

Ledbury Poetry Competition 2020 Winners

Judge Liz Berry



Judge's overall comments:

To make a poem in a time of sorrow and worry is a beautiful and admirable thing. This year has been such a hard one and the fact that so many people have been brave enough to try to write fills me with joy. This year there were over 3000 entries for the Ledbury Poetry Prize and, by my rough guess, around a third of those explored the pandemic and the lockdown which had made our worlds so fretful and small. There were deeply sad poems, funny poems, questioning poems, poems in which I felt sure that the poet was new to writing and those which were striking and accomplished. I want each poet who entered - brave, sincere, hopeful poets - to know that I read your poems with tenderness and was glad to have them in my company through difficult days. It might be too soon to know how we can write of these times and what poems will survive it but it lifts my heart to know poetry is still important to us and able to connect us across the distances.

The best bit about judging a competition is discovering thrilling, fresh, moving poems, the kind of poems which make you want to send them to everyone you know and say: look at this wonderful thing! There was an abundance of those - so much utterly brilliant work.

The worst bit of judging is having to choose winners as I always get down to about twenty poems and want to stop as they're all fantastic in such different ways. Sometimes you can't even begin to compare the final poems so you just have to go with your instinct, the poems which keep calling to you. I always try to be honest about this in order to reassure poets (I've been on both sides of this process so I know it matters) that just because your poem didn't win this time, it's not because it isn't a special piece of work.

But choose I must - that's the way of competitions, not at heart the way of poetry, but still a way we have of shining light on wonderful things. These final few are standout, knock-you-down, shout-about-it great poems. All different and all compelling. Thank you, dear poets, for allowing me to share them.

Adult category

First Prize £1000, a residential course at Ty Newydd and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Kim Moore

Kim Moore's first pamphlet *If We Could Speak Like Wolves* won the Poetry Business Pamphlet Competition in 2011. Her first full-length collection *The Art of Falling* was published by Seren in 2015 and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and her second collection *All The Men I Never Married* will be published by Seren in 2021.

On winning the competition Kim says: *I am writing this still not quite believing that I've won! It's even more special that it's the Ledbury Poetry Competition because the festival is so close to my heart, and has been so important to me over the years in my development as a poet. To have Liz Berry, a poet I hugely admire pick this poem out of the thousands of entries still doesn't feel quite real. Thank you again to Ledbury and to Liz Berry for bringing some joy and light into my lockdown existence, which this week has been especially grim.*

All Night A Bird

All night a bird beats its wings
behind the wall. In the space between rooms
It has the quietest scream. (I realise I cannot live

without desire.) At first I think it's trapped
behind the wall. Is it another bird
that moves, that seems to fall and rise again?
I am hiding something
in the mirror. In the morning
I am searching for myself
but see a bird rising up behind my eyes.
I think about a girl with hair covering her face
and the bruise of her body and one person listening.
I think about what he said, about the need
to *throw a stone behind to catch the one ahead.*
The bird calls to me from between the walls.
The bird calls to me from between the walls
to *throw a stone behind to catch the one ahead.*
I think about what he said, about the need
and the bruise of her body and one person listening.
I think about a girl with hair covering her face
but see a bird rising up behind my eyes.
I am searching for myself
in the mirror, in the morning.
I am hiding something
that moves, that seems to fall and rise again
behind the wall. Is it another bird
without desire? At first I think it's trapped,
it has the quietest scream. I realise I cannot live
behind the wall, in the space between rooms.
All night a bird beats its wings.

Liz Berry's Comments: This poem had my heart in my throat. A beautifully haunting, deeply unsettling use of the specular form, a form which perfectly fits this mysterious narrative of entrapment, control and yearning for escape. Fantastic.

Second Prize £500 and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Kizziah Burton

Kizziah Burton's poems have been shortlisted and longlisted in various places, such as The Sappho Prize for Women Poets 2020; The Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition; NIMROD International - Pablo Neruda Poetry Prize; San Miguel de Allende Writer's Conference & Lit Honorable Mentions; Women's Poetry Competition 2018 sponsored by The Poetry Book Society/*mslexia*--poet laureate Dame Carol Ann Duffy selected two of her poems. A recipient of awards from The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Foundation for three years and a travel grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, Burton is graduate fellow of The University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Kizziah says: "Thank you for your warm and enthusiastic phone call this morning on behalf of the competition. It was like getting a call from a mythical place. I am so moved by the award and your words from Liz Berry. Liz Berry's work, her excellence, has been a source of strength and light. Her recognition holds important and personal meaning for me. As does the communion of Ledbury and its celebration of poetry and support to poets world wide. Thank you dearly with all my heart for this award.

Cist

[ˈsɪst]

—*noun*

1. ARCHAEOLOGY. an ancient coffin or burial chamber made from stone or a hollowed tree to hold the bodies of the dead.
2. from Greek *kístē* 'box'. a box used in ancient Greece for sacred relics.
3. a sore that takes time to disappear.

the child is lying in a hollowed tree in the middle of a field not a tree a wood walled grave laid out straight like a fairy sheathed in bruise blue hands over her chest in prayer not clasped curled in a curve of rubble like a foetus in an open womb not a womb an ancient cist moon milked adorned with stalks of Easter lily perfume not a cist but a pit shrouded in peachdown not peach pearl aspiring to frost worn stone the stone of a mother's eye not an eye a thumb of light beaming through the pine black trunks onto the green tumulus a small hill a southern barrow of native earth a flint fragrant mound swell of hyacinth descending as streams descend through their darkness to the sea turning to the notes of the wind flute her death's disciple I walk in an oval then dance a slow jig with her song in my head in the last haven of sunlight the last sunlit palm to uphold more than a thousand roots and a finger pointing to the bed to lie in not her bed a hospital roll-away not her room the living room not the living room the dying room of a hundred flies talking all at once where hieroglyphs written in a child's hand on the wall script a legend of night climbing trying to get to the portal I pick her up in my arms and lay her in the hand hewn canoe stained and tarred I have made for steering down the red river where a girl runs through the woodlands and the sweet smelling rain the mayhaw jelly where the red fern grows a pollen evensong through the archipelagos the sea mossed channels the cypress swamps not a canoe a monogrammed monoxylon good for paddling through the Greek door now I have to sleep on the floor to keep her from falling over the edge that is coming I can't keep her from falling so I make my body her soft landing now I'm lying in the cold cist with her we are so close together our ear shells are touching I've tied her wrist to my wrist so she can't be taken away in the night when I'm not looking so I can find her so I can go with her if she needs me so I can follow her in case she walks in her sleep to comb the stone arched below the room that isn't her room in the house that isn't her house one more time before she finds the door and leaves without me

Liz Berry's Comments: A dense, breathless, fearful poem which siezes the reader and does not let them go. A child, a mother, a forest, a burial, a terror of loss and parting - stunning images and thoughts roll and crash upon us like so many waves.

Third Prize £250 and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Felicity Sheehy

Bio: Felicity Sheehy's poems have appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Yale Review*, *Narrative*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Poet Lore*, *Blackbird*, *Shenandoah*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Colorado Review*, and elsewhere. She has received an Academy of American Poets Prize, scholarships to the Sewanee Writers' Conference and the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and the Jane Martin Prize. She has received additional prizes and support from *Narrative's* 30 Below Contest, the York Poetry Prize, and the Limerick Writers' Centre. In 2019 and 2020, she was listed as one of *Narrative's* 30 below 30 emerging writers.

Felicity says: I'm honoured and thrilled to be recognised in this contest!

The Shapeshifter's Wife

After Sharon Shinn

Bored with me, he has taken
to the birch by the window,
young and supple, shedding
her skin in white slips all
summer long. I saw them
one afternoon, my tall,
stooped husband, leading
the pale girl to the barn.
She is not the first. There was
the shy servant with doe eyes,
the broody, clucking cook,
the visiting family, mute
and curly-haired, smelling
of hyacinth. Some days,
he'd come home hawk-eyed,
and windswept, or greying,
sore with stones, cut from
the river-bed. I knew
early on that my body
was too real, that I sniped,
I smelled, I took hot baths
and ate cooked food.
So be it. I have my human
legs and my wooden shoes.
I have my soup pot
and my fireplace,
my long, sharpened knife.

Adult Category Highly Commended:

Liz Berry says: These poems are so wonderful that I can't let them slip away without giving the poets my admiration. I wish them a safe journey onwards to shine in magazines and win many prizes!

Shipping Forecast for the Sea of Trees by Stevie Ronnie
After Elizabeth Bishop by Grace MacNair

Young People Category Judge's Overall Comments

Dear young poets, I fell in love with so many of the poems in this category. Your work was accomplished, deeply moving, zinging with life and made me feel excited about the poetry of the future. It pained me to have to choose winners as there were so many shining poems.

Young People First Prize £100 and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival
Sarah Fathima Mohammed

Sarah is a fifteen-year-old brown, Muslim-American writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *DIALOGIST*, *Diode*, *Apprentice Writer*, and elsewhere. She has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, the Poetry Society of the UK, and the National Poetry Quarterly's Editors' Choice Prize, among others.

Sarah says: I feel so honored to be recognized. I admire Liz Berry's poetry so much and knowing that she saw something in my work feels very heartwarming.

A Letter From My Mother to Her Childhood

Dear Abilasha, tonight, I watch darkness slowly
swallow the last sliver of my body, stretching past

my shoulder. Do you remember how we palmed
the soft flesh of the thatched hut our families shared,

the wood soaked and sticky? There was only one
room. It was as wide as our hips. We begged

our fathers to pry the bitter slabs open with their hands
and press a strip of fingerprint-smudged plastic

in the empty, pulsing space. Days rippled
through that makeshift window, fleeting,

silken memories, and us, feeding
on the luminescence—drinking the light, cold

and sweet. Bodies bathed in curdled milk.
How we prayed to the abandoned rag

in the corner, smuggled snippets of voices
between the tattered threads, mouths shaping

after the half-opened stories. Our mothers
sitting opposite to us in straw lawn chairs, separating meat

from bone. Until I turned sixteen, and my parents stuffed
greasy incense and a wedding sari into the small

of my back, palms guiding me to a gold-banded
ring, to a man living in a country I did not know

the name of. Now, in this new home, I have left you
behind, everything I know. There is no place

for light to settle. I cannot dig up stories
from these carpeted walls, these whitened,

bolted shelves, these rooms so big I forget where I begin
and end. I only understand the clang of pots, the faucet

sputtering fickle and divine—metallic taste clinging
to my skin. The only memory I can hold—bloodlines

of scorched histories: mothers and fathers, the interlocking
of touch and sin. And I would forget all this

to travel back to you, to the secrets you would tell
me, backlit by a thousand distant stars. Abilasha, I confess:

I wanted to kiss you in front of the windows
blossoming with stardust. To hold the softness of you

in my own trembling mouth.

Liz Berry's comments: I was swept away by this lush, deeply sensual hymn to girlhood, intimacy and loss. Crafted in tender couplets, this poem is full of gorgeous detail, building to that tremulous taboo ending.

Young People Second Prize £50 and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Irma Kiss Barath

Irma Kiss-Baráth is a high school senior from Vancouver, BC. Her work has previously been recognized by the UK Poetry Society, The Orwell Foundation, and the National Alliance for Young Artists and Writers. She is an alumna of the 2020 Adroit Summer Mentorship Program and a staff writer at EX/POST Magazine. On winning 2nd prize, Irma says: "Thank you so much for this award! I'm deeply honoured to be among this year's young winners. While I have enjoyed literature for as long as I can remember, I only started writing poetry about a year ago. *Heaven in Ulcinj* is one of the first pieces where I felt that I had found my creative voice, and I am very grateful to have it recognized this way."

Heaven in Ulcinj

Open this car window,
all five of us bottled in this mini-fiat
with no air-conditioning.

Open this baby's head.
I am looking out and a wedding is taking place
off the dirt road, the bride's animal heart
cupped by lace. She reaches for her
groom with a child's fresh hands, kisses
the bridge of his twice-broken nose.

For all the little boys: even prizefighters
and bums get to heaven.
And not a single stray tooth, not a
papered bruise on this most joyous occasion.

The bride looks to the clattering party,
to the open sky. Holy God, Holy Strong,

Holy Immortal. She breaks three bones
in thanks

For the heavenly nothing in her head.
No, *nothing*, she swears. Not even a glimpse

Of a tramp's short, black life. Let's count
this little hero's days until her eighteenth birthday.

She's an angel, on balance,
marrying her own stilted reflection. Let
her play in her frail skeleton
before the attic
curdles her chiffon dress. Oh,
she's game.

Hi, baby. Hi, heaven.
Our car lurches on.
On the other side of that hill
someone is eating the first
melted slice
of a wedding cake.

Liz Berry's comments: I adored the fresh, raw, sassy voice of this poem which kept me coming back to it. It has an intriguing narrative: two young women's lives slipping past each other for a moment and a uneasy sense of danger and violence running beneath the poem. A few straggly moments in the form but this is a poet who I'd love to hear more from.

Young People Third Prize £25 and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Jessica Yu

Jessica Yu is a 16-year-old writer from Ontario, Canada. She was first inspired to write poetry following a camping trip a year ago, and she hasn't stopped since. Her work has been previously recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and the New York Times. She enjoys reading books from Button Poetry, watching YouTube videos on how to bake, and listening to classical music. On winning 3rd prize: "Thank you for recognizing my work! I adore poetry, and I write a lot in my free time, so this is something I find very encouraging. "

the insomniac wonders

is death uncomfortable?
are you lonely, buried five feet
under a gravestone, kilometres away
from our house? tell me, alisha,
even now i cannot rest, wondering
if you miss me like i miss you. if you're
lying in your casket, cold, because it's
winter and you were always one to stay
inside. because how can thin coffin

walls protect your soft hands from
frostbite? and how can you be content
resting in darkness, when all your
life you slept with lights on?
worried alisha, i'm so worried, but i
can only fret for you here: in the dead
of night, eyes glazed, sweaty
hands clenching my blanket.
i remember how people mistook
us when we wore the same outfits,
how we were inseparable. even now
i follow you, with purple bruises
under my eyes. even now i lie in bed
undergoing a decay of my own.

Liz Berry's comments: There is something devastating about this poem. Its voice is so unadorned and chatty, so vulnerable, and it builds into something quietly heartbreaking. That final image wouldn't leave my mind.

Young People's Category Highly Commended:

Softness by Miles Rafael Bairley-Ujueta
A Burning Sun Has No Language by Ife Olatona
Dear Mama by Nikita Bhardwaj

Children's Category Judge's Overall Comments

Dear very-young-poets, your poems were a joy! I loved your ideas, your pictures, your playfulness and light. I read your poems with my two little boys and they made us laugh and say 'wow' and want to write our own poems. We all thought your work was brilliant - keep going!

Children Category Winners

Children's First Prize £25 book token and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Josephine Mahmood

Josie started writing poetry during lockdown because she was (like many other people) bored and out of ideas of things to do! She has also started writing a novel, called "Pitch Black", and is currently on chapter five. She likes spending time with her cousin doing fun things such as photoshoots. She also enjoys taking her dogs on walks, gymnastics, cooking, TV and going out with her friends.

Her comment on winning is: "I like writing but I'm really surprised I won!"

The Snowy Owl's Screech

(A Golden Shovel after James Reeves)

A winter's day is a glossy owl:
graceful and silent.

His feathers dance across his soft tender body as he flies.

On short winter days he soars,
drifting, drifting, drifting
through twirling, whirling flakes,
cries out in the pinching wind,
concealing itself in an everlasting circle of soft wing.

And when night's icy breeze spins through the trees
and the moon wobbles in the speckled diamond sky
he bows his head, calling a screeched yelp of pride and
shaking his heavy snow-wet feathers,
he braves the dark in shining armour.

But on long summer days,
when the snow is deprived of its full glory
he screeches no more his yelp of pride.
With his head leaning above a heavy heart
he nests on the once cold landscape.

So eased so eased the snowy owl rests.

Liz Berry's comments: How brilliant to see such a young poet exploring new forms like the golden shovel and using another's poem as what I like to think of as a 'mentor' poem. This wintery poem was full of exquisite images, and lyrical lifts - "when the moon wobbles in the speckled diamond sky" - lovely!

Children's Second Prize £15 book token and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Margot Holloway-Smith

Margot Holloway-Smith is 10 years old and lives in London. She loves to sing, dance and write. When she is older, she wants to be a photographer.

On winning: I can't believe I came second. I'm filled to the brim with excitement. My mouth was talking slur when I found out.

The Annoying Thing About Oxes

after Chrissy Williams

Oxes, they like to go to Costa to get their lattes.
They are always eyeballing their phones.
Always going to their boring lawyer work,
or office work where they have to chitty-chitty chit-chat
with other oxes in grey suits. It just puts my head in!
Even worse, driving their cars - coughing out brown pollution,
wearing tops hats or riding their bikes on the pavement.
Riding their bike on the pavement with their funny haircuts and horns.
20 oxes being rich then leaving the rest of the oxes with nothing.
And, to end any day, taking off their socks so everyone can smell their hooves.

Liz Berry's comments: Riffing playfully off Chrissy Williams' surreal poem about sheep, this poem takes a pleasingly wry look at adults (parents??).

Children's Third Prize £10 book token and reading at Ledbury Poetry Festival

Manya Kumar

Bio

Comment

The Cumulonimbus cloud is a friendly cloud.
He's tantalizingly fluffy like a pillow and as white as freshly fallen snow.
He reaches out to all his nearby friends and embraces them in a warm hug.
He may look like a cauliflower to some but to others a thousand different things and that's the
beauty of him.

To some he is strong and powerful but to others he is as cute as a kitten.
If you sit still you can see him dancing across the sky.
When he's bored he makes conversation with the trees and sometimes he makes the wind whisper.
He is a VIC in the cloud community because he is as cool as ice.

Liz Berry's comments: My sons and I both loved this poem and it reminded us of the joyful funny poems in *The Book of Clouds* by Juris Kronbergs. Fab!

Children's Category Highly Commended

Little Dragon of Water by Leo Wiseman.

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