

# Magma Poetry Competition 2025/26

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

## Judge's Prize report by Rishi Dastidar

Thank you to all of you who submitted for this year's Magma Poetry Competition. There were around 1100 Judge's Prize entries all told, and I am touched that you entrusted your work to me.

And what a pleasure it was to be subsumed in all those words. From all corners of the world, it felt like I was seeing all aspects of the world in these dispatches. From the loud and the public, attempts to find sense in the senselessness that is rampaging across our timelines. To the intimate and quieter, scenes from within bedrooms and kitchens, moments that disappear and yet linger forever.

In such a range and variety of approaches and styles, I am hard pressed to say there were some definitive commonalities through the stacks of poems. But some things, did feel like they were recurring, catching my eye. Perhaps fairer to say, these are what left an impression on me.

That there was a lot of brown in the poems; both mentions of the colour yes, but soil, the earth, the despoliation of it. I note that Pantone's Colour of 2025 was 'Mocha Mousse' so maybe we all absorbed that without realising.

And per chance related to that, worms appeared to be the creature that had caught many poetic imaginations. I'm not a super fan of them, but intriguing that poets are looking down around their feet to hymn nature there, and not just the skies and the seas.

Unsurprisingly, war and the political pain most of us are unwillingly living through was there in the poems in full cry. Iran, the current holder of the presidency of the United States, Palestine, were inescapable. I fully expect a new generation of brilliant political poets to come to prominence in the next few years, on this evidence. How can it not? Someone has to believe in legislating for the world again. It might as well be the poets.

And to that end, there was a - to me surprising - number of poems that drew attention to the fact that they are poems. Often playfully done, it does rather suggest that as poets we are very aware of the limits of language, and what it can do and not do. We are humble with our powers.

To my winners. I said in my rubric I was looking for, "Excitement, verve, an idea, language at play, a new way of seeing the world, something that turns me upside down. Something that makes me go, damn I wish I'd written that."

I'm delighted to say that my winners and commended poems did exactly that. These were the works that, each in different ways, lodged in my head and heart and refused to shift. Sometimes it was a particular image or turn of phrase that did it; sometimes it was a conceit that stopped me in my tracks as the world was refreshed for me. And sometimes it was a simple recognition that something had been triggered in me: a memory, a twitch upon a thread that said, this feels like home.

In their disparate ways, I think these poems share two things: First, that they are unafraid to be themselves – breaking rules about repetition, say; or revelling in their simplicity. And second, they provide some space for readers to bring themselves into the poem, to draw their own conclusions. These are, to me at least, poems of seduction, that persuade and charm you of their merits, rather than bash you over the head with a point of view.

Briefly on my commended poems, let me praise, hoot and holler for: the 21st century blank-faced wit of Sam Harvey's *Skibidi Toilet*; the wonderful conceit of *Overnight you became a river* by Fiona Ritchie Walker – I absolutely loved the line “You didn't know your kitchen / was on a slant until you poured over / the tilted tiles”; the subtle drama of regional and social mobility in the UK contained in the four short stanzas of Penny Blackburn's *Linguistics*; the knotty, fierce truth-telling of *Believe Me* by Conan Tan; and the finding of joy in the mundanity that is *Elegy for the Argos catalogue* by Chrissie Dreier.

My third-placed poem, *A hundred tiny naked women* by Lesley Curwen, has possibly the best single image I've encountered in a long while. Vivid, precise, and a great way to grab your lapels and pull you into the poem. The rest of it doesn't let up either, the unlikeliness of this phalanx made all too real, clinging to the protagonist, snoring, then wailing. As a metaphor for the cacophony of guilt that so many of us struggle with, it's superb.

My second-placed poem, *The Evolution of X* by Damen O'Brien, I found to be rather cunning and excitingly brilliant. Yes, the concept and conceit are brilliantly done, punchy and funny to boot. But why it really works is that it pays such glorious attention to sound. Internal rhymes, unexpected assonance and sibilance, and the bravery to push reliance on a single word beyond being uncomfortable into a glorious place. Excess here, ironically enough, is why a poem about an absence of X works.

My winning poem, *The cleverest man in the world* by Sharon Black, I was just not able to shake. Although it is named for possibly the world's most famous public intellectual, I found that very quickly I did not need to remember or know who this person was. Instead the poem works, by dint of the clarity and simplicity of its description. It's like a pane of glass in this regard. And it's so tender as well, the gestures soft, kind, almost hesitant. Oh to be an object of affection and loved like this! So when the last two lines arrived, it left me floored, in the best and worst of ways. If I say that this poem has what I call 'the trick of it', know that I mean this as the highest of praise. That from simple words and images, it has created a kind of magic, for me; as I keep asking, how did you do that? And break my heart in the process?

Congratulations to all of you, winners, commended, and those of you with the courage to enter alike. The world needs your words, more than ever. Keep writing.

Judge's First Prize: Sharon Black  
The cleverest man in the world

*Yuval Noah Harari*

has beautiful eyes, a forehead  
rich as shea butter  
and a face of smooth dispassion.

The slender nose of a boy,  
the hint of a dimple on this chin,  
he has been sculpted from caramel.

When he laughs, he is a puff of dandelion,  
has the most kissable mouth.  
I want to iron out with my thumb

the faintest wrinkles around his eyes.  
I would take his head in my hands  
that head with the cleverest brain in the world

and would put my mouth  
to the fuzz of his receding hairline.  
I'm sure I could make him

fall in love with my stupid ways,  
my puerile sense of humour.  
His head is like any head. Deep down

he wants the same things as me.  
We both know humanity is doomed  
with not a hope in hell that love will save us.

## Judge's Second Prize: Damen O'Brien The Evolution of X

They've heard a rumour that there are only lesbians in the future  
and that's why they're afraid / lesbians reseeding the lost forests  
/ lesbians tending the creches of humanity's hope in hidden  
bunkers / lesbians, filtering carbon out of the atmosphere, plastic  
from the sea / beautiful, organically-grown lesbians / hard-arsed,  
armour-plated lesbians / brightly-plumaged lesbians, crooning  
lullabies to their children / small, scavenging lesbians rebuilding  
the broken homes, pulling order out of wreckage, refuge out of  
ruin / big lesbians with large eyes and long nails / the shy lesbians  
that are rarely caught on camera / all the types / they're doing  
well now, populations steadily increasing / that Y chromosome  
finally crumbled away and along with it / the worst of violence  
and abuse / the worst of rivalry and war / the worst of tusks and  
horns, spring scars and jousting / all just prehistoric bones /  
they've looked around, poor things / with their stubby arms and  
outsized teeth / their tiny brains and enormous tails / and they've  
heard news of a world-ending event / something that will render  
them all extinct / in the new world, the warm-blooded, furry  
lesbians will inherit the Earth.

## Judge's Third Prize: Lesley Curwen

### A hundred tiny naked women

are living on her body. When she takes a bath they cling to her, enjoying the clean feel of hot water. When she sits on a bus, they scramble on to her chest to avoid being squashed at the back of the seat. They have skin of different colours. They are all young. She does not know their names. When she turns over to sleep, they sigh, re-arrange themselves, hang on tight. When they settle, she hears a small ripple of snores. At dawn, the tiny women crawl up to her ears and whisper why did you. One day they are all watching news on her phone when she notices their limbs become tense. They pinch her skin harder than ever. He is in a suit, gesturing to camera outside a domed building. The years have not hurt him, she thinks. His hair is salt-and-pepper neat. She feels miniature fists hammer her neck as they call in high voices why did you. She tries to swipe the picture away though the image of him stays. Hides her face as a hundred of them wail why did you never tell about what he did

## Judge's Commended: Penny Blackburn Linguistics

At least one student, every year  
will question my diction, call me posh.  
It's partly different accent – though it's had  
thirty years of corners being knocked off.  
The emery board of Tyneside sing-song  
lifting my flat-iron vowels.

I tell them the change started  
in University halls, where we stirred  
countrywide and far-flung voices  
into our shiny shop-new pans.  
Where the magnet of my accent  
drew on the iron filings of North Wales,  
Southampton, Somerset, Essex.

I don't speak of being seven, recounting  
some minor injury in class. Telling them  
how much it hurt, then being mocked  
for not knowing it should be *soar*,  
not *soowa*. We didn't reclaim the regional  
back in those days.

Time bends over on itself, like folded paper.  
Remembered shame takes root in my chest.  
Hot, creeping guilt at how my mouth  
re-shaped itself to sound like all the rest.

## Judge's Commended: Chrissie Dreier Elegy for the Argos catalogue

Before I understood the meaning  
of 'flammable', I wanted  
one of your shell suits: hi-vis yellow,  
purple-striped, 100% polyester.  
Even though my Mr Frosty Ice Maker  
spewed slush and your Alba cassette player  
broke during *Gangsta's Paradise*,  
I miss you. You gave me  
more paper cuts than I could count,  
but I loved the trip with my sister  
to collect your newest issue:  
the automatic doors  
that parted at our approach  
as if receiving guests  
at a high-end hotel.  
Inside, massive TVs would promise  
yachts on turquoise water, multicoloured  
birds-of-paradise, David Attenborough  
in a faraway jungle.  
We'd join the groups huddled over raised tables  
to flick through your laminated leaves.  
We'd scramble to jot down the item number  
with a tiny, tiny pencil.  
I'd gaze at the jewellery by Elizabeth Duke.  
Once I heard a boy ask to see a ring  
he'd offer to the love of his life.  
At home, we'd be lost to your pages  
for hours, undeterred by your chemical odour.  
Beds pulled together,  
we'd work out the essentials we'd need  
for our future home together  
and how many cars we'd clean to buy them.

## Judge's Commended: Sam Harvey Skibidi Toilet

"Social phenomena have no finished character",  
I found this in my notes, assuming it was Marx,  
But searching it online pulled up *Skibidi Toilet*,  
A Machinima series (portmanteau of machine  
And cinema) about a war between mobile faces  
In toilets and humanoids with phones for heads,  
According to Mashable, 'skibidi' is the noise  
Timbaland's "Give It to Me" makes when played at speed,  
The word can mean either 'bad' or 'cool', like 'sick', some say  
It's a form of scat: full-throated jazz, the fetish  
For faecal matter or slang for "leave me alone", "Skibidi  
Syndrome" is when children are afraid to go to the toilet  
In case a face is waiting there to conscript them,  
I'm 29 and I'm scared I might sit there too long  
Arguing with Stalinists in Instagram comments,  
My most-liked contribution to the discourse was a guide  
For how to be polite when avoiding eye contact  
As a payment is slow to go through: smile downwards  
At the machine, then a "cheers-thanks" and out of there  
With a Huel to stop your stomach eating itself,  
"The future is a continually being born",  
This line will lead you to the Myers-Briggs subreddit,  
Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging,  
I think it's all bullshit to be perfectly honest  
But that's just me, typical INFP-T,  
The irony is the personality test  
Was developed during the war to identify  
The industrial jobs most suited to women left behind,  
The productive forces of society come  
Into conflict with existing social relations,  
On 24th July 2024, talks began  
Over a live-action film of Skibidi Toilet,  
Directed by Michael Bay, whose unfinished projects  
Have their own Wikipedia which describes them  
Falling into "development hell", another way  
To say "poetry" or "social life" or "movement in the bowels"

## Judge's Commended: Conan Tan Believe Me

Though I can't remember why language  
failed me that night, only that it did, latched  
onto the nearest tooth like chewed spinach,  
only that my spine ached enough to reveal  
its arch blown through my apartment door,  
painted green then by previous tenants

though the precise shade was more moss  
than spring and faded from the onslaught  
of light that coated my face, the aftermath  
scattered like spare change down the sofa  
I slotted into, thinking that my body once  
trapped with its pulse could make me stay

though my hair ends split against the wind  
running through a bed of daisies bruised  
like a child, the sun merciless as summer  
disrobed me under a dog-shaped cloud  
that became a dog, jumped me until I fell  
onto blades of grass begging to be spared

though he spread me open like a coin purse,  
grunted repeatedly that he loved me, body  
rapturing into applause as I disappeared  
into theatre, the curtained moon the sole  
witness because I wasn't, no, I couldn't  
be there in my room as it happened, keeps

happening even now, the details, like him,  
they escape me, I'm sorry, I have no evidence  
of a future, a life at a distance from myself.

## Judge's Commended: Fiona Ritchie Walker

# Overnight you became a river

For the first time you know the meaning  
of *ripple*, feel the four letters of *flow*  
run from your wet skull  
to your ten raindrop toes.

You didn't know your kitchen  
was on a slant until you poured over  
the tilted tiles, slid under the door,  
dissolved into swift water, unable to stop.

What was your waist widens  
to an estuary on the dry, cracked lawn,  
but there's still enough of the old you left  
to inhale dangerous air, desert dry.

Your mind swims with memories  
of dark, green grass and you hear  
the slosh of fingers disappearing  
into a warm womb of parched earth.

The smell of the grateful soil brings tears  
to part of you that used to be eyes  
as you drift into a dry drowning,  
become absorbed.

Your breathing stills to a whispering breeze,  
grass drinking in your presence  
as you dream of rain  
bringing bones and flesh back to life again.

# Editors' Prize report

As always, the judging panel of Magma editors was impressed and entertained by the diversity and quality of the short poems submitted to the competition this year. Writing to a ten-line limit is a challenge and we were particularly impressed to see poems which worked within these constraints and matched their subject matter to the form. Of course every panel of judges brings their own subjective preferences to the shortlisting discussions and this year was no exception. We are extremely happy with our chosen poems and particularly love the range of topic and form.

First Prize winner: *When did you last see your father?* by A C Clarke: The more we read this poem, the more we felt its strength. It is emotionally honest, beautiful and yet exceptionally restrained. The simplicity of language struck us as eminently skilful. The diction is clear and the short phrases work well, creating silence around and within the space of the poem. The way the first line answers the title is brilliantly conceived. It achieved everything we hoped for from a short poem, the lines perfectly fitting the form, and we all agreed it was a worthy winner.

Second Prize winner: *Light / Regular / Super Plus* by Aliya Begum: We very much admired the way this poem adopts an ancient conceit and interprets it in a modern way. The poem's topic is still considered taboo by many, but the riddle format allows it to be explored elliptically, creating a sense of intrigue and wonder. We enjoyed the imaginative overload of the poem, and its rich metaphorical landscape and rhyme scheme. The butterfly shape is cleverly rendered and adds to the overall mystery of a product that is described in such a way that it might be found in a contemporary supermarket or a medieval market.

Third Prize winner: *Scrimshaw* by Catherine Spooner: We loved this poem for the way it handles sizes and perspective, a perfect topic for a short poem which does not strain against its form. We enjoyed the delicately handled description and observation, the sense of obsession, and the idea that hugeness cannot be reduced to tidiness in order to make life safe. The poem starts with a case of marvels and becomes marvellous in its own case.

The commended poems showed, in their different ways, skilful craft and fantastic storytelling. *Hanging by a Thread, You Instruct Me to Care* by Jasmin Allenspach used the sparse format of a clothing washing instruction label to tell a powerful story. We loved the power of the narrative and the force of language in *One Hit Wonder* by Daragh Byrne. *Childish Games* by Eleanor Holmes juxtaposed the myth of Achilles with playground chants to create an evocative and intriguing counterpoint. We really admired the use of language in Max Wallis's taut poem *Lichenisation*. And the power of storytelling came to the fore again in Steven Stromboli's moving poem, *Disneyland*.

Editors' First Prize: A C Clarke  
When did you last see your father?

When we were both free.  
Neither of us could hurt the other now.

It was after midnight, the hospice lights were low:  
I saw in his disarmed face, the child he'd been.

I could speak to him then  
as I could not speak to him living.

In that hushed room in a place where so many  
were leaving, I asked his forgiveness.

All my life until then I had thought  
he should be asking for mine.

Editors' Second Prize: Aliyah Begum  
Light / Regular / Super / Super Plus

*Ic eom wunderlicu wiht, wifum on hyhte*

I am a strange creature, a joy to women

- *Riddle 25 from The Exeter Book, 11th century*

Once my skin is shed,

I am a slender bone.

A chemtrail, a chrysalis:

I muscle into your home.

I drink your ruby wine,

take rest in your sorest wound,

then leave, a scarlet butterfly,

bloomed in the walls of your womb.

## Editors' Third Prize: Catherine Spooner Scrimshaw

A case of marvels: hand-carved narwhal horn,  
tiny kayak, pocket-size polar bears  
whittled from walrus tusks, smooth as mints.

I only wanted the whales. For my birthday  
I came back year after year, lured by the song  
of humpbacks calling through the depths,

sound weaving through ribs like skeins of weed,  
skeleton hanging above me, breaching  
across a chamber of air, a blue distance.

Editors' Commended: Jasmin Allenspach  
Hanging by a Thread, You  
Instruct Me to Care

One Size

74% Eumelanin  
26% Pheomelanin

Wash dark colours separately  
Bleach if necessary  
Iron on reverse  
Prolonged exposure to direct  
sunlight may cause discoloration  
KEEP AWAY FROM FIRE

Made in Bangladesh

*In memory of Rana Plaza, 24 April 2013*

## Editors' Commended: Daragh Byrne

# One Hit Wonder

You spend September lunchtimes face down on schoolyard tarmac  
under a scrum of sixth class boys, fists falling like conkers—

boys you flinch at in the corridor, like your brother flinches  
when mum's not around. You count the days in beatings—

beatings that relent one February breaktime when you're nearly ten  
and Jackie Aspel says that thing he says about your dad.

You hear it still some mornings—not what he said,  
not even the crack of his jaw when you fired the bullet

of yourself through the full bore of your right fist—  
but the silence of the boys after, mute as Jackie beneath you.

## Editors' Commended: Eleanor Holmes

### Childish games

Dot dash

Dash dot

Big fat question mark

Dagger in the back

Blood pouring down

Creepy crawlies all around

Light breeze

Tight squeeze

Egg on your head

Will make you freeze

*Marsh Mallow*

*Achilles' Yarrow*

*Chiron taught me all I know*

*Your wooden horse*

*I stole of course*

*Wounds will heal if they're bound*

*Ripples on the River Styx*

*Reminds me of my mother's grip*

*Slings, arrows, stones & sticks*

*Kiss me now, before you're licked*

## Editors' Commended: Steven Stromboli Disneyland

A single red shoe carried along a cresting wave down a beach  
soon to be wedged between rocks and compelled to sit and be still.

A shoe Mickey Mouse monogrammed, moulded for mischief,  
with a chain of plastic yellow daisies clinging on to a broad band.

A shoe soled to scuff and skip, fit for a ferocious four or five  
to splat noisily into muddy puddles and wear out with just wonder.

A shoe long travelled, sometimes cajoled, often times carried,  
that had already played hope hopscotch with the ways of the world.

And in the deeps, a twin, owner encumbered, rising and falling now  
in only a steady, tidal, locomotion. So close, so close, to Disneyland.

## Editors' Commended: Max Wallis

# Lichenisation

Cyanobacterium worships sun,  
threads light into sugar.

Mycelia throw their calculated nets,  
haustoria invading cell walls.

Symbiosis or siege, you ask  
a question that spores the air.

It dusts bark, bone. If I held us here  
long enough it would us, too.

Held; drained. What we ignore  
to be something more than alone.