stroke or dementia. Rarely have I read a more affecting, sensitive treatment than this poem conjures.

Written without punctuation, using the rhythms of speech, judiciously chosen line endings, a clever use of the white space on the page and a confident sense of narrative drive, this poet propels the reader through a whole life. Cleverly, the knowledge we gain of the life described is not in chronological order but is presented as a scattering, the untidy pattern, in fact, of our haphazard, increasingly patchy and unreliable memories.

Commended: Jed Myers

Nomad's House

I'd seen the black wooden chair. Ikea, I'd guessed,
intact but akilter out back of the Thai place. They kept
the slatty thing there, for someone, a cook say, to rest
on his breaks. Last winter dawn, a bearded man slept

a bit tilted on it, zipped in brown jacket with black
wool cap, stained gray pants, and paint-splattered boots.
Arms round his chest and perched-owl still, with his back
to the wall, he posed for a news clip no one would shoot.

I stepped light as I could past that broadcast on loss,
my trespass, I hoped, no disturbance, this alley his home
for the night at least, the parking slots I walked across
his uncluttered parlor under its airy dark dome.

I'm stirred, how, in the open and cold, he slept,
head erect in the little lot where his life had been swept.

Jed Myers lives in Seattle. His poetry collections include *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award), the chapbook *The Nameless* (Finishing Line Press), and the limited-edition handmade chapbook *Between Dream and Flesh* (Egress Studio Press). Among honors received are *Southern Indiana Review's* Editors' Award, *Blue Lyra Review's* Longish Poem Award, the *Prime Number Magazine* Award for Poetry, *The Southeast Review's* Gearhart Poetry Prize, and the McLellan Poetry Prize. His poems can be found in *Poetry Northwest*, *Rattle*, *Nimrod*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Crannóg*, *Canary*, *Magma*, several anthologies, and elsewhere. He is Poetry Editor for the journal *Bracken*.

Maura Dooley writes:

This poem is a thoroughly modern sonnet and within the economy of that form the reader enjoys a full narrative encounter with a moment in the lives of two characters. Full of sharp detail, the 'Ikea chair', the 'Thai place', the 'stained gray pants', 'the parking slots', the poem also skilfully conforms to the rhymes and development required of the sonnet form.

Emotionally generous yet restrained, this is an impressive and vivid narrative poem.

Commended: Susan Utting

My Sister's Eyes

after Claire Loder

My sister's eyes are startled,
crew-cut fringed, are tentacled –
my sister's eyes are sea anemones.

My sister's nothing but her eyes,
her startled sea anemones, she
has eyes for nobody but me.

My sister's face is all around
her eyes – and there's her little
mouth, it's making shapes,

my sister's mouth is spelling
words with her lips, I read
her lips, see what she's saying.

My sister's voice is sweet
as a cherry fruit drop, supple
as sea-bed tentacles, her words,

my sister's words for nobody
but me, are pink, and I, an only child,
adore her voice, the little mouth in

my sister's face, those startled eyes
that fix me as I move one way
and then another, that follow me.

My sister's sea anemones hold out
their tentacles to me and I'm beguiled:
my little sister's eyes are calling me,
they call me *sister*.

Susan Utting's latest poetry collection, *Half the Human Race: New & Selected Poems*, was published by Two Rivers Press in March 2017. She has won many awards, including the Peterloo Prize, The Berkshire Poetry Prize and a Poetry Business Prize for *Something Small is Missing*. She was selected for The Times newspaper's best love poem feature and has had work widely published, including in the TLS, The Poetry Review, The Independent, Poems on the Underground, and in the Daily Mirror as Carol-Ann Duffy's Laureate's Choice. Susan currently lives and works as a poet and tutor in Berkshire.

www.susanutting.com

Maura Dooley writes:

Such a confident voice at work here and like a spell it draws in the reader. Who is the speaker and who is this strange sister whose eyes are 'sea anemones'?

The poet here uses repetition to excellent effect. How unsettling it is to hear these words repeated in different order, like a chant:

Sister/eyes/mouth/words/voice/anemones/beguiled

How hard it is to resist the compelling rhythmical pull of them. This poem has everything to do with the sea – the restless, irresistible charge of it, the danger and the familiarity and everything, also, to do with family and those very same characteristics.