

Magma Poetry Competition 2022/23

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

Judge's First Prize: Ben Rogers The Escape

I am on a train after a long journey to the middle of nowhere and the station guard announces a three hour wait. There's an escape room over the road. I ask the guard about it. The guard says escape rooms are the rage these days, you can't escape from them. I enter the escape room building and ask the receptionist is it an escape room if I don't escape. There has to be some mild peril, the receptionist says. If I miss my connecting transport I could be stranded and I can't even pronounce the name of this place. An element of risk is the price of living, the receptionist says. They press a buzzer which allows me into a large room with candles and birdcages. The residents twitch in silence. Budgies, cockatoos, doves. Many others I can't name. But I bet they can't name me either. I have no idea what a clue looks like. I squint at a corrugated ceiling. I scrape through the sawdusted floor. I look for patterns in feathers. I try to outstare a parrot. The time is coming to an end. In a rush I let all the birds out. I am surrounded by squawks. In the corner is a large domed cage and as it is vacant I get inside. This feels safe, I think. I close the door.

Judge's Second Prize: Jonathan Edwards Penguins

There on the crowded dancefloor of your rock,
you shuffle, nervous teens, from foot to foot.
The stylus of your beak longs to break out
some old-school funk, some acid jazz, hip hop,
but how to cut some shapes when you're all thumbs,
your knees cack-handed, worn inside your body?
Of course, in water, it's a different story:
you ride the greased toboggan of your belly
downhill, launch torpedoes that you are
into the pool, where world is swifter, cooler,
and follow your own noses into the future.
Down there, on your true dancefloor, you're yourselves:
you limbo, mambo, soft shoe, choochoo, boogie
woogie to your grooving heart's content!

There on the home-time bus stop of your rock,
you spend the afternoon oh, busily
standing round a bit, constructing life-like
statues to yourselves. You waddle, wobble
clumsy, clammy yous through rocky worlds,
but in the water, man, you're someone else:
oh chinless wonders! Oh Renaissance men!
Now piloting the submarines you are,
now backstroking like an Olympic champ,
you Bond-girl it at last onto the shore:
waves of you re-enact the D-day landings,
moving up the beach. On Twiglet feet,
you step up now for lunch here, readying
the baseball catcher's mitt of your long beak.

There on the football terrace of your rock,
you point the giant foam hands of your flippers.
This morning, in a high street salon, here,
you groom yourself, you pluck and plume yourself,
your beak forever busy on your look,
then totter on stilettos down the rock.
Sometimes, long afternoons, you yearn, you dream
of somewhere else: you arc your head to see
that net which stands between you and the sky.
You draw yourselves up now to your full height,
you flap and flap your arms. I watch you go
nowhere fast. Oh loves, I want to cry
that you are gorgeous and you're trapped inside
these bodies which are memories of flight.

Judge's Third Prize: Ilse Pedler

When my body gave itself to counting

For a year I gave myself to counting. I had a calendar on which I marked a pattern of days; some had stars. The days before and after were just for waiting, sometimes I wished I could sleep these days away. Also, there was the day every month with a question mark, the one I glanced sidelong at every time I walked by. Leading up to the star days, I felt the madness gather like rooks brooding in the crowns of trees, *one, two, fifteen, twenty* and I might have said *just lie there, I'll do all the work* and I might even have said, *it won't take long*. I know afterwards, I lay still for thirty minutes, put a pillow under my hips, visualised swimming across an ocean, repeating my mantra under my breath

itonlytakesoneitonlytakesone

Then the calendar wasn't enough so I made a chart, I used different colours, put gold stars on the crucial days, I might even have written S on these days too. I drew the question marks in red felt tip. One day when you were tired, I pulled it out; something about the way your face closed like a slammed door made me realise I may have gone too far. One month I was late and it was like the air felt lighter, my body felt lighter and the rooks flew their blackness off into the sky and I practised the words I would say and how you would look at me and I struck a bargain with myself to wait until I got home but in the afternoon my body failed me oozing from a reopened wound and the rooks returned. I stopped drinking and smoking and said that you should do the same. I whined at you in a voice I didn't recognise when you got another beer from the fridge. I wanted to tell you about the counting and how I was losing myself to the days but you were pouring yourself into the bottle becoming thinner and thinner to fit down its neck. One morning when I came down, I couldn't find you and I put the empty bottles outside before I realised what I had done.

Judge's Commended: Kizziah Burton

How I Learned Fast To Speak The Language of Oppression

when my husband quarantined my words / behind the walls / of marriage / and religion / I kneaded his words / into my mouth / like wet dough / to make bread / because my mother taught me / bread is our word for love // until it wasn't enough // when he quarantined my bread / and meted it out to others / my nose grew longer / like the wooden puppet / dreaming of becoming real / and telling / the truth // when my husband made me / speak / his language / and taught me / obey / is their word for love / I did what I was told / until I had to wear two faces / until I couldn't / see myself / until I couldn't / hear myself / think / until I couldn't / count on / 1 + 1 / equaling 2 / until I couldn't / count on / one hand / who of me was left / until I had to choose / which eye to look out of / to reconcile / what I saw happening in front of me / until my eyes / were closing from inside

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when our country's religious affairs official said / break their roots / completely shovel up / these two-faced people / dig them out of the earth // the screw of his voice reminded me of my husband's // he quarantined our words immediately / like my husband had quarantined mine // when it wasn't enough / he quarantined poets / behind the walls of new schools // when poets could no longer speak / mother tongue / they kneaded official words / into their mouths / like wet dough / to make bread / so their children wouldn't starve / because soldiers taught / comply is their word for survive / and hunger is their word for bowl / until it wasn't enough // poets saw where this was going / but no one heeded forewarnings / because their words had been revised // when the official quarantined / the bread / mothers made / for children / and meted it out / to soldiers / poets' noses grew longer / like wooden puppets / dreaming of being real / and telling / the world // when the official made the poets teach / the official language / the poets did what they were told / to spare some of their fellows & some of their loved ones / until they learned / some / is the official word for / none // until they couldn't // until they couldn't / hear themselves / think // until they couldn't / count / on one hand / who of them was left // until they had to choose / which eye to look out of / to reconcile / what they saw happening in front of them / until every eye / was closing from inside

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they came for our songs / they came for our stories / they came for our sayings / sewn into the linings of our clothes /
then sewn into the linings of our skins / until all our words / disappeared / behind the walls / of re-education //
in the night / when I was alone / moon-gathering stones and bits for soup / I came upon a poet / wandering
backwards through the forest / his hair flocked with snow / hands wrapped in burlap / holding an empty bowl //
I knew his poems by heart // I held his face to warm it / wrapped his shoulders in my wool blanket / led him home
to sit by the fire / where poet taught me / how to make / my own language / stirred from scratch / until my mind /
walked free of walls / until a poem / became revenge / on every loss / until I could / see / my body / as sovereign /
a face with two sides / the right eye / could never again / be more important / than the left / until I could hear /
separate voices sing as one / until + 1 / gathered all / together / until / time itself / became both / subtraction
& addition / oppressor & liberator / until / this strange doubling / became scope / telescoping / behind me /
and in front of me / until my eyes / were opening from inside // until / my love / they came for you

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yours are the words / I ponder now // our mothers and fathers gone / our children gone / our grandchildren /
don't know / where they come from // my past just gone / the way tea / disappears from a cup / left for years
on the hearth / waiting / for the wanderer to return // you / are the door / left open / at the threshold /
of this empty house / I look out from / like a ghost / face blanched / waiting for no one / staring / hypnotized
by the rain / and all that has been / disappeared // like when you wrote / your letters / on air / instead of on paper /
so we were the only ones / who could read them / so no one could take them / or revise them // and I tried
all night / while we glowed in the dark / to guess / your words / there / left hanging / like broken lanterns //

Judge's Commended: Vanessa Lampert Thoughts entertained while sitting for Lucien Freud

I can smell bread / is a spanner the same as a wrench / is Lucien serious all the time / he didn't say I could call him Lucien / are French waiters told to go heavy on the accent to make the food more sexy / pommes boulangère / gratin dauphinoise / does Lucien ever laugh / is that the price you have to pay for genius / bouillabaisse / pâté de canard / Is Lucien more a dog person or a cat person / at school was he 'Freud' / no pressure there then / a cat person surely / it could be warmer in here / where has Lucien gone / will he notice if I shift over a bit / here he is with a baguette / is that breaded ham / I didn't see Lucien with breaded ham / that's definitely a cherry tomato / a cherry tomato is more plausible / no part of my body feels private anymore / why would a person buy a fish and gut it themselves / I'm stiff / 'no thank you fishmonger I want to gut it' / maybe he likes to be called Lucien Freud / I can't remember the rules for beach cricket / you could torture me with blades and I still couldn't tell you / croque monsieur / soufflé / you don't see people in fleeces much now / there's only one name for a budgie and it's Chico / where has Lucien Freud gone now? / it probably takes a fleece a thousand years to decompose / flamiche / Salmon en papillotte / God almighty how much longer

Judge's Commended: Kathy Miles

Alpinism

when the mountain walked away / sulked off in its enormous bulk / I
thought it would be back / begging forgiveness / scree pouring down its
face / saying it wouldn't happen again / those rages / the shove of
boulders / tumbling with the force / my cheek red where a crag had
slapped me / hard on the bone / bruises the colour of heather / but
mountains will be mountains / you can't make them change unless they
want to / and it was truly sorry, knows it has faults / though the therapist
had gazed / deep into its flinty soul / found caves of melting stalactites /
salty as tears / there was hope she said / some warmth lingering in the
stone / if only it would stop / the soft tinkle of streams down its throat /
tipping liquid into its fells / foothills stumbling over themselves / waking
with a hell of an overhang / but another shower and it was off / drinking in
the soak of rain / taste of fermented clouds / until it was high as a kite, a
soaring buzzard / off its peak on lush greens / new growth firing its temper
/ it was quick to anger in those days / some memory of lava heating its
core / and it told me things would be different now / there would be
flowers / tormentil and sundew / bees sipping among shrubs / sheep
grazing in cotton-wool flocks / it was calm not like a million years ago / first
flame then ice / but like all mountains / it was lying / packed its bags and
went / I was left with an empty landscape / and a hole in my life / though I
knew it was for the best / I grieved at the way it disappeared / without
saying goodbye / and even though a city took its place / gave me
everything I wanted / couldn't do enough for me / still at night I stare
through the window / hope to hear the lurch of rock / climb its slopes / lie
in corries again / not mind when an avalanche / hits me like a fist

Judge's Commended: Lisa Simpson In which she asks, what are you scared of?

I fear lifts. Whole grapes. Old age. Structural movement. Nuclear war. Dodgy tradesmen. Unplanned

pregnancy. Asbestos. Poverty. Breaking the law. Open riser stairs. Not being good enough. Magpies

who fall down chimneys. Anaphylaxis. Pink chicken. Losing friends. Another Tory Government.

Noticing an unattended bag at the bus station. A prolonged and painful death. The macerator

toilet malfunctioning. Other people's feet. Burying you. Ladders. Road Traffic Accidents. Climate

breakdown. Being a bad mother. Unwritten social norms. Highly Infectious Diseases. Air travel.

Soft play. Cat faeces. Fast spiders. Small spaces. Cancer. Japanese Knotweed. You ending up just like me. Drowning.

Judge's Commended: Alice White Sl(e)ight

i. The Magician Calls My Daughter to the Stage

She's brave, though only seven. She goes up in front of all the kids and parents in the crowd she knows, and those she doesn't. School event. Dinner theater. Fundraiser. He has her hold two corners of a tablecloth for a trick, then bow: he makes her bow, by pushing her head down, over and over. The crowd laughs every time. She smiles politely. Then he asks her, in French, because we live in France, to give him a *bisou*, a kiss on the cheek that was the French handshake pre-pandemic. She does. He gives her one back. Then he holds his cheek out, to ask for another kiss. She gives it. He kisses her back. He does this as many times as the forced bow. The audience is quieter now. He finally stops. Says, in French, *I love my job*. Then he tells us to give her a round of applause, lets her go sit down. I watched the entire thing. I laughed nervously. I filmed it.

ii. My French Friends Defend the Magician

It's a cultural difference.
Kisses on cheeks don't mean anything.
Kisses on cheeks aren't sexual.
He's from another time.
He probably hasn't changed his act in thirty years.
It was just a bit.
It was like this when I was a kid.
He's probably used to playing to an older crowd.
It's harmless fun.
I wouldn't have minded if it had been me.
What does her age have to do with it?
He would have done the same thing to a boy.
Just put yourself in his shoes:
People weren't laughing—I felt so bad for him.
He's just trying to make everyone happy.
I like to believe that people are good,
I like to assume the best in people.
That's different.
Kids know the difference.
I knew you'd be upset.

Editors' First Prize: Georgio "Bloom" Russell
Hide It

after Lucille Clifton

you gotta front like you wasn't
contemplating killing yourself the other day,

like you wasn't googling the painless ways to go
and had settled on gas and garage—you gotta go

into that packed room, dap hands, you gotta say
"how it go" to the boys and whistle when

a cattie pass through, round ass in yoga pants,
you gotta do it up like your eye them been dry

the whole week, like you wasn't recent
in the foetal ball, fist balled, recalling what ruin you

Editors' Second Prize: Jen Feroze
Boxing Day Swimmers

It's the strangest thing, lately,
I open my mouth and my mother falls out -
a mournful clockwork woodpigeon on the kitchen table.

After lunch we drag the children along the seafront.
My god, let me be like those women, bobble hatted
and wobbling towards high tide. Those women,
salt brined, making joyous hams of their bodies.
On delicate, brittle days, bring me to the shore.
Show me how to punch the cold
right in the centre of its stupid face.

Editors' Third Prize: Róisín Leggett Bohan
The Recovery Room

i.m. N. L.

Over the shoulder of a slow dance, I watched you slip away; you always left the party early.

Do you remember that time you broke your leg?
I pushed you to the pub and back for weeks,
our tipsy-laugh tripping potholes, the hospital stacks throwing us bad shapes.
And coming off shift our powder blue scrubs splitting a greasy breakfast—
drowsy mouths grinning, high on chlorhexidine as you played
with the biro stuck in my night-duty hair.

You never said.
The silence slapped me like a siren.
Sometimes I hear you laugh as I pass the recovery room.

Editors' Commended: Julie Cameron Gray After Reading Sappho

A fist of whiskey to knock the day out,
slough the voice of her off

to a locked cupboard, leave her toying
with shreds of Greek letters.

The arch of γ is the curve of her arm,
 Ω her shoulder.

Building her house letter by letter,
the best of what I want rests

in the chasm of her silence.

Editors' Commended: Katie Hale
ring pull

and have you too felt this the culmination of a whole life's
purpose to know what you're put on this earth for
and to perform it gloriously a one-hit wonder yes
but god was I dependable

and are you jealous yet

let me rest now here on this beach salt-scoured stones
that shift and clack continuous turning grind me into rust

I've done my one small task

yes

this is enough

Editors' Commended: Erica Hesketh
Night-feed

Daughter attempting to fall asleep on the breast:
I cherish you as you study the problem

from every angle, hot-cheeked locksmith
carefully coaxing pin after pin,

picking the combination with your whole mouth.
One day you will tip into orgasm

with this same quiet focus. Don't ever change.
Tell your lover, or whoever, exactly

what it is you want – their hair out of the way,
the weight of their warm hands just so.

Editors' Commended: Amy Rafferty No Park Bench Memorial

for David Brown

We knew you would have hated it, sitting under plagues of rain in a Glasgow park,
ignored by passers-by, sat on by strangers, the sum of you reduced to a tinkly brass plate
bolted to a bench, inscribed with words that could never do you any justice.
You cannot get the jist of a man down in a six-line dedication, so we gave up
and met at the Point in Rhu, planned bad tattoos in your honour instead,
skimmed stones across the water where you had taught us and then,
drunk on rum and remembrance, we hurled our grief back into the sky,
we rang the boat's bells over and over and shouted your good name into the wind.

Editors' Commended: Natalie Whittaker

The first time I saw my own ghost

The first time I saw my own ghost I had a whole tube carriage to myself dragging back from a weekend that had ended early it was Sunday morning my nerves fried onions I'd been dragging a small plastic case with wheels that cried like dying cats now just a rocking weight between my knees the window opposite flashed a blank phone screen my nerves fried onions behind my eyes my brain cramped in the small bone case I'd been dragging around for years and that grey reflection appeared disappeared reappeared against a black wall held her skull in her hands an onion I knew I'd keep dragging back down the same tunnels back down the same tunnels for years wiping the same grit from my eyes