

WIRRAL POETRY FESTIVAL OPEN POETRY COMPETITION 2026

OPEN PRIZES

Helen Ivory and Martin Figura

Judge's Report

We've co-judged a fair few poetry competitions in our time and although we both have our own preoccupations as writers and readers, there is always a consensus as to what we are looking for. Of course, ultimately, we are looking for *good* poems and as the three huge envelopes arrived, we swooped upon them like magpies on a treasure hunt.

Fleur Adcock's dryly witty *The prize-winning poem* ends with:

*What is required is simply the masterpiece we'd all write if we could.
There is only one prescription for it: it's got to be good.*

This sums up the elusiveness of a prize-winning poem while alluding to the fact that we were both looking for poems we would not have thought of writing ourselves. And if we have written something on a similar theme, or have read other poems on such themes, then the poems we were looking for would have gone about their business in slanted and extraordinary ways.

Then there is a matter of the poem being *good*. Many *good* poems reached our longlist of about fifty poems. These were poems that worked well in every way a poem can work. These are poems written by poets who are used to crafting their work. Another of Adcock's caustic lines reads that the winning poem *will not be the first poem the author has written in his life*. It is often the way that people are moved to write something, but they haven't really thought of editing it, or showing it to perhaps a workshop group, a tutor or mentor. That the poem isn't well crafted or reads like an early draft or something that needs to be looked at with fresher eyes, doesn't not invalidate the original impulse for writing. Part of the craft of being a poet means the deployment of an objective, editorial eye which comes with practice and experience.

Getting down to the last fifty is hard because we are human beings and it can be difficult to switch the subjectivity button off when a writer has for example, presented us with the facts of the worst, or the best day of their life. Selecting the last twenty is harder still, and that last ten almost impossible. The final seven, in this case, almost beyond impossible – indeed we've given Special Mentions to three poems that didn't quite make the Runners Up.

When reading so many poems for a competition, there are discernible themes. These include loss and grief – inevitable as they are to us all. Also represented is what's happening in the wider world just now – about which there is plenty to exercise us. Then there are more 'local' themed poems which we suspect have been born from workshop exercises. These are all excellent places to start and you can only notice patterns like this when you have read over eight hundred poems in this manner.

What we were looking for, and more, can be found in the poems we did choose. And because we don't wish to repeat ourselves, we will speak to those poems or rather explain how they spoke to us.

First of all the [two] that didn't quite make the final selection but were hard to let go of. We felt these poems should get a special mention.

Sometimes loss feels more like absence
Sometimes it's a great big hole

Holes are fascinating things – we are compelled to take a look, aren't we? A neighbourhood and its hole, becomes its own kingdom with little dramas acted out, regardless of the outside world in this funny and strangely moving poem. When the council fill in the hole, the neighbourhood knows what they need to do in a way reminiscent of Roger McGough's poem *At Lunchtime*.

Snare The title itself comes as a warning, underpinned by the opening line 'The bait is always the same'. This is a dark fairy tale. The bad thing that has happened in the woods, has happened before, is set to happen again – 'suddenly / grandmother bares her teeth.....the door slaps shut/ like a jaw.

Now for the Six Runners Up – poems that have survived sift after sift to get here.

Time stopped for me runs like the opening take of a film, the protagonist making their way through scene after scene, an accretion of tiny events leading to a startling and poignant scene where it becomes apparent that things will never be the same for them again. This poem takes the most difficult of subject and carries it to its conclusion with such care. We liked the affecting gentleness of this poem and its restraint.

Rising is an allegorical poem that inhabits the subterranean to imagine nature gently taking possession of a shrouded man. The visceral imagery hooked us into the poem as it unfolded. There is an allusion to Christ 'with hammers and nails' which points to a betrayal and then a resurrection in the form of the coming spring which feels more connected to The Green Man.

In **I WAS RESOLVED THAT FREEDOM WOULD BE MINE** the protagonist leaves the sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden and sets out on an erratic and often hilarious quest for freedom. Frustration piles on to overwhelming frustration until she finds herself at the end of her adventures overeating on free peanuts at the hotel bar.

Pink Ribbon grabs you from the arresting first line 'If you ever went topless in Tesco's car park' and doesn't let go until it ends. The subject matter is a mastectomy, and the poem hardly stops for breath as it rushes you through the fury, tenderness and indignities of the experience. You land with a bump, for the delivery of the last line – which ends with 'joy'.

Botanizer inspired by the artists Margaret Dickinson's notebook – *Flowers and Mosses 1846-1874* this is a poem with a light touch. It imagines her primly dressed setting out in search of her subjects 'leaves the gentlemen to ale, cigars... You're given the impression

of a no-nonsense unshowy woman going about her necessary business. You might even read a little mockery, even contempt, for those gentlemen left behind in 'Green man orchids spatter the grass / pale marzipan men, splay legged puppets on sticks.' as if she couldn't be doing with them and their nonsense. We liked her physicality – the sweat against the neck of her quiet Sunday high-necked blouse. She is a hunter and this is her quarry.

How We Made It Through The Dark Days takes one of Brian Bilston's '*discarded opening lines for a poem*' – For that was the winter we listened to Enya' and runs with it. Enya complains her way 'beautifully, incessantly, never once repeating herself' 'all winter / long we listened to Enya sing out her frustrations'. This is one of those poems that demands you believe in its closed world, a humorous poem that has you with its subjects 'crouched / silent by the cold ashes of the long -dead fire'. And like them we 'never once complained'.

To rise above such company to be self singled out for the big prize takes a special poem, which is exactly what **Daddy, where do babies come from?** There is an innocence to the questioning title that little prepares us (or the child in question) for what lies ahead. The titular father proclaims fathers as gods– their moods and proclivities which we all orbit around. The poem begins with the father's own birth 'I believe I was born from violence' and fantastically carries us back from there in a single unstopped sentence. You sense a little mockery in the hyperbole as the poem progresses – is the father / poet having fun with us? It ends in a crescendo of a last line 'fathers sprouted from clay & blood & sea-foam & violence, & baby, this was just in the beginning'. That 'baby' seems to confirm our suspicions. An exciting audacious poem that left us amazed!

Thank you one and all for your poems – we enjoyed reading them very much. There can only be so many winners – we hope the rest of you forgive us for not choosing your poems, and we wish you and your poems well.

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