



**THE
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ADA CAMBRIDGE POETRY PRIZE 2024

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POETRY AT ITS BEST ENGAGES READERS WITH ITS VITALITY, EXPRESSIVE FORCE, and experimentation, both on the page and in the way that words come together when spoken aloud. This year's Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize, with its record 195 entries, attracted poets from different walks of life keen to experiment with different writing styles. Their commitment exemplified the best of what poetry can offer.

The exceptional number of excellent poems made this year's ACPP difficult to judge. Apart from looking out for 'creativity, expressiveness and originality', our final judgements were made with a number of questions in mind: Does each poem work on multiple levels? Does it have complexity? Is the poem original in its voice, imagery and language? Is it well-crafted? Did we, on reading each work, want to go back for a second, third or further reread? And did such poems continue to disclose new shades of meaning to us?

When judging, there are so many other things to look out for: for example, imagery and heightened use of language, use of white space and layout, alliteration and enjambment, social realism and imagination. The many poems that made it to our longlists had multiple qualities that made it difficult to trim these lists down. And once we had our respective shortlists, it was extremely difficult to make our final painstaking decisions.

There are things to keep in mind for future submissions to the Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize. Poets should ensure they follow formatting guidelines: one of the criteria for this prize is presentation. Remember, judges are reading many entries. It makes their job easier if entrants format appropriately. Poems that are not formatted correctly are harder to read, and therefore can get overlooked unintentionally. Also, poems should be carefully proofread. The award-winning poems should all be poems that are publication-ready, which means font size, spacing, spelling, and so on, are important.

The following poems made our judging worthwhile. Congratulations to the writers of these poems, and to all who entered the competition. We hope that you continue to write, read, and talk poetry.

FIRST PRIZE

‘Fig’ by Stephanie Powell ‘Fig’ has an originality and conciseness that is deeply engaging. This poem works on complex, multiple levels. We kept returning to ‘Fig’. It stands out for its striking uses of imagery and metaphor, its sensory descriptions, and distinctive voice. There is a beauty in this poem that feels effortless and organic. The poem is completely realised and resolved in its form, and its content is seamlessly integrated. Delicate, yet surely crafted, there is not a word wasted in ‘Fig’. Compression and economy of language, combined with fresh and vital word choices, make this poem a great pleasure to read and to return to. Each time we did we discovered something new. ‘Fig’ has a moving and lyrical last line that stays with readers. Bittersweet tenderness, grief, and loss — our 2024 winner is both haunting and evocative.

RUNNER-UP

‘love hate sex death’ by Gareth Morgan *‘love hate sex death’* impressed with its originality and energy. From the first line movement is implied. Despite the cold the protagonist has finished their ‘sugar free powerade and moved on / to my cheesy hot dog roll’. There’s a switch to the imperative: ‘let’s go ... let’s work’. The power of observation is fused with a listlessness in which the protagonist hasn’t ‘felt so powerful in weeks’. Despite the complexity of observation, never did we beg the protagonist to slow down, as we journeyed through the build-up of images, contrasting from ‘rilke’s lyre ... and those assholes sauntering through’ and ‘unloved teeth’ to ‘houses ... sexier than warehouses’, which show a protagonist who refuses to die and wanting ‘to kill this monkish future’, with a knock-out last line, its use of irony sparing readers from indulgence. *‘love hate sex death’* is in lower case, except for a ‘worker named George’. Apart from the title, which is in italics, punctuation is used in the body of the poem. The rich imagery warrants rereading to allow further nuances to come through in this, our runner-up poem.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

‘Companion Planting’ by E.A. Gleeson ‘Companion Planting’ offers a profound and deeply felt engagement with parenthood, poetry and eco-poetics, history, and intertextuality. The themes are interwoven, inextricable, in the lived experience of the poem’s persona. They are rendered in visceral imagery, with a vitality of imagination and immersion. A knock-out last line of wisdom contains gravitas and hard-won experience and insight: ‘I ponder the value of a twosome, / ... their presence / a reminder of what we need to be taught, even if that is something /we do not want to learn’. The learnings in this poem are deep and from the very first line, we were drawn into its

meditative contemplations and the beauty of its language and thought: ‘Like the children, they tower into the sky’; ‘While I raised children, Ellen Bryant Voight raised poems’ — note ‘tower’ and ‘raised’ used here so effectively as verb, image and metaphor respectively. This poem is a joyous celebration of life, language/poetry and love, and it shows how these elements are richly embedded in land and home, and in each other.

‘Good Gifts from Above’ by **Richenda Rudman** ‘Good Gifts from Above’ has the confidence and lightness of touch that in time builds to a denouement that is quietly devastating and profoundly moving. What stands out most in this poem is the imagery — lovingly detailed and deeply grounded in potent visual action and gesture: ‘He had sent her / deep voices, sculpted hands / and nests’; ‘She smouldered, my mother’. There is also an understated sense of mystery and the numinous, conveying the transcendent in a deeply felt experience that goes beyond a reader’s own personal faith or perspective: ‘she wove her beliefs into a loom from her dreaming ... / until each one became a sign from God’. A deeply moving and original poem leaving us with a powerful final image of the sisters throwing the birds’ nests into the fire: ‘watching them collapse to flakes of ash / and seeing how the faint smoke finished, / disappearing above’.

‘A Mug From Goodwill’ by **Alexander Homoc** The first two stanzas of ‘A Mug From Goodwill’ stretch across the page, paragraph fashion, and the final stanza comprises two lines in verse formation. ‘A Mug From Goodwill’ is noteworthy for its concise expression, with not one superfluous word. The more one reads, the more the title comes into focus. This is a poem in which the narrator looks back (‘... so many precious things discarded and given away ...’), captured by a message on a mug, shattered by why the mug survives, thinking of taking action to liberate the previous owner of their condition but frozen by a reminder of what life holds. There is more, including the remarkable images: ‘An old record, two lovers who used to dance, ingrained in the grooves of the vinyl that now skips where they kissed’. And then there’s the ending, with shades of melancholy that drew empathy from both judges.

These poems so far were such compelling reads. There was more great poetry to come.

COMMENDED

‘Under the Clothesline’ by **Catherine Bateson** ‘Under the Clothesline’ is a fascinating blend of the domestic and the fantastic. A throwaway remark from the speaker’s husband (‘lighten up’) gives rise to an exuberant series of images as the speaker imagines leaving the ‘sagging line’ behind and ‘twirling skywards’ beneath a parasol or umbrella, evoking different reactions from those earthbound beneath her. The poem circles back to home and reality — but not quite ...

‘Williamstown Road’ by Hermina Burns ‘Williamstown Road’ cast a spell on the both of us. We referred to it constantly. A poem that consists of two sentences, the second, 20 lines, close to the length of the entire work, and just like the metaphor of the road it is alluding to, it drives forward, image building upon image, landmarks set in a time where there is no room for nostalgia. It is Christmas; old carols are being sung as we find Uncle Tom, ‘shell-shocked during the last war’ and drinking. There’s a finale that remained with us from the first reading, a desolation that continues to grip each time this work comes to mind and is reread.

‘First kiss, 12 or 13’ by Anne M. Carson ‘First kiss, 12 or 13’ exemplifies what the best poetry can do: form enhancement and illuminative meaning that captures voice and experience in distinctive ways. This poem is highly accomplished. It captures the uncertainty and social/sexual inexperience of its adolescent persona, who is pushed out into the world by an unexpected and unsettling encounter. ‘First kiss, 12 or 13’ is at its heart a powerful and moving portrait of a mother–daughter relationship and the intersection between desire, love and sexual encounters. Terrific and surprising word choices — and well-chosen use of alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia — give this poem a vitality and energy: ‘buttress’ [‘as buttress for me / ... it is me / she wants to buttress her’]; ‘clocks’; ‘a lick / flicks / into a small flame’. ‘First kiss, 12 or 13’ has a resonant, moving last line that really packs a punch. The poem looks great on the page, mirroring the persona’s inner turmoil — the chaos of pre-/pubescent experience, and the fractured, fraught mother-daughter dynamic, with its attendant gaps and lacks.

‘until the rest of it’ by Gemma van Loenen ‘until the rest of it’ is another poem we returned to regularly for its visual qualities and concise poetic imagery. In this year’s competition, there were a number of short poems that left a lasting effect with us. ‘until the rest of it’ is an evocative piece with images such as ‘... fat drops of rain spat on the roof’ and ‘when the storm cracked through brooding light’ — but as one reads on, there is more to come as one of the protagonists contemplates their moment of passing, juxtaposing present and future with a very fine ending (and title). Cat lovers will enjoy this piece.

‘Five O’Clock Practice’ by Kim Waters ‘Five O’Clock Practice’ has a fresh simplicity and directness that immediately engages. It does not show off; there are great depths to this poem and it is beautifully and carefully crafted. The poem draws us into its story, its characters, and its action, with vibrant imagery and acute moments of experience, past and present: ‘my sister / playing fast and loose with the keyboard’; ‘it leaked into every artery of the house’. Particularly striking in its use of extended metaphor, ‘Five o’Clock Practice’ uses economy of expression and form: ‘it was loud / and vociferous, a shark-round of quavers / circling their prey’. The poem’s economy of language offers a

very fine sense of pace and revelation. This is a powerfully evocative poem of memory that hints at unsettling subtext: ‘my heart drops an octave / as I recall the metronome’s ticking bomb / and the silence’. The poem reverberates with that final image of silence ‘just before the faulty fingering / of the final cadence chord’. A highly accomplished poem capturing the power of music and memory in a distinctive voice.

The following poems were highly accomplished works that we would like to specially mention: ‘After Yoga’ by Catherine Bateson, ‘Old woman, my Nan’ by Hermina Burns, ‘Emptiness’ by Al Turley, ‘White-Out’ by Rosemary Blake, ‘dysregulated’ by Andrea Louise Thomas, ‘Bones’ by Shannon O’Connell, ‘reading in silent union’ by Leone Gabrielle, ‘And I, in Arcady’ by Stephen Smithyman, ‘ever after’ by Robert Reid, ‘almost’ by Veronica Troup, ‘Reel to reel’ by Vasilka Pateras, ‘If I Were A Poet Laureate’ by Thuy On, ‘Duplex’ by Lesh Karan, ‘Motherhood — Year by Year’ by Kat Buttigieg, ‘Street Art’ and ‘Invasive’ by Suzi Mezei, and ‘Reversal’ by Darrelle Spenceley.