

# Magma Poetry Competition 2020/21

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

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## Magma Judge's Prize report

A poem calls us to pay attention to an experience, to its existence, and many do, but there are poems that go beyond that, poems that hold our attention for so long we live the rest of our days in relation to them. The winning poems I selected for the Magma Poetry Competition did just that.

I have to note it was interesting reading poems from the competition in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, a time where most people are restricted in one form or another from experiencing 'the outside'. It is fair to say living in a time of the pandemic has inevitably also been a time of questioning what our 'defining experiences' were and are. I found that many of the poems submitted to the Magma Poetry Competition were reflecting on momentous experiences, either with weighted acknowledgement, resistance, or with ambivalence. Whether the poems submitted were written decades ago, or recently, they were all drawing the reader into their response to an experience that urgently had to be carried in a poem.

## Prizewinning Poems

**Damen O'Brien's** First Prizewinning poem, *An Inscription on a Grave*, is a poem that draws different emotions from a reader; from feeling mournful, to being bewildered, to being humoured, to being angry, to being solemn, to being sad. I finished reading the poem feeling like I had been drawn into a full and unsettling experience, into a very possible and wild process of grief. From the beginning of the poem the speaker was intriguing, opening with the lines 'Driving past my favourite grave, headstone'. The sharp and almost witty voice of a speaker casually introducing their 'favourite grave' set this poem up from the start to be an interesting exploration. The speaker of the poem is so aware of the process of grief they are trying to get ahead of the future expected loss of their family, while seemingly mocking how others have processed theirs. The grief of the speaker is in some way inscrutable, and it is that mystery of not fully knowing how the poem wants us to feel that makes the poem captivating.

[Second Prizewinning poem withdrawn at the author's request]

**Catriona Wright's** Third Prizewinning poem *CONTINUITY* was a poem that held me spellbound from the first time I read it. Nothing feels 'normal' in this poem, everything is being rearranged, even the small details. In this poem 'the postman's mole roves his stubbled face,', and just when the reader wants to question the strangeness of this image the next line that follows is 'these errors are so common'. Each line in this poem acts as its own unit and is also a reminder of the work that line breaks do in ordering the image and expectation we carry into each line through the poem. The moment I thought I had figured out the poem it pulled me in an unexpected direction, the way life-jolting experiences itself do. I remain in awe of the control the poet possessed through the poem.

## Commended Poems

### **Nairn Kennedy** - *Ursus Maritimus*

I loved the poem because it had the element of unexpectedness that takes you by delightful surprise. The poem smoothly sheds a light on climate change, and the voice of polar bear within the poem felt real yet whimsical, and it worked.

### **Lydia Kennaway** - *Cutting Your Hair*

This is a poem that works in many contexts, whether in reference to a time of the coronavirus pandemic or outside that. The poem has a tender timeless feel. It zooms into the act of cutting hair, showing a moment of connection and communication.

### **David Short** - *Gently Down The Stream*

This poem moved me from the start, it felt as dreamy and celestial as its subject matter, and it got me thinking about the different and perhaps strange ways we can experience the things we'll miss as we get older.

### **M Valentine Williams** - *Off Beachy Head*

There are poems which when read feel like you have read a poetic novel with plot, character, arcs and more, this poem was one of them. The story of this trawler man is told so beautifully, and with control.

### **Sharlene Oola** - *My Mother Nature*

This poem was so striking in its strong imagery and language from the first read. Rich with emotion the poem is about so many things, from desiring love, affection, attention from a mother. It's a poem many can relate in on way or another.

Theresa Lola

## Judge's First Prize: Damen O'Brien

### An Inscription on a Grave

Driving past my favourite grave, headstone  
readable from the groaning road, for the first  
time I see that the flowers are gone. Neat little  
cemetery, new-bedded plots, plump with raw soil,  
and my favourite grave in line with the lights.  
Every week the flowers have changed, mourner's  
almanac, artificial annuals, tizzy and cheerful, but  
missing today. I've been killing my parents for years,  
trialling my sadness, running simulations on the only  
disaster that can't be insured for, picking the scab.  
We do this in the tomb of our thoughts, fantasise  
our tragedies. I make a great orphan, a sympathetic  
bereaved. The funeral they have not had was well received.  
Not a dry eye at the eulogy. This is healthy. But where  
are my favourite grave's flowers? Spritely. Thoughtful.  
That couple mouldering hand in hand beneath the cold  
granite, aren't getting their weekly tribute of guilt and duty  
from the roadside vendor, and I am shaken. What can  
their children be up to? Have they closed on the  
auction outside the family pile? Drained the champagne?  
Are they buying that super yacht with the tearful proceeds?  
Or are they holed up in traction, both legs in plaster,  
awkward gymnasts, frozen yoga instructors, desperately  
trying to make their appointment and replace fading  
memories. I've been killing off my family for years.  
It's healthy, I hope: an inoculation against the virus of  
grief. Getting the wreaths in early, ambassador sized,

jeroboams of flowers, because I don't think that I can be that diligent, sweeping the ancestor's parcel, the pressure to light a little candle to their memory. This grave has been a good reminder: first there'll be a death, and then a grave with flowers, tended for years, but the day will come when it will be impossible to get there and other times each harder still and eventually, I won't come and the flowers curl and drop and the grave will become a shabby thing. And then, long after my own eulogy, even the gravestone will be gone. This is a rubbing of the future. Better to let the weeds grow now. Better to scatter the ashes while you may. Better to wait for the green light and drive. And drive.

Judge's Second Prize: *[poem withdrawn at the author's request]*

## Judge's Third Prize: Catriona Wright

### Continuity

bullet holes dot the wall  
hours before the big shootout

the glass of pink lemonade  
replenishes with every sip

the postman's mole  
roves his stubbled face

these errors are so common  
it should be no surprise when

the dying ash in our yard  
bursts into cherry blossoms

our apartment is on Bloor  
when it isn't on Bathurst

I laugh and my hair is a bob  
which I nod into a blonde pixie

the baby we couldn't have  
throws mashed squash on the floor

we flicker between possibilities,  
mourn, are reborn over and over

I clean pale vomit off the tiles,  
which are teal, then desert blush

in the final cut, our lives, sputtering  
and contrary, were already vaster than us

## Commended: Nairn Kennedy Ursus Maritimus

Strangely, stealth's my thing.  
No trees to lurk behind out there.  
I'm stark and sun-bright on the brilliant

snow, a white ball on the billiard-table ice, where  
I can sniff a seal a mile away, tiptoe like a gently  
drifting heap of flour, a bear who isn't there.

I finish in a sudden rush at twenty  
miles per hour, a hundred stone  
of flying bear. I find that's plenty.

I can be delicate and patient, too, honing  
skills like Georgian ladies at their needlework;  
I lie by the smell of a seal near an ice-hole;

wait till it surfaces, make short work  
of its head, JCB it with a paw,  
wipe my bloodied muzzle, lurk

again. I can take on any creature, all  
the white-rimmed world, except this stealthy shrinking  
of the ice, this sudden spectre of a thaw.

## Commended: Lydia Kennaway

### Cutting Your Hair

*Best to start*, I tell myself, *where it won't be seen*.  
I fold the wired velvet of your ear  
clear of the scissor's blades.  
We're on the porch. Somewhere a catbird mews  
and there's a distant siren, too.  
You stare straight ahead into a mirror

that isn't there. I thought I knew you  
but this place I've just exposed is unexplored,  
the skin smooth, surprising  
in its tenderness. When you sat down,  
I asked you what you wanted. You searched  
for words but what I understood was

*Make it like it was before*.  
We'd looked high and low for the scissors,  
settled for the rusted shears  
from the back of a kitchen drawer.  
Here I find they're sharper than I thought.  
I blow away the first fine cuttings.

It's been a spring of extravagant birdsong  
and sirens. We've learned their calls,  
the chickadee's *dee-dee-dee*, the wail and yelp  
of the ambulance, the mournful decay of pitch  
in the wake of a passing police car. Only  
the birds are silent at night.

I mimic the stylist's routine  
best as I can recall, assess  
the cyclone swirl of the crown,  
lift and feather the hair to learn its will.  
I snip and tousle and clip. At the front  
I cut more than I intended

but stand before you and nod  
as though it's what I meant  
to do. You catch my eye  
and smile and God I love you  
for pretending you don't notice me  
feeling utterly at sea.

I return to the back, place my fingers  
at your temples like a mind-reader, tip  
your head forward and you submit,  
the nape of your neck defenceless.  
I want to make it like it was before  
for you, I really do.



# Commended: David Short

## Gently down the Stream

(written on my 85th birthday)

Now I'm really old, well over  
the allotted span of three  
score years and ten, I seem  
to dream more. They are  
gentle, these dreams,  
nothing naughty or erotic.  
I'm past that sort of thing.

They are my theatre of  
the unexpected. Head on pillow,  
it's curtain up and anything goes.  
Here he comes, the bearded  
man in a green suit, shouting  
that tomatoes are dangerous.  
I'm on the crowded train

that never starts, then  
it's a cricket match in  
which I'm scoring freely,  
only to find I'm in a  
bus shelter that's become  
a pub and the beer's run out.  
But in these dreams the most

marvellous thing is that  
I can run again, something  
I haven't done for years.  
Fleet of foot, I course merrily  
beside the stream, weightless with  
abounding joy, longing to  
possess the unpossessable.

But all streams reach  
the shore, and there perhaps  
the dark trumpeter waits to  
sound the last reveille. If life  
is but a dream, I fear  
to wake. It's all been rather  
lovely – let me sleep on.

## Commended: M Valentine Williams

### Off Beachy Head

Under the tall chalk cliffs of Seven Sisters  
he talked of disappointments.

He was a trawler man,  
pulling up from the depths  
things no man should look at,  
laying them out in series one by one,  
disowning them; chucking them back.

He knows where the dover soles hide  
in the trenches near the lighthouse,  
and how the small squid beat a retreat  
across the sandbars as his boat sips the water  
round her bows. Halibut, plaice and dabs,  
his for the taking.

A trawler man,  
heaving up entrails of a life gone wrong,  
hoping to find something in all those slippery lengths  
to sustain him through black nights on the boat,  
as he wrestled with winch and gear,  
when all he had was a pale and constant light on shore,  
the harbour many hours away.

He had been out too far, where sea and sky combine,  
and caught the swarming silver darlings in his net,  
a shoal of shillings, shining with regret.

Lifting the trawl net slowly, hand over hand,  
unhooking crabs, releasing weed, he knows  
which way the current with the high tide flows.

He had gone after the fish, the big ones,  
that smacked the side of the boat and spun her round,  
but he was hooked up on other stuff,  
dragged under by the tide that ran  
through his veins like mercury and could not see  
that on the land the sun was shining, fierce and fast,  
as the ocean waves kept breaking,  
or that other boats were waiting,  
to sail a different sea.

## Commended: Sharlene Oola

### my mother nature

i dream of setting my mother's garden ablaze,  
of watching pinks and oranges crackle into something that looks like me.  
i wonder if she would cry then.  
cradle wicker baskets and ceramic pots  
and forget that her hands are burning.

i should press petals into my eyes.  
stretch my skin into leaves,  
watch my feet sink into the ground  
and reach so far into the earth  
that my roots are burned by its' core.  
maybe then she would cry.

i will become a quiet thing,  
that cranes its head up to her son  
pretending that he and i are not the same.  
knowing that really,  
there is no difference between us  
as he burns himself into nothing  
and i suffocate myself in light;  
we are both killing ourselves so she will care.

i'm at the kitchen sink as  
she flows back and forth with mud and seed,  
still unable to look at me.  
she sees a plant with withering leaves and  
pauses.  
then, she decides to let it grow and accept the parts of it that are dying.  
and i think,

'how ridiculous i must be, to be jealous of a flower.'

## Magma Editors' Prize report

Every year our judge for the Judge's Prize bears the huge responsibility of judging alone and choosing the winning poems without the luxury of consultation with others. Although the Editors' Prize involves a team of judges there is also that long stage where we read through each of the poems individually and work out which we want to bring to the final table. After months of sifting, reading the poems in paired tranches, we become pretty invested in those we have each chosen as our individual top ten and it is often hard to let any of them go. The deliberation at this stage can take hours, as it has to be a collaborative process that informs the outcome of the Editors' Prize. Of course, we all know how subjective the whole business of poetry can be, which is a good thing because there is no such thing as a universal taste. Though it is sad not to see some of our personal favourites make it to the top it is often our experience that the poems that don't end up quite winning the **Magma** competition do come back in another life in another magazine, competition, or collection, and as a judge one feels that thrill of recognition and pleasure to know those poems have gone on to make their own way in the world.

The Editors' Prize invites submissions of poems of ten lines or less, but within that the range is enormous. The number of entries as well as the quality was exceptionally high this year which did not make our job, as a group of judges, any easier. The poems that made it to the final shortlist of eight finalists – came from all over the world and reflected a huge range of personal and political perspectives. The ones we finally chose for our first second and

third prize winners as well as the five commended, I think you will agree, take the short poem to new and exciting places in terms of form, subject matter and use of language. **Magma's** co-Chair **Gboyega Odubanjo**, who had his first experience of judging the Editors' Prize this year, attested, 'the winning poems achieved complexity, formal invention, and genuine brilliance without ever being held back by the limits set on them.' There were six of us judging altogether – as well as Gboyega there was **Leo Boix, Ella Frears, Lisa Kelly, Cheryl Moskowitz** and **Selina Rodrigues**.

As judges we were all taken by the sheer variety of voices, styles and powerful imagery in the top three outstanding winning poems. In first place **Collen Baran's** *Breakfast, Grade Six*, uses a three-column device that can be read across and down, the poem has a shifting dynamic, and demotic language that moves the reader into a strange dimension to uncover luminous meanings. Like a puzzle this poem keeps the reader guessing and wondering. The bowl is 'brimming' with granola, but the child is also 'brimming', about to cry or changing in some way – maybe early adulthood. The relationship between mother and child is also continuously shifting. The handful of granola 'not quite covering her lifeline' (read one way) is extremely moving. Is this mother struggling to feed her kids, suffering great sacrifice or is she experiencing some sort of breakdown? All these possibilities are implied.

Second prize winner **Emily Harrison's** *But Sometimes My Dad Would Use Tickling* is an unsettling poem exploring male touch. The poem asks the reader to think about tickling and how it is used – for fun, in games, as punishment. The poem is not focused on any individual experience and makes us consider

confusion around male touch, and confusion for the men themselves who perhaps are prisoners of a society that doesn't welcome the spectacle of male affection – 'you'd be lucky to see a hug past 1995'. This is simultaneously sad and humorous. What is great about this poem is it doesn't seek to condemn – it seeks to explore and involve the reader in the communal 'we', asking questions about society and how it shapes the violence and the benevolence of male touch.

In third place is *This Long Chain* by **P. N. Singer**. This restless, wandering poem is hypnotic and concerning. A riddle and also an answer to itself, achieved in one long sentence. Each line break is perfectly judged, and the poem is a fine example of the punch and craft a short poem should aspire to. So much is packed into these six lines. Although the poem is fantastical, we believe in the speaker's embarrassment and sense of burden at dragging this impediment throughout their life. The anaphora of 'this' for emphasis heightens the sensation of burden and pathos and inescapability from the chain. What the chain represents shapeshifts into a snake and a tail suggesting the Adam and Eve story, some sort of shaming, and possibly ancestry and associated guilt. A skilfully executed poem that touches on comedy and pity.

Of the commended poems the judges praised the accomplished poetic handling and linguistic questioning in **Katie Hale's** *at a reading, a white woman asks what good it does to be always harping on about the past*. **Eve Ellis' After the Tet Offensive** employs powerfully evocative filmic imagery to portray political and family history. *Wreaths* by **Hannah Hodgson** delivers surreal visions as remembrances, bearing grief not just for one but

many, and leaps crisply across space and time to provide a portrait of a mother's life. *The Bus Stop, Coulsdon, Summer 2011* by **Jasmine Farndon** captures the oddity of conversation between two young people and draws the reader in to the experience of adolescence and the treachery of human communication. **Tim Scott's** *Gun (Belfast 1974)* misleads us with the apparent simplicity and shortness of the lines. The language is carefully selected, in the shape of a trigger, and the poem builds in intensity towards its unbearable conclusion.

Leo Boix, Ella Frears, Lisa Kelly, Cheryl Moskowitz,  
Gboyega Odubanjo and Selina Rodrigues.

## Editors' First Prize: Colleen Baran Breakfast, Grade Six

**[author's note on form – can be read both horizontally and vertically]**

mom sees me eating	granola,	a bowl brimming,
sees me chewing	cereal and milk,	and
she yells,	what are you doing?	you should never eat
so much,	she takes	the box,
tells me how much	fat	it has
– she says, you never, ever eat	a bowl so full of	granola!
you eat this much	and pours out	just the right amount,
you eat a handful, she pours	three spoons	maybe less,
an amount that fits	inside her palm	not quite covering
her lifeline, and says,	never, ever eat	more than this

## Editors' Second Prize: Emily Harrison But Sometimes My Dad Would Use Tickling

as punishment men's hands have always confused  
me you'd be lucky to see a hug past 1995 but sometimes  
we wept until we were laughing for mercy sometimes men's  
hands are not for fun but for when we've done something  
wrong I remember our neighbour's hands clasped round  
our ankles pulling us out of the deep end an arcade claw and  
a soggy prize sometimes all they want to do is check  
if they can fit handprints on the backs of our thighs touch  
is a conspiracy handed down or handed over we'd recognise  
your grip before we recognise your voice

## Editors' Third Prize: P N Singer

### This long chain

This long chain, this long snake, this long tail, this long thing I have dragged with me, increasingly long, increasingly ridiculous, with age this massively embarrassing burden of hope, I don't know what to do with it now, where to put it, how to carry on dragging it or where on earth to hide it.

Commended: Katie Hale

### at a reading, a white woman asks what good it does to be always harping on about the past

harp like *hope* – isn't that what a harp is? horsehair/catgut/string  
anticipating touch, and always singing of past holdings

harp like *harpy* – how a voice can grow claws, can be bred  
to never let go, wings beating a repeated downdraft

and speaking of beating – harp like *heart* – though doesn't jazz suggest  
we only notice rhythm when it changes? and besides

harp is an old word, its roots uncertain –  
*harfe* / *harpa* / *hearpe* – though the dictionary says

it's probably from *skreb* – a reconstructed word, only invented  
for bridging a gap – meaning *to shrink* / *to touch* / *to attack*

## Commended: Eve Ellis

### After the Tet Offensive

My mother was a Ford pickup  
in the late 1960s.

She carried God's longhaired children  
through the backwoods of Georgia.

In her truck bed, she kept: a baby-killer's  
boots, a bottle of henna, ironed underwear.

In the back, the guns rattled  
all night as she rode.

## Commended: Hannah Hodgson

### Wreaths

The dead babies hover over her like thought bubbles.  
They say they are happy, living in the in-between –  
astronauts cut loose from their spacecraft.

The green dress hangs on the wardrobe door, gathering itself  
like a parent about to hear a wrongful assessment  
of their child's educational achievements.

No, my mother is not an apple. She carries her seeds  
someplace unreachable. Her heart has ripened so much  
it rots, falls to her feet, and all she says is *oh dear*.



Commended: Jasmine Farndon

## The Bus Stop, Coulsdon, d. Summer 2011

A girl and a boy are sat at the bus stop – occupied with not waiting for the bus.  
Something has finished, something has changed in her and she acts not to know it.  
“I am a blank sheet of plywood don’t you think” she says  
He responds “I will dig myself within your stupid veins. I am rooting for me.”  
“I am entirely blank. They will remember this feeling when they bury me.”  
He says “What just happened is as tiny as the motherboard and you were bad at it.”  
It is dark of course, the only hour in which boy and girl will sit at a bus stop and not wait for a bus.  
She says “No-one ever told me that trauma is something you can sit in like a bath, bemused.”  
And he would say “Tomorrow you should swallow a papermache dart.”  
And if she had the words she would say “fuck fuck fuck”

## Commended: Tim Scott Gun (Belfast, 1974)

Little H knelt  
  
and was instructed  
  
to place his palms together, form  
  
a nest of curving fingers into which  
  
the black shape floated.  
  
From the high tower of a uniform, his father’s  
  
searchlights lit his face and scanned  
  
for signs he might have grasped  
  
the weight of one man’s life  
  
and how to bear it.