

Magma Poetry Competition 2023/24

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

Judge's Prize report by Raymond Antrobus

It was the late Gboyega Odubanjo who invited me to judge the Magma competition this year. I have WhatsApp messages from him sharing poems we liked – in one message we discussed what we thought made a good poem, “I like poetry that discourages a single narrative or narrative all together” said Gboyega. “I put less emphasis on formal aspects... it's much more about surprise – mainly play (form, language, meaning, sound).” All the poems selected here adhere to many lyrical sensibilities we shared – tight and broken forms, surprising word choices, enjambments and imagery. In the spirit of Ezra Pound's famous quote that we both agreed with, “Poetry is news that stays new,” and I believe these poems speak to our times and beyond.

For Palestine by Clara-Læilla Laudette (first prize) opens with a moving epigraph from Irish poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin from her poem, *What Happens Next?* Laudette's poem is a series of haikus, a usually reflective, lyrically tranquil form used to capture nature and the passing of time, but contrasted here, the form captures fast paced violent and horrific images of “torn children” in Gaza. I kept returning to this poem, noticing new details each reading, from clever and provocative line breaks to the use of dates as subtitles within the poem that emphasise the endless atrocities

that the speaker and reader are witnessing in real time. Mahmoud Darwish wanted his readers “to wonder what poetry says to us in times of disaster?” It seems for the reader and the poet, the answer, whatever it may be, begins with witnessing without turning away. With clear, careful language, Laudette shows us ways to do that with this powerfully unforgettable poem:

...Your
unopened mouth proving the
difference between

peaceful and quiet,
silent and free. His tears don't fall:
they burn, like the tree.

Toussaint L'Ouverture Replies To Wordsworth (March 1803) (second prize) by Rommi Smith is a timely moving, musical poem in response to Wordsworth's sonnet *To Toussaint*. There were many entries to the Magma competition referencing Wordsworth's clouds and daffodils but only one entry referenced his sonnet to the Haitian Revolutionary general with the “unconquerable mind”. Smith offers Toussaint a sixteen-line Meredithian sonnet in a metred and “measured” voice that “weigh our miseries on justice scales”. In Wordsworth's sonnet he praises the radical

actions, sacrifices and sentiments of Toussaint's rebellion, even as it led to his own demise, he will live beyond. Wordsworth wrote:

Live, and take comfort! Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee – air, earth, and
skies –

Smith's poem hat tips this Wordsworth address, signalling a union in poetry and taking a stand against one's oppressor even if it means "riding the margin". The poem is deepened with the mention of Napoleon's denial of Black people's humanity (often whitewashed from Napoleon's biography) and is liberated / transcended into the natural world, one shared by both visionary, romantic men across time and place – "la lune. Le papillon. La fleur. L'oiseau." (the moon, the butterfly, the flower, the bird) chiming with Wordsworth's own "air, earth and skies."

Please Refrain From Speculating by Leyla Çolpan (third prize), an intentionally ironic title for a poem in lyric speculative mode. Bold too, when many American poets (Solmaz Sharif, Layli Long Solider, C.D. Wright and Claudia Rankin) have used it so powerfully in recent times. The poem is framed around a photograph, yet it's a kind of anti-ekphrastic form in that it moves against the fixed idea of an image and attempts to widen its semantic "field" (a word that reoccurs throughout). Çolpan has asserted a gaze that is a live rail for the politics of language in our times. Prominent thinkers like Judith Butler have called for us to rethink and reframe how we embody and perform our gender, asking mostly for grace and flexibility within it. If applied, this gives permission for the poet to enter the playground, an invitation to play and yes, speculate. But the stakes are high and some, like the subject of Çolpan's poem, Brianna Ghey, have violently lost their lives. Poems that dare to look at why this is happening and where our rigid and often toxic ideas around gender originate, if done in fresh and captivating ways like Çolpan deserve championing. I also see the poem straddling the line between question and statement,

subtly taking Kipling's *If* to task and his own famous gendered affirmation that closes his poem, "...one day you will be a Man, my son!" But Colpan's poem isn't able to complete itself or affirm any grandiose summation:

If nothing can capture this refrain and nothing
now completes it.

I didn't go into judging this Magma competition looking for overtly political poems, I was looking to be moved, jolted freshly awake and on this occasion, for me anyway, these are well-crafted poems with real staying power.

The commended poems too, offered me something to think about deeply and feel through – I was marvelling at their questions and lyrical concerns, *Anthros* by JA Lenton, *Brogue* by Éadaoin Lynch, *Watching* by Linda McDonald, *spell to dismantle patriarchy* by Lynnda Wardle and *Faint* by Amelia Loulli. These poems made me want to read more from these voices. Dear readers, keep your ears and eyes open for them.

Judge's First Prize: Clara-Læila Laudette For Palestine

*This happened in my lifetime in a place I know -
the moment the light falls on the victim and then
it moves away slowly, the light
that also falls when there's nobody there to see it.
- from *What happened next?* by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin*

12/10/23

Ashen arms angling
from rubble. You ask the brown
-ing leaves why. They spin.

15/10/23

Rush of clouds westward:
lavender bends its bobbed
head, bombs split the young.

16/10/23

Cut fruit in patterned
bowls, Mum likes her yoghurt thinned
with milk. Gaza blooms —

Scarlet patched sheets peek
past the grinning walls of an
ice cream van: sorry

chrysalis for the
unburied, tiny refuge
in October sun.

18/10/23

Today I saw torn
children. Rain, loosed in a
sheet of silver chimes.

29/10/23

Tired, thinking of
Asem: his wan smile, his two
parents, killed in time

for Halloween. His
pain, sponsored by taxpayers
in peace-loving states.

13/11/23

Oct. ticks to Nov. In
parked trucks: undisturbed dust, stale
biscuits, bodybags.

16/11/23

*How many more vid
-eos of children digging
themselves out will it*

take? Step closer, see
his eyes, chest collapsed – a tent
twisting, mauled by storm.

Close arms round him, his
Gazan breadth. He asks again
sob on sob *How many*

*videos of child-
ren digging out children will
it take?* Tighten the

brace of your arms. Your
unopened mouth proving the
difference between

peaceful and quiet,
silent and free. His tears don't fall:
they burn, like the tree.

Judge's Second Prize: Rommi Smith Toussaint L'Ouverture Replies To Wordsworth (March 1803)

"Nature gave me the soul of a free man." - Toussaint L'Ouverture

"My soul was with those who were resolved to fight it out with
Bonaparte." - William Wordsworth

"He was a very private man, who confided in no one" - Sudhir Hazareesingh,
Black Spartacus, 2020

"Freedom is a right given by nature."

"I [*fear*] not. *Happy am I as a bird*" -
of prey. Your sonnet asks I take it for
my mirror; I will meet you by the river

of debate. To live? To die? Two answers,
none can own - except I own this one: if
Napoleon's heaven Black men cannot enter,
my answer *lives* in 1791.

O weigh our miseries on justice scales,
the outstretched arms of oak. Listen for
the wind's reply and what it can't forget.
Look for me in the river's edge, riding

the margin; *liberté* and "*thunder cloth'd*."
Bel Argent beneath me. My desire
measured in miles behind, mapped in yellow:
la lune. Le papillon. La fleur. L'oiseau.

Judge's Third Prize: Leyla Çolpan Please Refrain From Speculating

for Brianna Ghey

If, when speaking of a photograph, convention dictates we consider its subject as captured.

If in the photograph she is smiling in a green field.

If the field is considered as open.

If behind her a treetop is turning unseasonably red.

If it is difficult, but not impossible, to resist a certain temptation to consider its unseasonable turning as symbolic.

If symbol is at times a kind of capture.

If in the photograph a cloud touched by western light is taking on the colour of her blush.

If it becomes evident that I am having some difficulty looking at her face.

If even a very beautiful and smiling.

If, when speaking of an action that may never be completed, convention dictates the action be considered as present and continuous.

If it is thus preferable to say 'she is smiling' rather than to say 'she smiles'.

If what is girlhood completed.

If in the photograph she is smiling between mouthfuls of budget chocolate.

If they have considered her an 'open person'.

If her outline against the green field must also describe a limit of imagination.

If, when speaking of any transsexual but especially of a transsexual girl, convention dictates we consider her body first as what has captured her.

If laughter of trans children.

If (as they say) first blush.

If changes to the adolescent body are considered as either permanent or impermanent.

If such questions are considered in *The Times* as 'open'.

If entry wound.

If even broad daylight.

If, when speaking of the killing, convention dictates we refrain from speculation.

If just asking questions.

If outline is considered as a permanent change to the adolescent body.

If not every opening is a means of escape.
If general concerns of 'safety' and 'legality'.
If girlhood is an outlaw season.
If, as a question of law, convention dictates the official record of her death be falsified.
If all official records are in a way untrue.
If, as a question of safety, we do not walk to the vigil unaccompanied.
If each of us knows a way onto the green field.
If in the photograph she is smiling and is looking back towards the camera in a way that I would
like to call conspiratorial.
If this word must be a limit of metaphor where what I want is to say 'breathes-together'.
If girlhood showing.
If the photograph is considered as an outline of her body against time.
If it is difficult, but not impossible, to resist a certain temptation to lay down inside this outline.
If we believe the body can at times act as a soul.
If what we do for one another is refrain.
If no two transsexuals are strangers.
If we are different but not strangers.
If it is not at all times true that we are captured standing finally alone in a green field as behind
us a treetop turns unseasonably.
If she is not finally.
If we can know this because she is smiling there between mouthfuls of budget chocolate and
someone is taking a photograph.
If we now take a different kind of photograph, in which we are concealing her in a moment as
she turns towards.
If the photograph makes outlaws of us all.
If we are joined there as in refrain.
If nothing can capture this refrain and nothing now completes it.

Judge's Commended: JA Lenton Anthros

"In a splintered world, we must address the splinters."

Clifford Geertz, *The World in Pieces*

This is the way they went:
This is how they called out:
This is where they sacrificed:
This is what they buried there:
- *please*

They shared their sorrow when:
They coveted the colour of:
They suckled their offspring on:
They used purple stones to:
- *can you please*

Here, they slept between:
Here, they were stripped of:
In the end, they worshipped one who:
Punishment was carried out with:
- *help us to understand*

In this passage, someone has removed their:
There is no sustaining conclusion. We cut out before:
- *understand how we were lost*

Judge's Commended: Amelia Loulli

Faint

and that afternoon waiting
for the cardiologist to tell us
what we could not know
about your heart
how we listened without meaning to
to the woman in the next bed
being told her cancer had grown bigger
than their knives the curtains so thin
hardly worth pulling
how I made a meal of the wordsearch
looking for *things that shine*
just to have something to talk about
just to tell you I'm looking for *silver*
for *stars* knowing the woman
who called the nurses in the night
when you blacked out again
when you fell from your bed
is crying asking the doctors to wait
for her husband to share the news
I find *water a puddle* in a short time
you will both be gone
from this bay this ward
from the impossible tangle
of hospital corridors I can't find
a mirror or daddy's house keys
I ask you to help me look for *the sun*
the sea there are no windows
in this room but I tell you
we will find *the night sky*
with its *brilliant moon a large piece of tin foil*
our fingers tracing the page
for the double letters of *glitter and glass*
help me circle *metal knife*
tears your hand bruised by the canula
all of our coats
bundled on the chairs
next to the beds

Judge's Commended: Éadaoin Lynch Brogue

(n.) a thick and heavy Celtic accent.
Disputed etymology: perhaps from Old Irish *bróg*,
'shoe,' from the footwear
'characteristic of the wilder Irish.'

You hear it in your youth, *d'óige*,
a tongue that sticks out
like your shoes – there it is,
your brogue,
do bhróga.

Its origins are murky, but you see it
in *barróg*, to wrestle or embrace,
a grasp that neither gives nor takes
nor holds, but circles its own
provenance

as you do with *barróg's* other meanings:
a reef, white-crested wave, breaking
like your voice – not in growth
but in hiding, your speech
bleached like coral.

Beir nó tóg, do you bring or take
the sound with you? Say aloud
Gortin and Doonagore to recall
your typecast voice. *Rogare*, to beg,
ask, interrogate

as others beg your pardonable vowels,
until you can't hear a *fada* in 'rogue,' nor
séimhiú in 'photo,' until other mouths
translate your name to pound signs
and percentages

until you cut off all the markers of your roots.
And in this *aimsir láithreach*,
weathered time, you return home
to hear your name spoken aloud
again

exactly as it is, and you try again to walk
in your own shoes, *barróg cheana*,
with a hold on your tongue, a pause,
between what you say
and what they can hear

Judge's Commended: Linda McDonald Watching

'The affliction of deafness is not obvious to the eye.'

Snap-Shots of the Deaf by W.R.Roe 1917 p.107

Ada watches the dawn
Creep down
Distempered walls.

Sees the latch lift.

Watches Mam
Enter the room with
The pitcher of water.

Sees her Mam smile.

Watches Mam
Draw back the curtains
Letting in light.

Sees the sun slant.

Watches Mam fill
The chipped porcelain
Bowl on the sill.

Sees water shimmer.

Watches her sisters
Dive under the covers,
Pretending to sleep.

Sees them wriggle.

Watches Mam
Beckon her over
To wash.

Sees her Mam frown.

Deaf Ada watches
Her world filled
With wonder and movement.

Sees she doesn't quite fit.

She doesn't know why.

Judge's Commended: Lynnda Wardle spell to dismantle the patriarchy

find leaves
burned by frost
or pollution
black bleeding green
push into the text
sharp apex the boyfriend
who used to bore me
I'm so proud of you
as though he'd made me
as though his pride could buoy him
enough to banish the patriarchy
heal cracked veins exhausted carrying
the blade just let me
write poems in peace and no
you are not in this one
find the margin where ink is green
and holy where my midrib opens to
receive the feeling of tree
sky spire which are all poems
written by the grumbling heart of this city
for us for this cold day the dart
of squirrel a rusted metal
pipe for our petiole to
fashion as flagpole
fly a new flag
for a new country
something
green to hope in

Magma Editors' Prize report

Submissions to the 2024 Editors' Prize ranged from personal experiences that spoke to universal emotions, to poems embedded in place, history, and society. With 673 entries (some containing several poems) the Magma judges were impressed by the quality and insight displayed. We arrived at our decision after much discussion and consideration, with our finalist poems a list that we are proud to now share, full of evidence that the art of the short poem is very much alive.

Catherine Spooner's *Scapa Flow*, the winning poem, impressed us with its quiet resonance. It is an open and searching poem, yet precise in its language. The lilting, opening phrase "The sea washes up the bones of things" takes the reader into the poem, culminating in the striking image of a "lamb's pelvis, clotted with red weed". This central couplet acts as a pivot to a birth scene which is ambiguous, not joyful, leaving a sense that the speaker is bereft and the outcome uncertain. *Scapa Flow* is a sea space between islands in Orkney, part of Britain's naval defences in both world wars; its history and geography underlie the poem which ends with the "empty space" of the womb. We were all drawn to *Scapa Flow*, finding depth and further meaning with each re-reading.

Second prize went to *Temporary Worker Visa* by Anne Rouse, a political poem of force and relevance. The cold official quotes bookending the poem are under-pinned by a warning to "keep off the lawn". The poem works in layers: the workers "on the sweating, green canal" are portrayed as if in an underworld, out of sight and mind, connected to the lawn only by a surreal chute. The last verse brings the workers alive, "your hands in their plastic gloves". This direct address heightens the emotion. We were left thinking of the socio-economic history and current circumstances that result in such working conditions, and of the people who endure them.

We chose *The Beauty Here Is Almost Unbearable* by Millie Guille for the third prize, for its courage and accessible, profound simplicity. How to bring off, in our times, a poem with beauty in its title? The speaker appears to be seated on the edge of her life, as well as the sea, speaking to the past and present. Unbearable beauty may be linked here to unbearable regret. The ending, "and the women/ ... I was afraid to" feels universal, standing for generation upon generation. The clear and insightful words, the tight syntax which reflects the thinking, and the symmetrical structure, add to the poem's power.

The commended poems all stood out for their originality. John White's *Transparency* delighted us with its central metaphor, transparent sea creatures morphing to the open staircase and connecting with memories of family. We were struck by its light, thoughtful tone. *Leaves, their whole lives, dangle* by Sharon Black gave us an altered perspective on the transformative power of nature and trees, the lines beautifully balanced between observation and contemplation. Jo Cornwell's *My Unborn* is full of wild sadness and lines containing expert alliteration and imagery, with an agonisingly beautiful metaphor at its centre. We loved the humanity of the voice in Kayla Troy's *ache* whose form mirrors the haphazardness of thought that we move through in daily life, with its individual pain backed by the horrors of the world. *The Goat in Tehran* by Hilary McDaniel we chose for its filmic vividness and ability to conjure a scene and stories from nine lines. The sights and smells of one corner of a city are evoked, and the fate of the goat resonates beyond the immediate situation.

Thank you to everyone who entered. Reading the short poems is an annual adventure and treat for the Magma editors.

Editors' First Prize: Catherine Spooner Scapa Flow

The sea washes up the bones of things.
Rusty innards of ships, spilled on the shingle.

Sea glass, edges still sharp, surfaces dimming.
A whelk shell worn to a loop of bone.

A lamb's pelvis, clotted with red weed,
its vacant sockets miming a terrible face.

A memory of the moment before the cry
in a maternity ward, the hour not holding you

while a nameless doctor stitched me silently,
the hollow of that empty space.

Editors' Second Prize: Anne Rouse Temporary Worker Visa*

If your job is on the shortage occupation list
among the loading bays for *fruit*
and *poultry* on the sweating, green canal,

please *keep off the lawn* framed in carriage lamps
where summer is decanted, and where the chute
hidden between the azaleas leads down

to your hands in their plastic gloves, for a round
of milky tea, pink wafers, *no longer able to bring*
dependants on a lanyard your face and name.

*Gov.UK website, Reducing Net Migration Factsheet – December
2023. See also “Seasonal Work”.

Editors' Third Prize: Millie Guille The Beauty Here Is Almost Unbearable

and I am sat
once again
at the edge of many things:

the edge of the island, the edge of my fears
as haunting, as recurring as the sea,

counting the names
of the men I couldn't love

and the women,
God knows,
I was afraid to.

Editors' Commended: Sharon Black Leaves, their whole lives, dangle

A tree is made of consonants, except at night.

The Lebanon cedar has a landing place for everyone.

An old beech tilts, a flight of spangles and lichen.

Trees have a mirror image underground, as all truths do.

They breathe so quietly in their beds of hummus and air, sleep upright like horses.

The moon gets caught in them, an old wound passing through.

The canopy is as tentative as voices.

In Yosemite, we circle a sequoia, pass through it like a magic trick.

There are many ways to reinvent yourself.

Editors' Commended: Jo Cornwell My Unborn

'Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate' – Gwendolyn Brooks

my hair catches small sticks; splinters of grown trees
when i danced this morning my hand became the shape of
a wild columbine, milkweed gentian, then morphed itself
into a bud so peony red it felt like a fist, a blastocyst,
my unopened child; the one pulled out as if from sepals
and dragged downwards. and there she went, quietly,
sweetly, away from me, sighing

who will come with me and mix cotton with daisies?

Editors' Commended: Hilary McDaniel

The Goat in Tehran

*after you everything that happened, happened in a mass of
craziness and insanity.* – Forough Farrokhzad

The colors were dry. Sand and white,
dirt and tan against the eggshell blue,
cloudless sky. The open sewers became
a festival of rotted fruit. Inside the quiet
turquoise tiled enclave was the beginning
of a story. A steep concrete wall with no
windows stood across the alley to the
south and in the ruins of a building next
door the grey goat resigned to his slaughter.

Editors' Commended: Kayla Marie Troy

ache

the world / isn't very well / of all the eras / the sick / never lodged / in my throat / this long /
it aches / perhaps / if I pray / five times / a day / it'll end / move my body / close my fitness
rings / more often / eat all my vegetables / stop killing the chickens / avoiding the GP / it'll all
be lively / train / my teeth / with cheap sulphates / nurse headaches / with broken sleep / and
lonely nights / yes / I'm talking myself / into hysteria / my friends will tell you / she's / lost it
again / all we can do / is worry / the crab curry is nice / but it opens / your stomach / the next
day / call it a detox / ladle lentils / onto our plates / lap it up / with god's gluten / the ghee /
an unwanted settler / my hips / widening / I stopped smoking / a month ago / my friend died
it didn't / work / I stopped / again / the war started / it didn't / work / and still / the troubles

Editors' Commended: John White Transparency

We love you, impish see-through things
from the sea's womb mostly, though we don't know

how to place you, 'glass' or 'ghost', all on display -
the vertebrae, your heart, digestive tract

like the floating staircase in the house we grew
up in, living visceral lives (you get by

on your nerves) and yet robust
like our late mother, tugging with translucent hands

the way an octopus might, firm and
as it were tentatively.