2017 Ledbury Poetry Competition Winners

Overall comments by judge Fiona Sampson MBE:

This adult competition was among the most difficult I’ve ever had to judge, not because of the sheer number of poems − though there were many − but because there were so many that were of winning calibre. I had many favourites among the last thirty or forty poems to be whittled down: there were many among these that were highly publishable. It’s particularly good to see poetry being entered that’s slightly more expansive or even radical in its techniques, and that so many of the entrants clearly have a deep engagement with poetry. These poets were, I felt, truly participating in the contemporary poetry world. In the end though the winners chose themselves by the sheer communicative power and achievement of their work.

**Adults**

First Prize £1000 and Tŷ Newydd residential course

Jonathan Greenhause

### The fire-escape, no longer weighed down

by tomato plants & basil lifts up by micro-millimeters towards the sky,

& the sky looks down, is baffled by the limits

it can & cannot know; how here it’s the sky, but there it isn’t,

how a few degrees of air

can lessen into nothing. Even a fire can wonder what it is,

if it’s only the flames or also the smoke, the heat

dissipating into what may be sky,

into the fire-escape’s melted steel, how two things become one

& how a single thing’s almost never just one substance

but always a little less or more,

always

a metamorphosis

between what it was

& what it’ll be.

Staring at the sky & the fire & the fire-escape,

the child only knows he’s a child,

something not quite adolescent yet no longer crawling on all fours.

He knows & doesn’t know how this moment won’t ever repeat,

how the smoke which may

or may not be part of the fire enters his lungs,

& how the fire-escape, melting

into a union with the fire, is no longer an escape

but more like the sky,

more like a vast stretch of nothing serving no use to him,

all these things inevitably joining

to become one in the same:

The boy & the fire,

the escape & the sky.

Judge’s comments: This is a vividly ambitious poem, yet also one which is completely accessible and which deals with an important, immediate subject. Its language is living and completely contemporary, but at the same time timeless and full of gravity. The writer begins by being profoundly visual and philosophical, then raises the stakes to tragedy with complete conviction.

Second Prize £500

Anna Woodford

Anna Woodford is currently poet in residence at the Co-Motion research project based at the Universities of Newcastle and York. She recently received an Award from the Society of Authors towards the development of her second poetry collection. Her first collection Birdhouse (Salt, 2010) won the Crashaw Prize and was included in the Guardian’s round up of the best poetry books of the year. Her pamphlets Party Piece (Poetry Business, 2009); Trailer (Five Leaves 2008) and The Higgins’ Honeymoon (Driftwood, 2001) won the Poetry Business Award, a PBS Pamphlet Choice and an Eric Gregory Award respectively. She has been widely published in Poetry Review, Rialto, Stand and the TLS among others. [www.annawoodford.co.uk](http://www.annawoodford.co.uk)

**Work**

These are the things I never wrote about

the Nurofen the smiley mug *Postscript*

by Seamus Heaney blu-tacked to my bit

of wall Paul hovering in the office

doorway as though he wasn’t the boss

Paul in his slippers sometimes

The intray where my twenties were to do

The little window in the computer room

overlooking the houses I dreamed about

living in with my ex The clock

where it was never home or lunch

The clock whose hands I hung off

like the silent movie star in the poster

stuck in a hazy Freshers Week bedroom

In those days when nothing was connected

still the slowest modem in. the. world.

The work skirt Mum’s cardy The clogs

with gold studs I remember in detail

as if my history is no more substantial

My getting the milk and phone *Hello*

*This is Gate Communications* The cheese

bites strawberries dipped in chocolate

lunches with lots of knives and glasses

on our birthdays when what we wanted

was a day off The team meeting The

low ceiling Paul singing Here Comes

My Happiness Again (again and again)

These are the things I never wrote about

when I was starting to write or maybe

it was before my pen was my own

and writing was press release for Leech

Homes and copy and stuff needing

one tick two ticks of approval

the stuff we went through after

Paul died The mountain of stuff

he never got on top of and

under the weight of everything

the photo of him in his twenties

grinning and sticking up two fingers

Judge’s comments: ‘Work’ is a poem whose wide-open diction sounds artless yet is anything but. It has tremendous clarity, and works with great sophistication to portray not just a particular past but its resonance. The leap to bereavement that occurs near the end of the poem is completely earned, and all the more moving for its understatement.

Third Prize £250

Dana Alsamsam

Dana Alsamsam is a queer, Syrian-American poet from Chicago who is currently an MFA candidate at Emerson College in Boston. She is the assistant poetry editor at *Redivider* and senior editorial assistant at *Ploughshares*. Dana's poems are published or forthcoming in Hooligan Mag, After Hours Chicago, L'Ephemere Review, Daphne Mag, Blood Orange Review, Bad Pony Mag and others. Twitter & Instagram @DanaAlsamsam

**Nana Says**

Dubai, UAE

Nana presents two apricot jam jars,

real honey with comb, Nescafé and tea.

She gives like she

is falling which wouldn’t be too hard

close to the ground and delicate

as an eggshell broken

by a slim beak of light.

Nana fills the fridge and cabinets

like the apocalypse is upon us so we might

eat from her hands her clay colored plates.

It still must feel like home

though this never will be not really.

(not enough life left

to spend it dreaming

of the scent

of Syrian jasmine)

Nana says my father is like the maestro

making sure it all goes and goes.

Her back hurts but she rocks to the swill

of his careful comfort song.

Nana smiles as she proclaims *life is difficult*

her dark eyes disappearing beneath

practiced skin,

staring out

at a dusk pink sun

setting,

sinking.

Judge’s comments: ‘Nana Says’ is subtle and insightful. Its rhythmic bounce is sophisticated and earned, and so is its diction, with its lovely slant metaphors. This portrait of an individual, of the love she earns, and of a community, is memorable and uniquely musical.

**Young People 12 - 18**

On judging the youth poems, Fiona Sampson says:

It’s always a pleasure and a privilege to judge youth poetry competitions. The younger poets, those of broadly junior school age, tend to play joyfully with words and images. The teenagers are astonishingly frank about their emotional worlds. Both remind us how high the stakes for poetry can and should be. It’s astonishing how poetically mature the outstanding entries are, and fascinating to see what poetry these young writers might now be exposed to, to help them develop further.

First Prize £100

Eloise Unerman

Eloise Unerman is a young writer based in South Yorkshire who writes poetry and short stories, and attends Rotherham Young Writers. She was awarded the Cuckoo Young Writers Award in 2017. Her poetry also won first prize in the young people's category of the Hear My Voice poetry competition as well as a commendation in Photofictions 2014 and Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2017. She has been published in the anthology Everyday Hymn (Writing Yorkshire 2015), Anthology of Young Poets (Paper Swans Press 2017), Introduction X (The Poetry Business 2017), and Wild Poetry (Hive South Yorkshire 2017).

**04:52 to Bristol**

Femininity is wide-eyed, she is covered

in mascara and desperately searching

for a train ticket. She’s in McDonald’s at midnight,

giving her last five pounds, to smear rebellion

red lipstick on a big mac. Femininity has taken

her high heels off. She is wandering

the empty dance floor, torn-away sequins,  
engagement ring confetti sticking to her feet.

She is travelling across the country, running

from a brown-carpeted flat, and a man

with veins pulsing in the contours of his face.

Judge’s comments: Extraordinarily deft and highly anthologisable far beyond the context of the competition. This is poem that knows exactly what it’s doing, from the clever stanza-breaks to the pentameter lines. It uses all that technique with the lightest of touches to give us a series of vivid images, an unflinching political message, and a micro-narrative with a shocking, yet unstated, ending.

Second Prize £50

Alicia Johnson Husbands ‘Agoraphobia’

My name’s Alicia, I’m 17 and am very humbled to have placed in the top 3 young adults category! Next year I hope to study Creative Writing and I’m very grateful to have had my writing recognised. I encourage anyone thinking about entering next year’s competition to have a go!

Agoraphobia

**i.**

Backseat of Dad’s car, left side, grubby black leather seats; sister on the right

reading, gazing out the window, humming. The need to impress her.

*Why does mum never come with us to see Grannie, Dad?*  He fiddles with the radio,

Bowie sings about a man who wants to meet me. *Your Gran don’t like strangers.*

And that’s that.

**ii.**

Memory’s fading but I still see the house. Large, old fashioned, gloomy. Catch my aunt

round the corner coming up from the orchard, green wellies caked in mud.

*Alright, Rob? Alright, girls?* It’s autumn, cold. Hunch my shoulders closer to my ears, fidget,

awkward, hide my face. Sister smiles and Dad speaks for us.

*Good, aren’t we? How’s mum today, Mags?*

**iii.**

Shrouded in black fabric, wispy white hair, observant watery eyes, Grannie doesn’t speak. We stand

in the kitchen, icier than outside, grey floor cracked slabs. Stove looks ancient, blackened,

fridge dull white growing grey. Grannie trembles, spine curving over, blue veins peaking against opal.

*She’s offering you a biscuit, take one.* Hand’s extended towards me, shaking. She wets her lips, slow.

I mumble, *Thank you.* Chew it silently. It’s dry.

**iv.**

Bernie’s out back, chopping wood. Grunts hello when he sees us, unsure. Pass him down to the

vegetable garden, ghostly greenhouse at the end. Walk through the gate into the orchard,

on a downwards slope, apples plums apples plums *Here have a plum, love, spit out the stone.*

Eat it carefully, cool juice dribbling over my fingers. Don’t bite too close or it’ll turn sour.

*I’m cold.* Dad packs rough green apples into a sack. *I want to go home.*

**v.**

Sit on my hands on the way back, fingers numbing. Daydream out the glass.

*Hey, Mr Tambourine man, play a song for me.* The fields grow greener as we travel back

down the hills, sky remains a cloudy distant friend. Suck the shrivelled skin on my index finger dry,

brush the edge of my thumb across the velvet of my ear. Comforting.

*I’m not sleepy, and there is no place I’m going to.*

Judge’s comments: This is a richly stuffed narrative of a poem. It’s also evocative and musical in its layering of quotations, speech and inner thought. The long lines are urgent, never dull. A poem that’s full of life but wonderfully artful and sharply observed.

Third Prize £25

Emily Bown ‘Hibernaculum’

Hibernaculum

Here it comes.

Peeping through under Jack Frost’s cloak,

A single budding voice probes

the stain less silver covering

the world like blinding pixiedust.

Here it comes, pushing through

Frozen particles towards the numbed sun

light waiting behind cloaks

of cloud, one determined voice.

Here it comes, up from under Jack

Frost’s binding spell from snow

to sleet to running water one

little chest puffed and blooming

Here it is

Judge’s comments: For all the faux sweetness of “peeping” and “Jack Frost”, this is a tightly observed, rhymically sophisticated poem. Its exactitude matches the scale of the plant it’s describing, and I’d be eager to see this young poet’s take on larger scale subjects too.

**Children 0 - 11**

First Prize £25 Book Token

Joe Dreyer

Joe enjoys reading (especially fantasy sagas), rugby, video games and mucking about with his friends, older siblings and Taxi, the family dog. Joe’s teachers describe him as ‘kind and thoughtful’. At home he is described as ‘untidy’. His best friend is a writer he calls Rat and who calls him Maggot. They like to consider questions such as ‘Would you rather be eaten alive by maggots from the inside out, or have your face grated off with a cheese-grater?’ Joe wrote ‘Havoc Rains’ at school after reading Ted Hughes’s poem ‘Wind’ in class.

**Havoc rains**

*after Ted Hughes*

This house coughs and wheezes a silence sound

of loneliness unbroken, but not by choice.

For the splintered floorboards and broken chairs

maroon you on the island that is your own.

Windows shatter into a million, glaring pieces of glass

but the lighted lantern still hangs, still glows hope.

This house is one with memory fresh, but the taste of

sweetness is crushed, compressed.

The rain thunders down like a whip. The rain is relentless.

But a fire can’t last forever when every hour is a cold shiver.

The chain snaps. The splintered door hangs

from the silver hinge, like a person hanging from a cliff.

This land is butchered, a pig, with deep, dark, red gashes.

The rain, like silver bullets, hurtles to the dust.

The trees, fortresses that couldn’t fall,

now grounded, with flimsy branches, no leaves.

The ground upturned, naked, lying there like bones that are earths.

The mountaintop still trumpets the noise.

This land is forgotten, sunken from reality like an old song.

But time is gone and cannot be recovered.

The land can’t grow when it is a fish in the dry, lifeless desert.

The hollow house. The hollow land,

its life struck down with the crack of a whip

and the boom of a drum.

Judge’s comments: Even though I don’t much like puns, this is a resonant title for a very ambitious poem. The poet has read ambitiously for someone in the eleven and under group, and their work echoes with Ted Hughes, who I’m sure would be glad of this homage. An adventure into the realm of myth, at the same time this poem pulls back beautifully from telling us what to think: a rare achievement.

Second Prize £15 Book Token

Ruby Davis

Ruby Davis is 11 years old and has been interested in poetry for about a year. As well as writing poetry she loves singing, reading, public speaking, and spending time with her family and friends. She  lives in London with her parents, her older sister and her twin sister.

‘Art’

I see her, her face that must be painted,

With the graceful touch of an artist’s brush.

I wish to touch her, yet, am scared of tainting,

It’s complicated, surely I should be infuriated,

But, I am simply motivated,

To fight against the notion of us being separated.

I take a breath, an inch of courage arising,

My brain analysing, devising something for me to verbalise.

I open my mouth, but then I’m realising I am publicising my love,

Now my brain’s advising me to STOP.

So I’m apologising, and emphasising that of course I’m not,

In love with you.

So I’m trapped in my own distress,

Obsessing- did I mess this up?

She probably couldn’t care less,

Nonetheless…I care.

I guess, maybe it’s a work in progress.

Even so, I confess, my faithfulness is reassessed.

But, I’m persevering.

Not fearing the nearing future,

No, I’m steering the future,

Taking control and volunteering for the future,

I’m clearing the past…

And…Domineering.

Judge’s comments: This is highly sophisticated writing which portrays a line of thought. That’s much more difficult to achieve than looking outward and just describing what you can see or something that happens. The rhyming is cleverly done, too.

Third Prize £10 Book Token

Naomi Rich

I live in the village of Shere , Surrey with my family.  I am 10 years old and go to school at St Teresa’s, Effingham.  My biggest achievement so far is that I have earnt my Chief Scout Silver Award in Scouting – it took nearly two years.  Recently, I was shortlisted for the John Betjeman Children’s Poetry Competition with my poem “Dark Garden”.    I play the violin, I enjoy swimming, drama  and…..writing poems and I am quite good at art too.

Dance

I watch you simmer when you walk.

I look at how your feet chuckle together,

The clinking of the beat.

I see the rhythm in your fingertips.

Your sweet movement like a flamingo.

The skips of the shoes,

As they sing along.

The humming of a robin.

Your hips sway with the clicks.

The clocks tick within your fingers,

As I see your legs bob.

The arms jogging along.

I see you doing something only I know,

Dancing.

Judge’s comments: Perfectly evocative. These verbs that cross over the senses − from sound to sight and from touch to sight − are unexpected, synaesthetic metaphors. And very original.