

Wirral Poetry Festival Open Poetry Competition 2026
Prize-winning poems

Open Competition Winner

Daddy, where do babies come from?

by David James Bawden

I believe I was born from violence. Some rival god from a time when my father was still a god & all the gods were stars & all the stars imploded in on themselves & fatherhood was next to godliness & the universe sprouted from the fallen body of a father & all I am & all the world was born from that initial violence & the old fathers must die so the old gods may live & the old gods must die so the old stars can collapse into black holes & that rival god tore at my father's testicles & split those golden eggs & scooped out the clay inside & wherever the father landed upon the earth, gods & stars & fathers sprouted from clay & blood & sea-foam & violence, & baby, this was just in the beginning

Open Competition Runners-up

How We Made it Through the Dark Days

by Steve Pottinger

For that was the winter we listened to Enya
complaining that the porridge was too hot,
or too cold, complaining that she would have
preferred jewelled quinoa, or a quart of gin,

complaining that the cost of first class post
was outrageous, that her bins had – again –
neither been emptied, nor blessed by a coven
of skyclad wiccans with rococo birthmarks

and extravagant libidos, complaining about
the regularity – or otherwise – of her morning
motions, complaining about the rain, about
the absence of rain, complaining endlessly,

beautifully, incessantly, never once repeating
herself, never pausing for breath, creating
a soaring hymn of grudges, a glorious litany
of gripes, her voice ringing from chimney breast

to cooking pot and back again as we crouched
silent by the cold ashes of the long-dead fire
and the world turned and the planets moved
through the heavens, and the days shrank

to next to nothing, then grew again, all winter
long we listened to Enya sing out her frustrations,
were lost in dumbstruck admiration, slack-jawed,
open-mouthed, all of us, and never once complained.

(opening line from a list of 'discarded opening lines for a poem' by Brian Bilston)

Open Competition Runners-up

Pink Ribbon

by Sally Spiers

After Kim Addonizio

If ever you went topless in Tesco's car park,
pressed each breast into a vise, felt
a diagnosis shred you to pink ribbons
or your nipples cured, put up in jars
labelled *before*, if you muffled your rage
with clumps of your own hair, wept
for the female word for emasculation,
reckoned two columns, *to do* against *time left*,
if post-op you bathed your tenderness in sunlight
softer than the twin mounds that you mourn,
half-smiled at your girlfriend's *one cup or two?*
tattooed cherry blossoms on the wound because,
why not? life is precious and you can. Listen,
you survive; there will always be words for joy.

Open Competition Runners-up

Rising

by Steven Shakespeare

he lay in the earth
speaking to the soil
holding the root, soft
like a lover's hand

mycelium wove
his shroud, it bandaged
his side, his back, eyes
that had seen too much

skin that remembered
scourge and spit and shame
and always the night
when friends turned false, fled

left the field to death
to frightened children
with hammers and nails
who knew not what they—

he tends to the shades
teaches them who had
lost their voice to sing
takes them up to where

blackthorn breathes, puts out
flowers before leaves
as if impatient
for the coming spring

Open Competition Runners-up

Time stopped for me

by Margaret Poynor-Clark

when I got in the lift with a porter and a man in a wheelchair attached to a drip, joking about the poor state of cricket, and when the doors opened, I brushed past a mother and daughter taking a turn down the corridor in search of a change of air, nearly bumping into two nurses chatting about what happened last Saturday. No one saw me walk into the office, collect his certificate and bag of belongings, take a taxi downtown, climb the stairs, sit on a red velvet chair outside the Registrar's office, and inadvertently get caught up in a Friday afternoon wedding, the bride stepping forward to give me a white lily before I was ushered in.

Open Competition Runners-up

Botanizer

by Sue Wood

'Bee, spider, fly, early purple, green man orchis... Hill Green, Kent ' from Margaret Dickinson's notebook Flowers and Mosses, 1846-1874

She hunts between hop fields in disregarded places,
leaves the gentlemen to ale, cigars, cliff tops
scaled for bringing home the exceptional
in trophy bags, their Arctic beards too fierce
for milk-maid swards in Kent.

She is dressed for quiet Sundays: a neat kick pleat
in her skirt covers ebullient knees.
Her small grey notebook is neatly ruled:
Latinate, common name, place and numbers found,
an entry for each genus, listed, noted.

Green man orchids spatter the grass, pale
marzipan men, splay-legged puppets on sticks.
She counts, one finger on each puffed up helmet
where calyx and sepal meet to trap the bee.
Two hundred and ninety-two.

Her knees ache. She sweats against her high-necked blouse,
digs out one specimen, adds a minus to her tally.
This one is hers. In morning light with
whisp of badger hairs and watered ink
she will disarm her dancing manikin.

Bee, lady's slipper, fly, spider... a genus of disguises,
small lives of subterfuge.

Open Competition Runners-up

I was resolved that freedom would be mine

by Katherine Meehan

I left the Tarot Garden, and I read about Niki de Saint Phalle
leaving her children, how she was Mama
to the men who worked at the garden in later years
when she lived inside of a gigantic pair of tits
lined with mirrors reflecting mirrors
and sometimes a part of a person.
When I came home, I let the pigeons eat the grapes;
they shit on the garden table. Tenderly
I stroked the hours filtering down from the sky.
When the clocks went back, I loved cats immensely.
I read about Saint Phalle's line of perfume and inflatable pool toys;
it seemed the only way for a woman to make art was cash—
I needed to become rich without kids or a husband,
very hot and very single. Perhaps I could pick one,
but my crepey neck skin said it might be too late.
This has nothing to do with bathroom tiles.
I smeared my hall with pink paint.
I tore dandelions out of the ground again and again.
I resolved to look at people sluttishly; I resolved to love myself more.
There was a snail on the outdoor table cover,
I plucked and cast it amongst the woodruff.
I was full of compassion.
I saw Jesus (I think) in the form of the snail.
In the form of a snail, I saw a new boyfriend.
The grapes grew mouldy; the fig leaves yellowed.
I read a play about the 'pram in the hallway' for a playwriting prize.
I hated the way I talked to people. I hated the concept of choice.
I hated the choices I had and the ways they made me monstrous.
I said the void was a mother; my mothering was void.
I wanted to be perfect. I wanted a completion, an ennead
unsurpassable and oceanic as Lilith.
I was in my dark femme era, I *was* Black Moon Lilith,
I was a fictional point in the sky, when the sky said:
Isn't it true that you're a primordial demon?
Isn't your lover the angel of death?
Isn't it true that you're eating your babies?
No. The fact is, I'd gained about five pounds
eating free peanuts at the hotel bar.

Liverpool City Region First Prize

Alex's Wake.

by Grace Stanger

Consider Alexander:

His hands exclamations of morality,
Reaching up and out of his coffin,
Which rests, unsure, atop his doctor's shoulders;
A flock of surgeons quivering beneath a sky
He no longer holds up.

How fares his heart on Osiris' scales
Now that it is no longer gilded?
How sure its weight?
Like the echo of a fat round jewel
In the palm of his hand?
Chart the steady journey which his body,
honey-sweet,
Makes towards the temple.

I recall Alex's soul peeling away from his body
and drifting, amniotic, like the grey skein of a cataract into his fraternal incense-smoke.
Reconfigure this stubborn body in permanent gesture, then, into a vessel;
A galleon tossed upon the backs of his physicians.
That the earth might split into the gaping maw of a goldmine in the wake of the dry-soled shuffle
of his procession bears no significance to him.

He is oxymoronical to our weight in gold;
As he rises we sink.

Liverpool City Region Runners-Up

**A Letter of Marque for the ship Thomas Hall on a voyage from Liverpool to Jamaica 1st April 1777
by David Wilkinson**

becomes a wound on the deck
a dark stroke of wax and ink
parting the sea into those who own it
and those who are drowned by it

it speaks of Jamaica as destination
but also as plunder for sugar and rum
and a Colony that feels the tremor
of Empire in every tide

it is as though size matters
the bigger the document
the greater the piracy
and legitimacy of distant men

the rigging hums in the wind
as the crew are transformed
into something not quite merchant
but not quite navy

when the ship finally sails
it leaves a wake in a long-unsettled line
like a ledger which only has debits
and a shadow stretching further than any mast

Liverpool City Region Runners-Up

Infanticide

by Leon McRae

A cockcrow, posing bachata, swathes the curtain gap
turning out her restive thigh, to mark a silent flick.
The shared kettle, careful and then avid, blooms
the grounds to taste her mouth. On the wall of
an all-female affair, a male-nude sights redress

but the tits are already out, hanging over the oven,
its minute-minder pregnancy and the cookbook
hand-me-down. The recipe tuck is a gingerbread
house, but father is home thumbing, debonair
as a judge but having no better law.

Before sending her down, where society lays
its roots, he shows Mother Death a womb
of soil in a cell tray. From the thinned-out seeds,
flowers now thrive by light and space. He says,
Forest flora grow in sun, but you grew plump

by seep—a bloated baby of the gluttoned vase:
a display of extraordinary madness, and
a gavel for plucking hands.

Liverpool City Region Runners-Up

What We Left at the Bottom of the Sea

by Bev Montague Clark

She watches me from behind glass,
reinforced blue. Her sharp eyes question.
Her hand placed one side, my tentacle the other.
Humans are strange.
No camouflage to hide themselves.
I have many patterns, textures, colours.
She has nothing but that coat
and eyes that hold her sorrow.
My nine brains superior to her one
yet we're similar. I've lost my home,
like her I'm mourning. She pities my captivity,
floating through a shadowy kelp forest
searching for something deep.
An Aquarium full of noise and faces,
she fears the wolf-eels of her world,
as I do mine. My long arms splayed.
She understands. I dream of Oceans.
The sea-bed's solitude.
She's dreaming of a lost child.
My three hearts are grieving for her one.

Liverpool City Region Runners-Up

Some Cultures Share, Adapt or Steal Belief Systems and Gods

by Adam Paxman

This chōka's theme is
Syncretic mythologies.
Examples include

Aztec/Mexica
Ruler of the underworld,
Mictlantecuhtli,

Known as Ah Puch or
The Stinking One by Mayans.
Syncretic figures.

Other examples?
Greek god of fire Hephaestus.
God of volcanoes,

Metallurgy, smiths
(Nowt to do with Morrissey).
Midwife to Zeus, whose

Head he split in twain
To birth Athena (nowt to
Do with poster shops).

Aphrodite's cuck.
Caught war god Ares in an
Unbreakable net.

Roman counterpart?
Vulcan. Etruscan? Sethlans.
One more example:

Turnu/Eranthe
(Etruscan deity) had
Two equivalent.

Winged young man Eros
Was cherubicised during
The Hellenistic,

Then renamed Cupid
By the Romans. Nowadays
He is the star of

Saint Valentine's Day.
Primordial chaos to
Greetings cards mascot.

Syncretism is nuanced but
Hopefully you get the gist.