

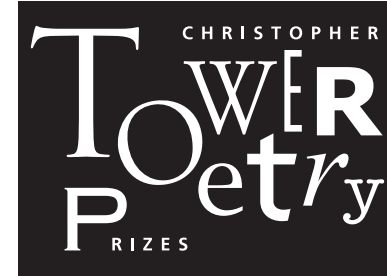
CHANCE

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Tower Poetry
Christ Church, Oxford

www.towerpoetry.org.uk



THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER POETRY PRIZES 2008

CHANGE

17 APRIL 2008

Judged by
Simon Armitage
Alan Jenkins
Peter McDonald

THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER
POETRY PRIZES 2008

First prize

THE FIVE STAGES

Emily Middleton

The King's School, Macclesfield, Cheshire

Second prize

JOURNEY TO HILLY COUNTRY

Ashley McMullin

The Sixth Form College, Colchester, Essex

Third prize

HEAT

Nina Bahadur

St Paul's Girls' School, London

Runners-up

TEXTING IN CHURCH

Richard O'Brien

Bourne Grammar School, Lincolnshire

QUICKENING

Amelia Penny

South Hampstead High School, London

WE BEASTS

Charlotte Geater

Northgate High School, Ipswich, Suffolk

SESTINA 102 ; 26

Anna Savory

Fort Pitt Grammar School, Chatham, Kent

EMILY MIDDLETON

THE FIVE STAGES

It began long ago, when we pooled blood
like brothers. Respecting the membrane
of our imaginations, we never left
our confines; spent the nights conjuring fire.

Then we found the plough, ablated the fruit;
metastatic, we spread around the globe,
dividing into slaves and enslavers.
We sculpted states, guarded them like eagles,

but we needed leaders, and the weakest
succumbed; laboured till backs cracked, sinews snapped.
A biopsy of their lives showed much was missing;
ascending to the ministry of their own fate,

they rammed down the door, no longer benign,
to carve off chunks of power, form councils.
Men bought and sold their way to the top
whilst others shared the status of amoebas.

Yet there was still a canyon between us.
We struggled like strangers; chose to unite
as comrades with blows, bullets and blood.
The end was brutal: the change was complete.

ASHLEY MCMULLIN

JOURNEY TO HILLY COUNTRY

On a bacon-crisp December morning,
My dad and I climbed steep Errington Road
With a rucksack-loaded lollop. Dawning,
Behind trees' skeletal silhouettes, glowed
The glaring-pink eastern rim of the sky;
House fronts, concealing their dwellers who snored
Within, rang with birds' shrill, musical cry.
Along the barracks, our icy breath poured
Forth in spiky gout of mist; so lonely,
Yet so close, as we trod the barren straight
Of Butt Road. We waited at the stop, slowly
Numbed with cold, before the coach arrived, late.

Westbound it took us, leaving the slumber
Of my hometown to join the grey, racing
Stretch of the A12. Hurrying under
The paling heavens striped with the lacing
Vapour trails of jet planes, we passed
Fields and farms, and small settlements which clung
To the roadside. All went by as in fast-
Forward mode: bursts of images among
Which the vast landscapes shifted each second,
Dropping back like discarded memories.
Towards noon, near Reading, rainclouds beckoned,
Whilst one old man muttered obscenities.

From the lashing rain we emerged, and crossed
An iron bridge over golden mud flats
Glistening with sunshine. Onwards, through lost
Valleys dressed in firs like green, bristling mats;
They vanished, as hilly Welsh countryside
Gave way to flooded fields and meadows, fed
By serpentine rivers, swollen and wide.
We soon joined the city's packed streets; ahead,
Lay our destination: Ninian Park.
Inside the ground, flags whipped and cracked with each
Wind-breath; as for the match, we were, as dark
Closed in, viewers of a dismal defeat.

Heading back, back to where we had begun,
With the night pressing in on the window,
Deep and oppressive. Slopes, once soaked in sun,
Drifted, barely visible in the glow
Of foggy headlights; like the maze of peaks
And summits in the mind, when trying to
Recall remnants of the past, which now leak –
Drop, by drop, by drop. As if through
Misted coach glass, I barely see those two
Figures on that fresh, lost December day:
Walking, in the bright dawning hours, into
The distance, slowly fading... walking away.

NINA BAHADUR

HEAT

It starts off straight.
You are well-mannered, a fish of a boy,
Cool in redbricked streets baked between lines
Marking us in and out.
In a choked café with tiled walls and the curtains closed you tell me
I like shapes of your legs in the dirt
And running circles round you
And your godhonest heartbeat and that's enough for me.
In black and breathless nights
I take your wrist, and I kiss, and the stars
Are just pedestrians and the frantic sun
A bystander in the grand scheme of things that is us.
We blaze on through the dust
And burn in every bright afternoon.

When the storm breaks the land learns to drink
And for blurred August weeks we're sewn in by the rain.
When it's all hung out to dry
Words drip from my lips, unsaid, I'm drowning,
And glass sunken in old windows makes the world
Seem a little stranger.

All autumn steam rises:
Washed out by the downpour, I let you go.
But there's a pale reminder cross-legged on your lawn,
Your flickering morning memory, like light on scales,
Of gasping for air, of skin on sheets.

RICHARD O'BRIEN

TEXTING IN CHURCH

Her fingers skim the keys before the mass begins;
the tone is mute in deference to God,
though those next up the pew still hear
the clicking that she doesn't try to hide.

It's Christmas-cold – the radiator's broken down –
the church looks like a thermal diagram,
sharp pink across the faces in the nave, a molten red
in the two corners where the patio heaters hum

like arsonists' umbrellas. Halfway through
'O Little Town of Bethlehem', the choir trills
an irritating descant and she stumbles on the notes
without support; next time, she sings too shrill,

too loud and out of key, as if to prove something,
reflecting as she does on how religion is the cufflink
of the world: ornate, sophisticated, useless,
and that no one noticed when she took it off.

The homily was shit. She came a beat behind
on the 'Amen's'; 'Our Father' never used
to end like that. She thinks about the last time
that she knelt like this; not in the house of God,

or even in a house; against a garden fence,
half-blind on wine, half past the point of caring
who he was or where he'd been, or if he thought
the wafer was the Body and the wine

really the Blood or just a metaphor; and she wondered
if Cava could be the Blood, if you could buy and bless
the Blood in Tesco Metro, if the vicar got to take
the wafer home, to chew a few herself if she got peckish,

had no Pringles and the village shop was closed.
And she wondered why those boys threw
sharpened stones over her fence, when the wafer, be it
Body or no Body, sogged down to tasteless water anyhow.

AMELIA PENNY

QUICKENING

There had been too many nights between warm walls for us,
Too much. The desiccated hollows of the house
Had lain like the sockets of dead joints for long enough,
Had held us, stuck like coins between old floorboards
As the cold was lying softly in the lees of leaf stacks,
And the sky was a scum skinning over the waters
Of gutters and drains.

And there came the day when the sycamore seedlings
Pushed their red roots from the workings of their wings
Into the rubble, and sniped
For the forests returning to England, lay
Like a swarm on the blank ground
When the sky was Roman glass above
The trees whose leaves hung rotting.

So we had to move, to break
The crust on the eyes of things, sick
Of watching the grey mornings stare
Through windows mapped in rain
Held desperately in frames, and swollen shut –

We forced them. Tugged and barged
And came out gasping as the panes began
To shift and snap.
Broke outwards. Burst. Like drowners
Cheating the sea, and choking, spitting
Gobbets of moth scales and mould
Gone ashy with age, over the hacked-down
Gardens whose wounds were newly seeping.

We woke the ladybirds which bled among the hinges,
Trickled out over the brass,
Carmine and gold, and left
The traces of their bitter, insect fear,
Yolk-yellow patches on the frost-peeled paint.
We breathed their bitterness, and felt it as we lay
Among them on the windowsills
And hung there,
Hurting.

CHARLOTTE GEATER

WE BEASTS

i

My hands had never skimmed your neck.
I hadn't felt the skin
of your lips. I did not know if you had dimples
but I had seen your eyes
and although I had not seen it often
I knew your tongue.

When you asked me, I hesitated.
I said yes.

You closed your eyes and spent hours
in the chair. I had not used razors before
and did not know that with one wrong stroke
I could cut you open. Forgive me,
I wanted my mouth to be
the first to sear that line.

ii

There are too many storms in your body.
Your hands are pale lightning
bolts; they strike my hair
and dash from me
to the street lamp, Orion's belt,
the highest part of my house.
If I could catch your cough
in my hands, I would keep it
trapped in the cage of my fingers
and let you breathe.

Rain causes nothing to change
inside your lungs. I hear the thunder
as you whoop and clap in the dark.

ANNA SAVORY

SESTINA 102 ; 26

And I saw everything and all shift but
 Subtly, with run-ons only loosely changed,
 No matter how apparent and with words,
 And one event (of little weight to me) formed lines,
 To the effect that nothings staid but that,
 All cycled, no change permanently made,

And based on one event, we met, he made
 Me read some book (all teddy bears and toffs) but,
 He seemed to like it, though he told me that
 He'd drifted off tradition, long since changed,
 Doubted return but still read prophesy in better lines,
 (Real vagueness as to which) I, sure he knew then, noted words,

They met again in Lourdes to hear gold words,
 And from station to station still to make,
 'their solitary way' in pious lines,
 And I, yet unconvinced, despite their 'but
 He looks the part for nothings solely changed'
 He was to be regained and that was that,

Given the depths of it, I confess that
 It had no bearing on me, far less than words,
 Noted 'a twitch upon the thread' and he was changed,
 Better or worse for it, changed, staid, he made
 A case for the suspicion that it's but
 A constant cycle now traced out in lines,

Curved subtle lines with runons constant lines,
 Which ultimately lead to their beginnings that
 Nothing is solely changed I'd heard that, but,
 Much changed, then back again, with words,
 Or chance or both or situation made,
 For clarity and revelation changed,

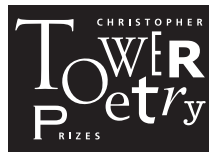
Ultimately though I saw the point, all changed,
 Or cycled rather, repeated in weak lines,
 In demonstration of the fact that ends made,
 But beginnings and his interim that
 Is surplus all, uneven beats and words
 Can find some pattern with that ebb and flow but...

Envoi,
 Like clothes he will have them changed that
 their boundary lines shall fall in pleasant places and his words
 made not meandering philosophy but quiet truth that changeth not.

Tower Poetry is a dynamic organization based at Christ Church, University of Oxford, which offers opportunities and resources for young British poets.

We aim to develop the role of poetry in education and enable new poets to showcase their talents through a series of exciting initiatives ranging from courses, competitions, and workshops to readings and publications.

Tower Poetry fosters the creative potential of young writers through high-profile projects such as: The Christopher Tower Poetry Prize and The Tower Poetry Summer School – an exciting and challenging residential course at Christ Church for 18–23 year-olds. Our acclaimed website features a thought-provoking mix of reviews, new poetry, news and events. An essential resource for young poets, teachers, and anyone interested in the future of poetry. *Tower Poetry Review* is published three times a year; TPR features the best of our website's reviews and poetry – and a little bit more! It can be downloaded from our website or sent as an e-mail attachment. (And we also publish books and pamphlets, organize readings, arrange seminars and workshops....)



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