

2024 JUDGES' REPORT



POETRY REPORT 2024

Liz Berry



Writing poems, when the world feels full of darkness, is a beautiful and reviving act. Poetry is a way of reaching out, of seeking understanding and shared humanity, of finding light or summoning the courage to gaze into the dark. To know that so many of you were writing poems and sending them out into the world this spring fills me with hope. I want every poet who entered the Bridport Prize this year to know that I read your poems with tenderness; your work and brave spirits lit up my summer days.

The best thing about judging a competition is discovering thrilling, fresh, moving poems, the kind of poems which make you want to send them to everyone you know and say: look at this wonderful thing! This year's submission pile was full of poems like this. What a joy!

The worst thing about judging is having to choose

winners as in many ways it feels counter to all that I love about poetry - the community and connection, the sharing and encouraging of creativity. I always get down to about twenty poems and want to stop as they're all fantastic. So I try to think of it not as "which is best?" but rather which poems would I most like to share with you and shine a light on now.

So, here they are: beautiful and brilliant in the full beam of the winning glow. I hope you'll enjoy them as I did and find something that touches or delights you.

Highly Commended:

'Curlew'

This poem is a musical, linguistic delight. Chock-full of gorgeous language, it brings the curlew to us in fresh and unexpected ways.

'March Hare'

An elegant poem with a pleasing jumpy form, echoing the jaggy energy of the hare, this conjures the artist Van Gogh in his final months. The images are vivid and the desperation of the painter's illness makes a heartbreaking end.

'The Crack in the Road has Spoken'

I'm always drawn to strange poems and this one has strangeness to spare. I couldn't stop thinking about it: its dark folkloric imagery, what it meant, whose voice we were hearing...

'The Glass of Milk as a Western Standoff'

Whip smart and swift, this poem brilliantly and cleverly explores a moment of domestic struggle as parent and child face off over a glass of milk. The ending is so powerful. It's rare to find a poem that handles the subject of disordered eating with such sharpness and skill.

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'Rabbit'

I so enjoyed this poem: lush and jittery, capturing all the wild energy of the sister who moves beyond the borders of the domestic world.

'Pantoum for the Gujarati Aunties of North West London'

How wonderful to discover a pantoum in the pile! I really enjoyed the vivid world this poem conjured – the colour and dance – and the way it moved seamlessly to the ordinary grit of life. Lovely stuff.

'Passerine'

This felt like a young woman's poem and I loved its visceral messy voice and the complicated chaos of the age it explores. It reminded me of Kim Addonizio's early poems. The mother in me wanted to reach into this poem and hold its speaker tightly!

'The Old Country is Dying'

There was something of the folksong about this curious, elegiac poem. I liked its easy, almost conversational voice and the lush moments of lift its nature images bring.

'How to Survive A Road Traffic Accident'

All the messy bravery and disappointment of being young are here, along with the smart rueful voice of experience. That last stanza is just brilliant!

'Earth Day'

Ah I was glad of this poem of gentle wonder and questioning. In a time which feels so overwhelming it's good to be reminded of the beauty of the world and its need for our awe.

Third:

'Hope in Three Syllables'

This was just the poem I needed in the complicated, heavy, summer days when it found me. Plain-speaking and moving, with not a word wasted, it's a reminder of the bravery we show when we allow ourselves to hope. I can imagine readers sharing this poem with those they love and taking comfort from it on dark days

Second:

'Ode to Io'

A beautifully crafted, powerful poem which brings together myth, astronomy, history and love. From its bold opening address, it sustains a dark, forceful energy as we move towards the "next hurtling place" of loss.

First:

'Other Words For Dancefloor'

I adored this fizzy, clever, whirling list poem which conjures all the energy, thrill and heartache of the dancefloor. An elegy for a student nightclub (joy!) but also an elegy for youth, this poem is a delight to read and I know many readers will connect with it too. Its panicky, urgent ending conjures perfectly the ecstasy and grief of being young.

SHORT STORY REPORT 2024

Wendy Erskine



I don't know if you have ever shopped in TK Maxx (or, for those in the US, TJ Maxx.) It's the type of store where it's absolutely pointless to have in mind something specific - a black coat, say. More sensible is to go with no particular expectation and rather, a receptiveness to whatever prospect might present itself as worthy of attention, be it a jumbo box of Korean sheet-masks, an angle-poise lamp, a velour tracksuit or kitchen knives. If this analogy does not seem facetious, I feel similarly about the Bridport Prize and short story competitions in general. I could blithely tell you what I am looking for: emotional truth, complexity of experience; tautness; innovation in form; the weight of the unspoken; fully realised worlds and so on. But in reality I have no idea what I'm looking for until it presents itself.

When reading, I tried to take each story on its own terms, approaching it with the flimsiest of expectations about what a story is and what it should do. Speculative fiction, the quotidian, the bizarre, the experimental, the traditional, the pained, celebratory,

baffling, capricious, political, apocalyptic: there was no hierarchy of significance. I liked being surprised. Yet I also enjoyed people bringing their own sensibility to familiar contexts.

In terms of the winners and highly commended stories, it's important to remember that personal preference should not masquerade as objective fact. I cannot say with conviction that these stories are the 'best.' That would be delusional. It just so happens that I like them. Another judge at another time might have made different selection from the same stories. Hell, at another time, so might I. And perhaps I should also say, that although someone like Blindboy might, with extraordinary generosity, have described me as 'the greatest living short story writer', I have never myself ever won a competition of this kind. I'm aware too that some short stories acquire their power from being part of the gestalt of a collection, rather than being knockout standalone texts. Ultimately, so much is a question of taste and in this case, it's mine. But, all of that said, I feel so very proud of the Highly Commended and winning stories.

'Blue' tells a story of responsibility and projected escape. It's sharp, condensed and so alert to detail.

The story **'EDC'**, short for Every Day Carry, features Mitchell, who enjoys videos detailing the essential items that people have routinely on their person. It's a beautiful paean to the world of stuff and the talismanic qualities items can hold. And yet it's also about being a partner and being a parent.

'Grace', unshowy, unsentimental and ostensibly about a dog being put down, offers an unflinching portrait of a marriage. There is a hardness to this story, a steely stoicism, that I adored.

In **'Honey'**, an 'idiot woman' brings honey cakes to a man who sits on a small hill. Skilful in its alternating

Wendy Erskine

perspectives and its concrete, vivid language, it has the power and timelessness of myth.

'That Summer' controls so effectively a large and disparate group of characters as it delineates so movingly the multiplicities of loss over a particular summer.

'The Butterfly Boy', written so cleanly and precisely, documents teen girlhood, swimming pools, rivalries with enviable clarity and intensity.

'The Second Coming' about Jesus returning to take his position in a high street made me laugh more than any other story. Who would have thought Jesus would have an AC/DC tattoo? And yet this story is serious in what it has to say about consumerism, protest and injustices.

'They Cling Tightly' moves deftly and assuredly across different temporal lines as it tells a moving story about two brothers. Ideas of connection, responsibility and letting go receive delicate, careful treatment.

A daring, technically demanding story, **'Thump Thump'** is narrated by someone in an enclosed space, sipping a negroni. It's compelling and very skilful.

It's brilliant to come across a story with great dialogue and that's what I found in **'Western'** between the narrator, her mother and her boyfriend. Complexities of identity, tradition and place are explored in an illuminating, engaging manner.

And so in third place is **'The Offer'** about a trip to a firm that offers payment for those who want to forego treatment for terminal illness. It manages to do so many things: there's a deeply convincing set-up; a cool satire of bureaucracy and a compelling consideration of how much – or little – life amounts to.

'After the Fall' is a pitch-perfect, beautifully controlled story about the relationship between an ageing, married couple. But it's also about how and why we construct narratives. The ending of this story is superb in terms of its balance. It is a very deserving runner up.

And finally, in first place, **'Zanzibar Blue.'** This is a story of remarkable lucidity and poise. The narrator, involved in academic study, stays in a guesthouse run by an Afrikaner, Papa, who intends to build a hotel called Zanzibar Blue. Exploitation, violence, the status of the outsider: our narrator observes it all with compelling nuance.

Judging the Bridport Short Story Prize was a privilege and actually surprisingly moving. There was something to admire in every single story.

Thank you.

FLASH FICTION REPORT 2024

Jasmine Sawers



What an honor to be asked to judge one of the finest flash contests in contemporary literature. The Bridport Prize attracts some of the most skillful writers working today, and they certainly did not make choosing between them easy. I am always blown away by the ingenuity and diversity of flash; while there is always room for traditional structures, the compressed form demands both writer and reader conceptualize narrative in new and exciting ways to deliver the punch to the gut found in the best fiction. For me, a surefire way to achieve potency within concision is to make the most of a story's unique voice.

Each of the highly commended stories spoke to me in a clear voice that gripped my emotions without devolving into sentimentality. In *'Flat Five,'* the second person narrator is so assured and confident while being acted upon by an outside force that will be their downfall. In *'The story we will one day never tire of telling you,'* the first person direct address narration explores the thwarted longing for a child alongside the surreality of blind parental love. In *'My Aunt Keeps a Spider in Her Hairnet,'* the first person narrator is not our protagonist but a witness to her actions, heightening the loneliness that pervades the prose. In *'Chicken,'* the second person narration is deployed expertly to enact alienation born from trauma. In *'Jenny's mum tells lies,'* the child narrator delivers

nuance beyond her ken amid the frustration of being at the mercy of self-absorbed adults.

The visceral evocation of pain, betrayal, and self-obliteration sets *'Love Bite'* apart from other stories of infidelity. The speculative bent serves a unique emotional realism: our protagonist would do anything to keep her husband's affections, but in doing so, destroys herself. Love, in this story, is consumption, is annihilation, is disappearance.

With its unique form, *'Eulogy of Henry Rowley, 1961-2024 (Notes)'* layers the oft-tread story of the death of a partner with gentle humor, a touch of resentment, and the quiet tragedy of getting older without one's beloved. The protagonist, self-deprecating and flinching from his own devastation, preoccupied with making sure others are kept comfortable in the face of his grief, shines even from his place in Henry's shadow.

On my first pass through the stories, I read them by order of submission date, oldest to newest. This meant that I read *'Enough'* last. When you read something last, there is a great deal stacked against it: your eyes and your mind are fatigued, the excellent pieces you read prior are crowding your brain and competing for your attention, the piece is quite literally being compared to more stories than any of the others. And yet when I read *'Enough,'* I knew immediately that it was the winner. It is a masterclass in expressing the unspeakable, in employing voice to shield and deflect, in exposing exactly the vulnerability the protagonist is trying so desperately to deny. The real story slithers between the lines, a creeping dread whose truth breaks over the reader with a chill even though the damning words are never uttered. In under 200 words, *'Enough'* evokes fear, anxiety, hatred, and panic while exercising great restraint and never sacrificing the fineness of the writing. Even the absence of a full stop at the end carries meaningful narrative weight. If Ishiguro wrote flash, I believe it would look something like this.

Each of these stories defies expectation and imparts a heartache that lingers, all the heavier for their brevity. The best flash is honed into a bullet: it's in and out before you realize you've been hurt.

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS FIRST NOVEL AWARD 2024

Ross Raisin



From the very first line, the sentence-by-sentence flow of this year's winner, *'The Legatees'*, is electric. This is a novel that courses with vulnerability and humour, mischief and sorrow, as we follow its narrator, Joyce, through the early, numbed progress of grieving for her lover – a celebrated artist whom we come to understand groomed her from a much younger age. It is through sophisticated storytelling, though, not salaciousness, that we become drawn into her world: through subtle shifts in the atmosphere; descriptions that spear the particularity of a moment; interactions that are by turns mortifying and very funny.

All of the relationships in *'The Legatees'* are drawn with nuance and originality. I love that the novel never does the obvious thing. The characters are always behaving like themselves – never like characters I recognise from other books; behaving always (to borrow one of my well-worn teaching catchphrases) with plausible surprise – whether in the decision to escape from a dinner party, or in a smaller action such

as Joyce studying a doodle that someone has made of her and judging the actions of her cartoon self.

That dinner party scene is worth another mention, because it is fantastic. A cake-slice of art-world social awkwardness, in its depiction of sinister pretension and desperation, a place where people behave with 'brisk professionalism masquerading as bonhomie'.

This is, in one sense, a novel about art, and the curation of legacy, the manipulative sleight of an artist's hand. But, moreover, it is a novel about a woman in limbo, searching, as she attempts to set straight the account of her deceased lover, for an agency in her own life that circumstance, and the control of others, have until now held from her.

It is no easy thing to write a child's voice that feels both original and believable – which is what the runner-up, *'This is About an Alligator and Nothing Else'*, manages to do. And I don't imagine it will surprise you to learn that the novel is, in fact, about more than an alligator. It is about a snake too, for one thing (and that's a scene which I am not going to forget in a hurry). It is also, minutely and engagingly, about Florida: a 'place shaped like a gun'; a place of sticky heat and themed birthday bibles and chunky chilli powder home fries.

And also, with effective background menace, about corporate malevolence. A buddy novel to the backdrop of a giant sugar company, which offers bribes to the locals to not talk about all their doctor appointments; a community whose little children chat over their school lunch about all the loved-ones they have lost to big business.

Part vivid family drama about coming of age in the 90s, part literary ghost story, *Babygirl* is about May, a young woman who is left to bring up her niece following the death of her sister. Haunting, intimate

Ross Raisin

and sharply observed, the novel explores themes of motherhood, female survival, and what is inherited and lost across four generations of a family of women.

'Bound in Shallows' offers a view of a future in which the land has been taken over by sea and salt. On a boat, a couple's intimate relationship is disrupted by the arrival of a man who threatens the balance of their dynamic, and by a sudden pregnancy. Deftly drawn, with characters we root for and want to survive, the author of this manuscript elegantly sets up a dystopia where the wind carries hope, and we will the characters forwards, into and through the dangers around them.

'The River is a Brown God' brilliantly evokes 1830s Texas, when Americans were the illegal aliens, flooding over the Sabine River into the Mexican Republic. This is a novel which also knows exactly what story it wants to tell and is able to impressively keep its focus as it develops. All the judges were impressed by the author's ability to create a setting which is both vivid and visceral, as well as conjuring up a piece of history which feels authentic and alive. There's a cinematic quality to the scene-setting which draws us in as readers, right from the first sentence. An impressive piece of work.



2024

POETRY WINNERS

Judge: Liz Berry

FIRST

Other Words for Dancefloor

Rosalind Easton

SECOND

Ode to Io (Galileo's Song)

Melissa Knox Evans

THIRD

Hope in Three Syllables

Chrissy Banks

HIGHLY COMMENDED



March Hare

Francesca Duffield

That glass of milk as a Western standoff

Catherine Wilson Garry

Pantoum for the Gujarati Aunties of North West London

Roshni Goyate

Earth Day

Luisa A. Igloria

The Crack in the Road has Spoken

Joanne Key

Passerine

Clare Labrador

The Old Country is Dying

Shanna McGoldrick

Curlew

Tom McLaughlin

How to Survive a Road Traffic Accident

Charlotte Salkind

Rabbit

Amy Ward



2024 SHORT STORY WINNERS

Judge: Wendy Erskine

FIRST

Zanzibar Blue

Joe Bedford

SECOND

After the Fall

Andrew Laurence

THIRD

The Offer

T. N. Eyer



HIGHLY COMMENDED

The Second Coming

Houssam Alissa

Thump Thump

CJ Bowman

Blue

Linnhe Harrison

Honey

Kenneth Havey

Kat Nugent

Western

Grace

Emily Rinkema

That Summer

Anna Round

EDC

John Tait

The Butterfly Boy

Annabel White

They Cling Tightly

Angela Wipperman



2024 FLASH FICTION WINNERS

Judge: Jasmine Sawers

FIRST

Enough

Mike Kilgannon

SECOND

Eulogy of Henry Rowley, 1961-2024 (Notes)

Jaime Gill

THIRD

Love Bite

Karen Whitelaw



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Jenny's mum tells lies

Sally Curtis

Flat Five

Emma Levin

My Aunt Keeps a Spider in her Hairnet

Mairghread McLundie

The story we will one day never tire of telling you

Adam Z. Robinson

Chicken

Alison Wassell



2024

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS FIRST NOVEL AWARD

Judge: Ross Raisin

FIRST

The Legatees

Laura Allsop



RUNNER-UP

This is about an Alligator and Nothing Else

Anna Dempsey



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Babygirl

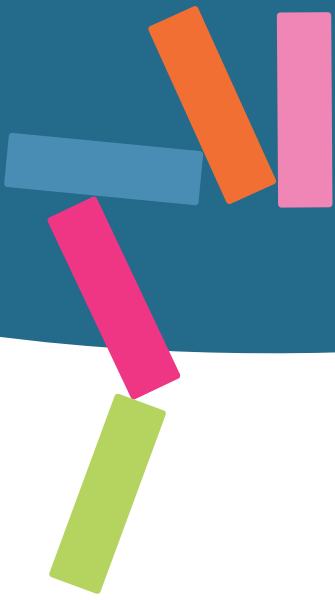
Charlotte Cole

Bound in Shallows

Alison Theresa Gibson

The River is a Brown God

Mónica Ibarra Parle



YOUNG WRITER AWARD



Presented to the highest placed writer aged 16 to 25 in the competition each year.

WINNER

Flat Five

Emma Levin

THE DORSET PRIZE



Presented to the highest placed writer from Dorset in the competition each year.

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WINNER

Jenny's mum tells lies

Sally Curtis