

Magma Poetry Competition 2019/20

Magma holds two competitions, the Judge's Prize for poems of 11 to 50 lines, which was judged this year by **Caroline Bird**, and the Editors' Prize, for poems of up to 10 lines, which was judged by a panel of Magma editors.

Caroline Bird Judge's Report

A good poem is like the Winchester Mystery House: it contains many more rooms than its façade would suggest – multiple basements, hidden doors, decoy restrooms, some staircases leading to new floors and some leading to nowhere – it has faith in meaning and meaninglessness equally, and you never truly feel as if the whole poem has been explored. You can always sense a secret passageway beneath your feet, a safe behind a wall behind a wall...

Mark Russell's *Hospitality* (1st prize) is a perfect prose poem: you read it over and over, chasing down each sentence and yet it somehow eludes capture every time. The seduction of a prose poem lies (as James Tate once wrote) in its 'deceptively simple packaging,' it arrives in the innocuous shape of a paragraph. The prose is a trick, wrong-footing the reader as it runs ahead towards its lyrical epiphany. 'Hospitality' begins in a world we think we recognise and somehow, by the end, we have been untethered from reality and lifted into something else, sadder, realer than real. On some readings I sense a deep

political anger in this poem, it sings like a parable of social injustice and yet, on other readings, it is apolitical, a tender love poem to freedom. The humour sometimes negates the sadness, sometimes makes the sadness unbearable. My point is, it's alive and uncatchable. A paragraph that cannot be paraphrased.

Imagine the moment just before Bruce Banner becomes The Incredible Hulk, just before his muscles rip his shirt apart, just before the buttons ping off and the roar erupts from his mouth... that the sheer amount of energy bursting within **Victoria Richard's** *The Mothers Scream into the Void* (2nd prize) It is 'weighted by peril,' and the violent grandeur of its language clashes and sparks against its subject matter. Mothers are watching their kids bounce on a trampoline – a sight the world might mistake for domestic – and yet this poem gives us access to an inner world, ruptured and dangerous. This is not satire, this is Greek tragedy, 'a howling.' Existential agony is incredibly difficult to communicate in a

poem without tipping into melodrama and yet this poet succeeds with style, leaving the reader breathless.

An unreliable narrator in a poem is an incredibly powerful and unsettling device especially since, rightly and wrongly, we associate poetry with truth. In *Ventriloquism* by **Rachael Matthews** (3rd prize) we know the speaker is either unable or refusing to address a deeper sadness, and this silence rattles at the bars of the slick and dazzling words. This poem has a public face and a private face – it is a pleasure to read, sugared with delicate lies that trick us into ingesting a sharp loneliness. Poetry is born from the desire to confess and hide simultaneously, and Matthews demonstrates this masterfully.

Every single one of the commended poems struck me with its originality. I forgot I was judging a competition, stopped 'looking' for something I could pre-imagine, and felt the poems choose me instead. The taunt depths of **Liam Bates'** *The Protagonist*, the steel-capped chattiness of **Nicola Daly's** *All I Know about: J*, the wild precision of **Katie O'Pray's** *Four Kisses*, the mournful lightness of **Cameron Brady-Turner's** *Animal Crossing*, and the delicious menace of **Sally Baker's** *Fear of Arsenical Green*. A good poem is experienced not read and with all of these poems, winning and commended, I stopped reading words and was dropped instead into their strange mansions and left to wander – and I thank them for that.

Magma Editors' Prize Judges' Report

As always, it was a pleasure and a challenge for our panel of Magma editors to judge our short poem competition. To be successful, a short poem really has to work hard – there is no room for slack. We received many entries that were finely crafted poems, but ultimately did not move much beyond the descriptive. The poems that rose to the top of the pile surprised us and drew us in, asking us to reread them, providing in some way a transformation. Our third prize winner, *Muldro*, by **Lydia Harris**, intrigued us with its exploration of a word and its connotations. We didn't know at the time where or what Muldro was but we wanted to know more. We particularly loved the way the poem ends with the scattering of nasturtiums. The second prize winner, *Morning After*, by **Paul Nemser**, is delicate and fascinating, both disturbing and beautiful. We loved the deft use of language and

the recurring oyster imagery. Our first prize winner, *Goose Neck Lamp*, by **James Pollock** is formally adroit and extremely satisfying. It takes as its subject an ordinary household object and manages to turn a familiar experience into something emotive and at the same time slightly sinister. Congratulations to all our winners and commended poets.

Judge's First: Mark Russell

Hospitality

Tracey had brought in the famous chef Harriet Magnusson to speak to the fourth years about apprenticeships. She introduced four of her best pupils to Harriet and they discussed the perfect consommé, the hardships of béarnaise sauce, and the potential disaster of soufflé. Tracey's best pupil James was late, and entered the room windswept and woebegone. 'James where have you been?' she said. Before James could answer, she went on. 'It doesn't matter. Harriet, this is James.' Harriet looked hard into James' eyes. 'Poor James,' she said. 'What is it?' Tracey said. Harriet continued to stare. 'You will never be a chef,' she said. The room was still and silent. 'Thank god,' James said. He stopped on his way to the door. 'All I wanted to do was to sit in the sand dunes with a bottle of Malbec. Rest my head in her lap. Talk. Not talk. I'm surrounded by people but utterly forsaken. Loneliness, it stalks you. It makes a creep of you.' The fourth years began to shuffle and complain of dehydration. 'I want to be a silversmith,' James said. 'Come to my office tomorrow,' Tracey said. 'Yes, Miss.' James picked up somebody else's bag and left. 'Whose bag was that?' Tracey said. A boy wearing an unwashed white shirt and no tie put up his hand. 'It's ok, Miss. There's nothing in it,' he said.

Judge's Second: Victoria Richards

The mothers scream into the void

as the children scream on the trampoline.
Their ghost faces line the windows, clutch
tea with violin fingers; their smoke-ring mouths.

Listen as the high-pitch cat cries rise up
with helium softness and down, weighted by peril.
Only the young are so aware of their temporality.

God-like, a giddy keening for one giant bounce
to send them to the moon like gunshot, into forever-orbit.
The mess of childhood is long, and bloody.

The mothers know this. They stand behind glass,
burning their throats, wishing (not wishing) for a fall.
For something to ripple the surface

of TV and *he'll only eat turkey dinosaurs*
and *I had it first* and *she doesn't like beans touching the plate* -
and in the forest, a howling.

The mothers prick up their ears. Tongues
slide over teeth, bare and glistening.
They watch as one of the children commands the others

to line the inside of the trampoline like gladiators
to throw her body in the air with brittle urgency
to the death, always to the death.

The mothers sense rupture. Shuffle
closer to the glass, breath damp and ragged,
jostling for space, elbows sharp as knives,

an ecstasy of trembling.
Hold their breath and wait - *oh, god, please* -
for the children to land.

Judge's Third: Rachael Matthews

Ventriloquism

Sundays she hands me the weddings section like a saved dessert. After property, investments, mergers and acquisitions, she wants skin touch and stories made from smiling headshots. Side by side in yesterday's underwear, in the pressed-in middle of the sofa, she noses my hair, closes her eyes, wants it to start. I always do it the same: couples like us, couples not like us, the feature pair with the photo shoot, then the older two who're unlikely - have known pain that's similar but different. I tell her that Jennifer and Ruth were married Saturday in Brooklyn and have Master's degrees. She wants me to say they won't last, so I do, I even use the word doomed and rhyme their new surname with cannoli in a voice I never knew I had. I tell her that Ryan and Paige are Harvard magna cum laudes but now work as Elmos in Times Square. She's laughing and still with the red fur and the ping-pong ball eyes when I switch to straight-faced for Kirsten and Brad who met at spin class. The couple's first date was lunch at the Starlight Diner, I read out to her. She's already hooked because we go there ourselves and know romance. Kirsten had the reuben, Brad the turkey club, I lie delicately. Because she's become immune to pointless detail she thinks it's verbatim. I end on Bill and Marcia forced by death onto match.com. Even though his banking and her non-profit seemed at odds they connected through jazz; a friend of the bride officiated; Marcia is keeping her name. She takes hold of the paper, looks at their newlove faces, pronounces them perfect. What is magna cum laude I ask her, thinking of champagne and Chaucer. Just like after sex she slides off me and onto her phone. Second-best, I say after googling it first. Why brag about that, she wonders.

Commended: Cameron Brady-Turner Animal Crossing

I thought *I want to die*. Then I said it aloud.

I probed the idea with satisfaction,
like tonguing a broken tooth. The body
is a garden untended it overgrows
with weeds. I cancelled my appointments
and slept all day. Emails collected
in my inbox and bramble curled about
my palace, like fingernails. I slept
dreamlessly and when I woke I was still
unhappy. The mind lights fires
it can't put out. Something as slight as
an unlanded joke lights the fuse
and the result is catastrophic. An explosion
casts shadows that point the way out.

I thought of the worst thing I could do.

I thought as long as I don't think
I don't. Dread crouched in the corner, still
as a house-spider, until I clocked it
and felt the prickle on my neck. I adjusted
my ambitions. I aimed to make it
across the road. I played Animal Crossing
and let the workaday worry spike
and recede a cool washcloth to the brow
of a feverish dream. I live here now.
Fruit hangs low and is lovely every time.

I pick it and I eat. Blades of grass
safely fence a dream. I settled down. Imagine
your mind wanders the same
forest as mine. Peaches fatten overnight,
the townspeople are pleased to see you
and fish are swimming into your hands.

Commended: Katie O'Pray

Four kisses

IV.

She is unlooping
my hair from itself, thighs
bowing under my head,
there's a man who fathered an alien she says,
she says they called him starseed,
we are wearing down the evening, steady burn on a wick
and paddling in the halfnight, I can't stop
talking because she does not know me, no image
to disrupt, the high
falls and I am putting on my coat, she says
wait
turns her mouth up into mine

III.

The girls in the garden with us are singing
and telling their boyfriends they want
to fuck, the night time
cooling my sunburn through my sleeves, the fruit
punch is all rum, the picnic blanket dappled with cherry burns, I don't remember
the lips, just that they happened,
just the glowsticks, the singing -
the places where all the veins meet

II.

French sunlight
slapping the back of the bus, teachers dozing
in the front row, I am sucking
on a peppermint,
sticky suede seat, he is
lean lipped and freckled, sloppy tongued
but enthusiastic and if we don't do it now,
what will we hang on the fridge!

I.

There is damp sand pushed under my fingernails,
I am squatting, soft legged over wooden blocks, white knee
socks on the hopscotch, corner of the playground
only watched by a ceramic frog, sickly
belly and I don't even think
he says anything, I've never tasted
someone else's spit but girls
are silent in the swallow
and his dad calls me sweetheart over the gate
and my hatching teeth,
I already know

Commended: Nicola Daly All I know About: J

I still can't say his name but when I think of him he is shirtless with a splash of gold to his throat.
it's Friday night which is why he has come over to eat steak fingers, corn and mash potatoes.
What the hell are we going to do now? My Mom sobs over Kennedy.
You could fix some food, J says. Whilst I am struck by the hollow sound of his laughter
with the years she seemed to forget how he boasted to our neighbours
about getting Marilyn Monroe's autograph when he worked as an exterminator out in LA.
Obviously she knew that a man who burnt you with his cigarettes wasn't kind
but after a while it was as if she didn't care how many times he made her get down on all fours like a
dog in our messy dinette and chow on his left over meatloaf. She only ever recalled the way
he never punched her below the waist when she was pregnant and his habit for leaving his last
Pall Mall in the box by the bed so that she would have something to keep her together
when she woke at 4am to start her shift at the cannery. I am unsure how I knew that Jack Kerouac
was his favourite author or that he didn't lose his thumb in Vietnam. All as I know is that I gave up
going home for Christmas. I am not sure when I first became aware that this man with a ripple of black
hair meant death. Naturally I tried to talk to my mother about her steady bloom of bruises.
In the early years she would call from Arizona, New Orleans or wherever they had drifted to asking for
car fare or a place to stay until J had calmed down. In fact the last time we spoke
I wired her fifty dollars and promised her my sofa but she was a no show.

Commended: Sally Baker Fear of Arsenical Green

I've become obsessed with the wallpaper
that may have killed Napoleon
on St Helena in the South Atlantic.
Green wallpaper
in Victorian parlours
where children died suddenly
from suspected cholera or diphtheria.

The green of underground lakes
in small rooms with wood fires
and damp lichen-covered walls.

An antique itch
of poison under the skin,
colour leaking into the room
like a tank filling up with weed.

Fluorescent glass scent bottles
on the ornate mantelpiece,
ferns and alligator prints on the chairs.
Skin papered over
with blousy roses,
trails of ivy, trellis of honeysuckle
threaded with bluebirds.

I feel it when I can't breathe,
the green wallpaper
pressing against my chest
like the stiff fabric
dyed with Scheele's Green,
the women holding hands to dance the polka,
artificial wreaths bound into their hair.

Commended: Liam Bates The Protagonist

The story goes that there's a sword
up a gentle incline of hillside

and the power goes to whosoever
plucks it from the outcrop where it's planted,

but who's got that kind of time to spare
to test the tensile strength of a prophecy?

You say *I'm so tired*. I say *Snap*. I say
when I grow up I want to be a main character,

at least a speaking part. Ha ha,
not likely, not in this economy,

but there's always a need for backdrop,
especially trees. I've taken to

wearing several black jumpers at once,
ideally cable knit. I want to fall in

with a crowd of philosophers. They'll tell me
the gaps keep heat from escaping. Let the space

itself be the protagonist. Let the table
be headless and ready for guests.

Editors' First: James Pollock

Goose Neck Lamp

Peering over your shoulder at your book
like a curious moon, its cone of light
blue as moonlight on the page, its long neck
craned attentively, as if to write

itself into the story you are reading,
the lamp, for all its brilliance, is discreet,
silent in fact, and placid in its pleading.
Only by degrees do you feel its heat.

Editors' Second: Paul Nemser

Morning After

All night I've run scaring rats through my insomnia,
but they've climbed each other's ratbacks and jumped into the sea.

Now you say, "The bed's a bivalve. It opens for us like wings."
You're better than the sunlight spotting things.

My pale, my pearl, my onions in a pan,
my gravity, my dew on the rise, my cyclone in a well -

"Don't worry," you say, and I hear, who can barely hear,
"We're just putting ourselves back in the oyster shell."

Editors' Third: Lydia Harris

Muldro

This word arrives by post with a hard goats' cheese
and a cellophane packet of petals.
This word is smothered in brown tissue paper
twisted to a clinch above the crumbs of this word.
This word is an array of seeds in a paper pod,
lined up like gangways in the cross section of a ship.
This word is a stowaway in a Northstar cargo boat.
Muldro, says this word, crumbly, friable.
Find me on Tomima's chin. She is widow of the farm
at Gallow. Scatterer of nasturtiums in her yard.

Commended: Maria Isakova-Bennett The Alt at Lunt Meadows

He's moody, sluggish, but his quiet attracts
egrets, dunlin, tufted ducks.

He does nothing but slow-flow. I want to love him
but his heart beats shallow, hidden in gloom,

too much his own. It's when he feeds reedbeds
I see his purpose - pink-footed geese preen,

take rest, gather themselves, and he is rambly then,
attracting a whitter of sedge warblers,

and the check-check of red-backed shrike
and he seems suddenly deeper, full of music.

Commended: Ian Chamberlain Certificate PG

Cinema was trickery he said, the whole thing jiggery-
pokered - we should not believe one second of it. Television
just the same. But *his* camera - his camera never lied.

He kept a cabinet of proof, black on white, plain
as a parish register, facts as recorded by that old eye-witness
Kodak, who was called upon to testify on ceremonial days

while we showed our teeth. And showed our teeth
all through the coaxing out of bellows, jinking at the eyepiece
fiddling with the focus screw, our polished faces fixed

on the spot he called *the aperture*, looking for the wink.

Commended: Dean Gessie existential deer

while trapping hauling and binding
lobstermen rescued a juvenile buck
swimming head small in the briny large
and dropped him minutes wide of plan
on the singing sands of point impossible
whereupon the animal turned cheek and
barrelled again all-over good into black
eddies and white rips and aquaria lungs
dog-paddling dead right and free clear
of all those who trap and haul and bind

Commended: Kathy Pimlott After the Fall

So when a manhole cover flips,
drops me down, scraped and shaken,
though only five, I pause to consider

if now is a suitable time to shout *help!*
like in the stories, attract attention
by waving my red cardy or whether

that would be showing off and
I should stand quietly in the drain
until someone notices I'm gone.

Commended: John Maguire The artist responds to criticism

My dear Clothilde,
I think you're
right;
the women
would look better
clothed;
the lobster
I will deal with
later.