

McLellan Poetry Competition 2016

The prizewinning poets are:

McLellan Poetry Competition 2016 Prizewinners		
Place	Name	Poem
First	Jed Myers	The Wire Said
Second	Claudia Daventry	The Rough Wooing
Third	Richard Evans	Paper Chains
Commended	Ross Cogan	Idun
Commended	Laura Foley	The Long View
Commended	Lesley Harrison	Herring
Commended	Keith Hutson	Vera
Commended	John Lancaster	The Swing
Commended	Lynn Thornton	Penelope

Responding to the poems David Constantine writes:

‘I read the Long List, about a hundred poems out of more than nine hundred. Clearly, this is a major competition.

In circumstances forever changing, poetry says what it feels like being human in particular time and place. It celebrates the infinite variety of human life between the facts of birth and death. It thrives in the mix of uniqueness and the commonplace. The poems I read proved that again and again. They demonstrated the necessity of poetry, for writers and readers equally. Some writers here reached back to myth, legend, historical characters, for the intrinsic interest of those subjects and for the figurative force they have still in our day and age. Illness, old age, memory, loss of memory, bereavement: the common lot. And interwoven among them, childhood, youthfulness, love of people, of localities, of fellow-creatures on earth – all the energy and the joy of it! And anger too, revulsion against what stunts and thwarts a human life and spoils the earth we share with all living things. I could cite a score of poems here that, without preaching but simply by doing what poems do, discover the oddity, the irreducible singularity, of human beings, and so oppose all fundamentalisms. This assertion of plurality was matched by a mixture of forms – some that have been in the language for hundreds of years, others invented for the project in hand. Forms: that without which there is no poem.

So I congratulate all the participants and thank them, collectively, for their assertion of faith in a thing that matters.’

First Prize

The Wire Said

“...we have been most ourselves, when we have opened our doors...”
—Amy Davidson, in *The New Yorker*

Held up behind a red in evening rain,
my FM station on, I heard a man
who'd left his house in rubble, crossed a plain
and then a sea, gone north without a plan,
now faced a razor wire fence—it met
horizon at both ends. The wire said
a vast estate of folk more fortunate
had spread this far, and that its forbears bled
a sea to claim it. Then a rush of surf
it seemed poured through the radio—a gust
blown here, I thought, across the bordered turf,
from where the nomad shifted in the dust.
His ragged English rode like froth on flood.
It floated through the wire, blood to blood.

Jed Myers lives in Seattle, where he's a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington. He began seeking publication of his poems as of the events known of 9/11/01. His collections include *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award), the chapbook *The Nameless* (Finishing Line Press), and a chapbook forthcoming from Egress Studio Press. His work has received *Southern Indiana Review's* Editors' Award, the *Literal Latte* Poetry Award, *Blue Lyra Review's* Longish Poem Award, two Pushcart nominations, and, in the UK, a Forward Prize nomination. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Crannóg*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Quiddity*, and elsewhere.

Second Prize

The Rough Wooing

*We liked not the manner of the wooing, and we could not stoop to being
bullied into love*

George Gordon, 4th earl of Huntly, 1551

Smoke hangs under the plaster rose when he leaves the room.

It is not for want of love that she resists him, but a wanton
streak a mile wide that runs in the underground rivers
of her blood: you are not going to have me unless
you lie down, unless you make yourself mine
unless you understand that to be lovers
means a knot of steel cable, of stone
it means until the end of time
until one of us is alone
and the other, dead.

Until I'm bone dead
until you are left alone
until you no longer have time
left to your name, your heart is stone
and you have forgotten how two lovers
slough and change skins, me yours, you mine
I will not leave you in peace, I'll pursue you – unless
you turn to water and escape down underground rivers
into the centre of the earth, where you disappear in a wanton
hiss of steam, leaving me nothing but a pall of smoke in the room.

Claudia Daventry moved from Amsterdam to St Andrews in 2007 to pursue the MLitt with Don Paterson and Douglas Dunn, after which she has combined teaching with her interest in languages to start PhD research on translation in poetry. Her work has been widely published and has won various awards and commendations, including first place in the Bridport Prize, the inaugural Ruskin prize and last year a Templar award for publication of her chapbook *The Oligarch Loses His Patience*, which is currently being translated into French.

Third Prize

Paper Chains

And if we were told over the tannoy
in that mechanical tone
there had been a fatality on the line
between here and our listed destinations
somewhere in scrub-land
at town's edge, by shut docks
from building, wire-fence or bridge
or leaping clean from a dark platform
into the definite force of a cross country bullet -
then we would all take in hand
or in black leather glove
another's hand, and another's
until each of us were stood
together, like that,
a paper chain
none eager to be the first
to step off the yellow safety line
and get on with their lives.
We wanted to stand there, to stay
in our winter coats, close enough
to see each other's breath
because we stood beside a grave
which might have been ours, or anyone's
stretching on and on into uncertain distance.
And it was our comfort to understand
like us, on every platform, from here
to where the body lay
of woman or man or child
strangers lined the track-side
in silent vigil . . . but I'm not sure
you could really understand, it must seem strange
to you, how we didn't tut
or check and re-check our watches, phones,
how we didn't shake our heads
or share complaints
with anyone who seemed half to care
or listen.

Richard Evans was born in Hastings, East Sussex. He was raised by his mother, who gave him his love of poetry, taking him to poetry readings with a group from the homeless drop-in where she worked when he was young. He started reciting poetry with the group in open mic nights and

charity events, and continued to recite at Other Words, a local open mic night, until he went to University.

He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at UEA, and later did an MA at Goldsmiths, working odd jobs and leading poetry workshops in schools to fund himself. While at University, he met the author and founder of Egg Box Publishing, Alexander Gordon Smith, who published his first collection of poetry, 'The Zoo Keeper' (2003). This received some critical appreciation and was highly commended in the Forward Prize; it included photographs by Camilla Stapleton-Hibbert. In 2009, he published his second collection, 'Orbiting', illustrated by Sussex based artist, Ed Boxall.

He now lives in Birmingham, and is studying to become a primary school teacher with Teach First; he is also working towards a new poetry collection.

Commended

Idun

Brown-eyed Idun, with her leaf-green scarf
bound round her white flesh like the smooth wax
of an apple, balances a fruit basket –
puzzle of moss-packed rush and willow –
in her arm's bow, so that it strokes her hip.

The sweet, gold-skinned fruit hold a white-
coated claim: that they will tame time,
dam up minutes, redirect ruffling days
down other courses, leaving us dry
like islands. But I know that the real sorcery

is in the angle of shoulder and hip, tangle
of plaited hands like a detail in stone
from a tomb sculpture; the smiling grace
that gives love with an apple – the only thing
truly immortal in all the gimcrack heavens.

Ross Cogan has published two collections with *Oversteps*, *Stalin's Desk*, and *The Book I Never Wrote*, and received a Gregory Award. A freelance writer/editor, he is also Creative Director of the Cheltenham Poetry Festival. Ross has won the Exeter and Frogmore poetry prizes, among others, and published in numerous magazines, including *PN Review*, *The Rialto*, *Poetry London*, *Stand* and *Orbis*.

Commended

The Long View

After Mother files for divorce,
and we all move out,
before he marries a young Swiss,
who decorates their Christmas tree
with burning candles, giving him
anxiety—he lives alone,
and we leave him alone
with his tenth-floor view
of the sweeping East River,
unfolding like an abstract movie
of a possible future—tidal currents
churning into chill Atlantic sea,
muscling under Triborough Bridge,
at the Nexus of Hell's Gate
he turns from nightly, retiring
to one of five empty bedrooms
and bathrooms, thick walls
muting the city's urgencies,
tugboats lowing warnings,
sirens wailing
toward each new disaster.
After he remarries,
and fathers a baby he calls
his second litter—
after I watch them twirl
on the once-beige, newly aqua carpet,
enjoying a moment's peace
before their divorce,
and young daughter's death.
Before his over-taxed heart's
long decline, murmuring warnings,
as he shuffles from his bedroom's
dark river view, through
long empty hallways, seeking
some comfort he can't name,
further wearing the fading,
threadbare robe I inherit,
when the apartment
is empty of him.

Laura Foley won first place in Common Goods Poetry Contest, judged by Garrison Keillor and the National Outermost Poetry Prize, judged by Marge Piercy. The author of five poetry collections, including *Night Ringing* and *Joy Street*, her poems have appeared in *The Writer's Almanac*,

Valparaiso Poetry Review, *Aesthetica Creative Writing Anthology*, and many other journals. She lives with her partner among Vermont hills, with their three big dogs. www.laurafoley.net

Commended

HERRING

from *The Harvest of the Sea* by James Glass Bertram. London: John Murray, 1873.

The larvae are filaments of glass,
the otolith visible behind the large blue eye.
At birth they die or thrive

in the great ocean workhouse
floating like threads; the lump of their heart below
a silver sac of air.

At night they wind together,
poppling as they rise, dispersing at the surface
sinking at dawn on gravels and anticlines

a dark idea following the current
rising off Foula, wavering in long, thin lines
- blue in gold, slate grey in purple -

hauled up in drifts, kissing the surface
the light of their colour fading long before
the boat can reach the harbour.

Lesley Harrison lives in the north-east coast. Her poetry examines how we locate ourselves in a landscape through language, weather, finding shelter (real and imagined) and our subliminal collective memory. Her most recent poetry pamphlet 'Beyond the Map' (Mariscat) explores the experience and aftermath of the east coast whalers. Her first collection is due to be published early in 2017.

Commended

Vera

Even then it was a name for adults,
not an eight year old. In the backward stream,
worse at maths than me, she had no father

and a limp. Her mum was Mrs Worthington,
so we'd stand at her broken gate and sing
Don't put your daughter on the stage then run

until, one teatime, more worse for wear
than normal, Mrs W came round to shout
our antics at my dad. He listened –

placidly for him – responded
Fair enough ... but she's hardly Tiny Tim.
I had a stab at fending off the strap with:

Vera doesn't mind, she says she likes it.
Her mum's drunk all the time and starves the dog.
If you don't hit me I'll apologize.

Before they took her into care, Vera performed
a vent act for the teacher with her Sindy doll
to Neil Sedaka's *Where The Music Takes Me*,

ending on a *happy happy happy happy day!*
that left the class light-headed with respect
and must have taken years of practise.

Keith Hutson has written for Coronation Street and many well-known comedians. His poetry is widely published in journals including *The Rialto*, *The North*, *Stand*, *Agenda*, *Magma*. He delivers poetry and performance workshops in schools for the Prince's Trust, and teaches writing at the Square Chapel Theatre, Halifax.

Commended

The Swing

Mown down, a morgue of neat swathes of the dead
grass, ladysmocks, buttercups laid out stiff
to dry waited to be pikel-tossed, raked
to rows, stoked for carting to the hayshed,

empty but for the stink of creosote
and muck midden; raked badging hooks, forks, scythes;
low rucks of last year's harvest. And Chaddock
rigging up a swing from the thickest rope.

When he shoved real hard you could get so high
as to put your feet through the pitching hole,
see down the field across the Cheshire Plain
to Liverpool where big ships steamed, the sky

plumed with dreams from the Christmas annual:
the Elder Dempster Line: the *Aureol*
cargoes on her West African run, full
with mail, missionaries, guns, palm kernels.

Curving back, your head could split on an oak
beam: his three big lads, for dares, would miss it
by inches. Tall, I'd slow down well short. His
daughter Maeve, lozzucking on the hay, joked

I played too safe, was scared to go too far,
showed me up in front of the others: Ralph
Brown said she fancied me. Home one New Year,
we spoke, her loading kids into the car

in the coffin row built on the meadow;
the barn now parking for their caravan.
She'd wed a chapel bloke who sells you life
plans, buried her alive, bored work-widow

blurting that folk still missed me: had I been
abroad? I thought to brag that I'd risked it
all, sailed away to Freetown; played trombone
on Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans;

jammed with Kid Sheik near where sternwheelers plied.
But we've always been on a different
arc and, just in case she made me colour
up again, to close the circle, I lied.

John Lancaster was born and grew up on Biddulph Moor near Stoke-on-Trent. After Sheffield University, he worked as a planner and for housing associations. He played jazz in New Orleans and Birmingham where he started to write. Since being a second prizewinner in the National Poetry Competition 1979, he has published four collections of poetry: *Effects Of War* 1986 Giant Steps Press; *Split Shift* 1990 (with Geoff Hattersley) and *The Barman* 1993, both with Smith/Doorstop; *Here In Scotland* (with Milan Knizak) 2000 Vetus Via, Brno. He has held numerous posts as a writing tutor, is widely published in poetry and literary journals, anthologies and educational course material and work has been used and performed in the broadcast media. He lives in Totnes, Devon. You can find out more about him on Wikipedia: [John Lancaster \(Writer\)](#).

Commended

Penelope

She'd have known him anywhere
by his height, by his chest barreled
like an ox, by his scars, by the authority
in his voice, by the way he stumbled
as he climbed the stairs.

She stood by the fire like a statue,
hoping it would unfreeze her veins
warm her to welcome him; when she
opened her mouth nothing came, certainly
no sound he could recognize.

I am here, he said, not looking at her
but at the mirror hung above her head,
there he saw his face crumble as if the silvering
had slipped, but not before it had imperfectly
caught the birds she'd woven, take flight.

Lynn Thornton lives in Oxford. She tutors in English at the University. She recently graduated from RHUL with an MA in Creative Writing. Her poems have been published in various magazines and anthologies. She is currently working on a sequence of poems inspired characters in Shakespeare.