

POEMS

by the winners of
THE POETRY COMPETITION FOR EKO



Drawing by John Hegley

With Contributions from
THE JUDGES

John Hegley • Rachel Pantechnicon
Francesca Beard • John Tozer

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The cover drawing is of John Hegley's '*Monsieur Robinet*', whose latest adventures have been published by Donut Press.

**The Winter Outing of the Woolhope Naturalists
Field Club, December 1870**

Lydia Macpherson

The ladies of the party are helped over the stile
by whiskered botanists fond of a well turned ankle.
Miss Taylor draws a notebook from her beaded reticule
and writes "The bunch of mistletoe was so large
that it could be exceedingly well seen from the lane".

The Reverend Johnson climbs the ladder
"placed with thoughtful consideration" amid banter
from the men about Druids, golden sickles
and garlanded white yearling bulls.

The Reverend drops the felted sticky bundle
and "small sprays of the heaven born plant
unpolluted by any touch of earth" are given out
to "all the ladies present". Miss Taylor holds
the wishbone sprig with its smeary fruit.
Her whalebone stays are biting, her chilblains
ache, her hem is iced with mud. She smiles
(Mama says she must always smile).
In the dwindling light the botanists are advancing.

Heart Surgeon Cooking

Liz Loxley

No wonder he takes such care
preparing his instruments,
guiding the knife through its sharpener;
a red pepper weighted in his palm,
that first incision, such precision
that it hinges apart in perfect halves
he steadies each chamber
as he strips the veins
rinses his board straight away
before the blood can stain.

Ship in the Bottle

Clive Pig

When Grandad died
he was toasting bread on the electric fire
and when his heart stopped
the cork popped out of the bottle on the mantelpiece
and sea spurted into the living room.

The ship's horn boomed
and a toby jug toppled from the shelf
and sank bubbling to the carpet.

Grandad was bobbing up and down
drifting towards the window
but a seagull's cry
woke the tattooed mermaid on his chest.

She slipped from his skin
and swam with him into the bottle
and laid him gently on the bridge.

And when she kissed him
his eyes opened
and he stood and took the helm.

A whistle blew, the engine started.
He raised the inky anchor
on his forearm,
waved farewell
and sailed across the seven seas.

And when I take the cork out of the bottle
I smell the steamer's smoke,
I taste the tang of sea,
I hear the seagull's cries
and know the ship
that Grandad made
will one day come for me.

Wales in May

Justine Knowles

Wales in May,
The greenest place on Earth.
The hedgerows wear white lace like summer brides
And you, my grumpy angel, at my side.

Eleven years,
Our little car speeds on,
Through wooded vales where rocky rivers run.
We take a few wrong turnings, pray for sun.

Mountain roads,
We lose ourselves in cloud,
On moorland gold with gorse and bracken-brown,
Where sheep stand in the road and stare us down.

Five mile walk,
Where cuckoos chime the hours
In bluebell haze we clamber mossy walls
And hear the distant roar of waterfalls

Thirty-nine,
My birthday brings the sun.
The opal shores of breezy Mumbles bay
Where Dylan came to drink his blues away.

Homeward bound,
We pause in bookish Hay
Where orphaned volumes hunch in dusty rows,
I search for poetry and you for prose.

The Follow-on

Richard Gaunt

As the fateful roller turns, the openers get started.
It hadn't moved like a ball: went right for us, angry as a lost wasp.
It was a stitched missile, it was a rosy leather apple shied overarm
by spiteful gravity; behind our wafer helmets, our marshmallow pads,
we'd melted through an innings, softening in the sun.
It was like the trenches, only we get ice-creams, then another go.
Strokes that notched time's passage round the clockfaced ground,
flick of wrist, regular commute of bat, diagrammed start to finished pose,
things we'd already done, day in, day out for yonks
– like walk the kids or bath the dog or fill a trolley
went wrong, which is a worry – because that's all there is to do.
Just white knights fighting air, just pairs of windy drunks
who need the loo, fidgeting and flinching at the crease.
We can only take it from the top. Do the same, but somehow different.

The sun slumps beside the gassy lads on the back row of the stand.
Spectators reach for put-by glasses, exhume their buried sarnies.
That pitch was hard as a B-road, summer tarmac at eleven,
boiled down to marmalade with bitter rinds of spin by lunch.
The dressing rooms are swish here, the tea urn's still lukewarm,
no-one but the stung perfectionist at number three
who shunned the buns to run through cover drives
is really keen to trudge back out, hear sham applause rewind,
a bit more weary, all doubt recalled, memories of failure
warming up in the limbs, busily perfecting error.
OK, let's have another go, then. You can only do what you do
at this late stage, copy out again the copied grip and offer up
the same blunt answer you've been taught to each delivery.
So, this time round, as per plan. The same again, but somehow better.

The Colonists

Graham Burchell

Termites had a home in the school playground.
A dwarf mountain, dead as a planet's crust
polished by kid's arses. It's a play thing -
more fun than a slide or a swing: a place
to make thunder, claim victories, wave flags.
No wonder shade-loving termites within
grew wings, and flew their fat queen far away.

Maybe Mars is made from the same red spoil,
a free-spinning termite mound, sphered
by friction with the invisible in space.
Let us go there, stamp our earthly feet,
crack it open, unlock its water, greet
its workers and soldiers, offer the earth
before we take it and dig out its queen

Storytelling

Sharon Black

I want to own books that bear the marks
of readers they have owned:

pages dog-eared at the corners where sleep
folded one day into the next,

the raised arm of an exclamation,
a passage underlined,

marginal notes scrawled like starlings
in a strip of cloudless sky.

My books should flaunt their influence,
wear emotions on their sleeve:

a spine etched deep with wrinkles, bound
with threads like broken veins,

a tidemark where bathwater crept
and carried off a thought bubble,

coffee stains and nicotine,
the imprint of a mug.

So take this tattered paperback,
disappear within it please

and later I will read you, track you
down between the lines,

hold the ghost of you, undisturbed
by chapters, heroes, plot;

I will listen to its stories whispered
from among the soiled sheets,

revealing parts of you more intimate
than any lover's words.

Phosphorescence (for Adele)

Aileen La Tourette

Better than moonlight, which can go either way, we know,
- we've both taken those paths way out past the breakers,

- something simpler and rarer I first saw in Greece that
summer we were all there, even our parents, still upright,

- but you'd gone home by then, back to school. It was Fall,
the wind whipped off the Aegean, you had to walk backwards

when the sand blew, or up by the palms in the ink-dark night.
That night the palms were wild. I bent down to see what looked

like neon light or kerosene burning in a little pool, touched it,
then cupped a handful of licked-lollipop green in my lime gloves,

ladled ripped liquid lace soft as kid or webs over the two people
I was, thick dark palm leaves swishing Zorro-swords above the beach,

- phosphorescence and pregnancy. I'd forgotten till today, that odd
moment on the beach in Greece, and another one up here in Merseyside

when a friend called and we slipped over a wall into an Irish Sea,
I swear, gone green as the beer in New York on St Patrick's Day -

we wore the waves, screamed when we saw our arms and legs like
creatures from outer space. There are so many greens, you know?

More than any other shade, I sometimes think. I don't know whether
you agree. We can decide when we walk in Central Park in July.

Meanwhile, I'm beaming you handfuls of green glow, Scotty, an
antidote from the stored warmth of the sea, Irish or Aegean,

after you've been for your second-to-last radiation session
in the room with the bank vault door they lock you in alone

on the Frankenstein table. You were already tired after chemo,
working all the way through because of the insurance and because

you're you. Now there's today and tomorrow to go. I've used up all
the obscene cards I can lay my hands on, so I'm sudsing handfuls of

phosphorescence over you, soft as bubbles in your bath water when
you were a baby chuckling your great, deep, phosphorescent chuckle.

Remember Plastic Bags?

Phyllis Higgins

Discarded plastic bags –
ubiquitous they were back then,
found lying flaccid, placid on the ground
in town and countryside and coast.
Their gypsy spirits suffered drastic sags;
just down and out sad sacks
all waiting a chance to bum a ride on the wind.

When air-borne in triumph,
they'd be reborn as billowing balloons.

Inflated by their own importance,
they'd cock a snook at the earth.
These 'can't catch me' racers, these exuberant flyers
would breeze across the sky like ersatz high scudding clouds.

But spiky branches with their reaching gibbet fingers
would snag them as they flew.

Free spirits captured: plastic bags in trees.
Once icons of the time, consigned to oblivion now,
a sight no longer seen.

How apt it was that Nature's trees should seize
and trap these enemies of the earth.

Impatient to escape they'd flap and snap with rage.
Some squirmed free to soar again,
but lingering, sad fates awaited those pinioned pennants
strung up high out of reach.

Their strength now is their weakness,
decaying by inches to wind-whipped shredded ribbons;
lank, colour-drained white flags limply surrendering,
each impotently longing to fly again,
but tried for eco crimes and
condemned to hang as plastic bags in trees.

Dusky

Dorothy Fryd

I sat by the rhubarb patch, knowing sooner or later,
I'd be asked to nurse a brother injured in action
by invisible bullets. I'd already scribbled red-crosses
onto crepe paper, transformed my clothes into uniform.

I carried a plastic stethoscope in my lunch box,
carved medication notes onto tree trunks,
pressurised wounded arms, removed bandannas
from sweaty heads, replaced them with daisy chained crowns.

The light reigned over us; the last trip of freedom
against wooden gunshot, our feet falling
into the rabbit holes we could no longer see to avoid.
Those frenzied moments between dusk and being forced inside.

Leaving

John Elinger

When she was dead and gone, the dust
slowly descended on her bed-
side table in a gentle mist,
blurring the relics – book, half-read,
with bookmark pointing to the place
she'd reached; her folded spectacles;
delicate hearing aids; a glass
of musty water; her heart pills.

The props of life accumulate
with age – bed-jacket, diary
(with entries carefully crossed out),
her walking stick, the front-door key
tied to a loop of string she used
to hang around her neck – each one
functus officio, released
from duty, now her life is done.

Beneath the book, half-hidden, lies
a simple ring, plain gold, worn thin,
never removed till now. She chose,
though long widowed, to wear it in
memory of her marriage, as
a sign – aware that, once interred,
what each of us takes with us is
nothing at all – she'd kept her word.

Curious Beasts

Jenny Morris

An anteater moves as if kissing the ground.
An elephant female must lead every herd.
Sad lemmings swim west until each one is drowned.
A seal will weep tears when Scotch bagpipes are heard.
Sea otters afloat sleep with paws over eyes.
A wombat's desire is to snore all the day.
A mouflon will whistle when he is surprised.
A camel smells water from two miles away.
Giraffes have no voice and wear knobs on their heads.
A rat can roll eggs which he shoves with his chin.
The coatis fall down and pretend to be dead.
Hyenas crack granite-like bones and then grin.
Racoons are quite fussy and wash all their food.
An elk's overhanging top lip gives him poise.
The jaguar males sing 'pu, pu,' when they're lewd.
All sloth bears slurp ants with a greedious noise.
A porcupine rattles its quills at its foes.
All these are the things that the zoo keeper knows.

Lastmaker

Frances Green

It was his first, this last, and best;
the knuckles, tendons, toes laid bare,
a deep-grained hornbeam foot caressed
and smoothed with fine sand-papered care.

Strong toes, long tendons flexed and spare,
a walker's foot; his finger traced
the lines of polished, finished wear
and knew their purpose, pulse and pace.

A walker's foot: his fingers laced
the knotted instep, high-boned arch
and felt the muscles' stretch and brace
through pilgrimage, through long day's march.

And some real instep, high-boned arch
from this worked hornbeam, leather-dressed,
for years had walked: to pray, to march...
out from his first, this last, and best.

In a Gansey

Edward Doegar

I

The monastic scratch of wool at the neck,
against my tender skin,

and yet, always the re-worn feel of it. Heavy on,
it thickens my movements feeling the crease

of my elbow. Its elastic return finds its own shape
on my shoulders. The natural grease

(sufficient for showers) seals in its collected scent:
last Autumn, seaweed and toast, bonfire smoke,

then coffee, sheep and cologne.

II

They were workmen's clothes. Woven
by fishermen's wives, each bore

their wearer's initials. Across the chest a fortnight
could fashion the braided skill

of their village's pattern. More than a whimsy of thread,
this was so they could tell them apart, so

as the fishermen wound up on the shore,
bloated beyond recognition,

their family could bury the dead.

III

Mine reads of Whitby, as my wife's does
of Scarborough; and though we're neither natives

we each belong to our own. So this gift for our wedding,
that my mother had us measured for,

betrays its intention: as if our gansies should serve
as her Dad's does, twenty years his – seven hers,

not just a symptom of preference
but as an example, through its tight-knitted testament,

of the durability of wool.

Notes on Contributors

Paul Stephenson

Alison was born
Brian spent his early

Chloe has worked
Dan devotes his spare

Eliza is the author
Fabian has been a member

Gill divides her
Henry is currently completing

Isabel was a stand-up
Joel once chaired

Kirsten was an inner-city
Lars centres on

Marion lives between
Nick is now

Olga came first
Pablo continues to

Quinn was recognised
River runs

Saskia often gives
Tod recently received

Uma submitted
Victor used to

Wendy was highly
Xavier appears often

Yolanda emphasises
Zach will be.

Two Tellies

Joseph Gillett

And ours was the policy
Of ploughing on regardless
Regardez-less, as in – not looking.

And here we are -
Like two tellies in the one room:
Unnecessary, and getting in the way
A pair of lifeless heavy squares

Without legs to walk over
Without arms to embrace
Without hands to wipe our tears away

Our screens remain unwashed
Both completely turned off

No one watches us anymore.

Fireclown

John Fox

Fireclown's in the garden
Keep your mother out of sight.
A painted beast that smells of yeast
is looking in our window.
Phone the Council
Phone the Health
Phone the Mortgage
Phone the Telly
and the Official Speaking Clock.

He might empty slops on the daisies on our lawn.
He might steal our babies in the hours before dawn.
He might drive our car over cliffs in the night.
He might bang a drum and give us all a fright.

Now Fireclown's in my dreams
Nothing seems quite right.

His tongue is spiced with reptile juice
His ribs with fossil scales
His megalithic spine is ringed
with fins of southern whales.

He burns the regimented sinews in the cod roes of my brain.
He burns the book-rack history of the segments in my back.
He burns the polished objects in the front room of my life.
He burns the pearly anchors on the twin set of my wife.

Fireclown's in the garden
Keep your mother out of sight.
Fireclown's in the garden
Now nothing isn't right.

(Unbridled) Guillemot

John Hegley

I'm a guillemot
I use my skill a lot
I get the fish out of the wet
I eat my fill a lot.
I live on ledges
vertical edges
eating-wise, I do not know what veg is
Don't give me sherbet
give me a turbot
my appetite for fish I cannot curb it.
Here's lines more in the manner of George Herbert:
The fish, it swimmeth, unaware
and, rumbled, down I tumble to my prey,
to pluck it forth, my instinct, I obey,
from water to the stifling air,
I'll whip the little whipper-snap away.
I'm a guillemot,
so you don't thrill a lot?
Well, listen humans, very soon you will a lot.
Did you know that I can go so deep
I've been seen from the porthole of a submerged submarine,
sixty meters under?
I don't think so.
Miss it and blink so
I come in hard and I'm able to sink so.
I'm a guillemot I know the drill a lot
I drill into the drink and get the drink and not the ink upon my quill a lot.

(Continued . . .)

I don't do nesting,
when I'm resting
I can sleep while I am standing on one leg,
and so it doesn't roll off
when I stretch my wings or stroll off
I've got an egg that's eccentrically weighted so it rolls around in circles
and doesn't fall over the edge of a cliff.
I do my perchin
and my researchin
then underneath I go
I'm no sea-urchin
I'm a guillemot
I do my speccy reccy from my rocky window sill a lot
I am homeless
but I'm not gormless,
I can go so quick it's almost like I'm formless
I'm a guillemot
I find the fishes tend to lose one-nil a lot,
but I take only what I need
I'm not a greedy bird.
I am sustainable.
Self restrainable.
I am a guillemot.
I don't eat Trill a lot.
I'm a guillemot.
Am I not?

Hooting In The Dormitory

Rachel Panttechnicon

Have you forgotten those nights in the dormitory?

Didn't we have a hoot?

Hooting like owls on the end of a promontory,
each night eight hours of unlimited jollity -

Didn't we have a hoot?

Part One:

When Gwendoline brought a tree into school -
into the dorm, a tree -

and we disguised it as one of the girls,
smuggled it into Geology.

Mrs Septimus didn't suspect us, not for one second,
until

"Will that girl with the colony of spoonbills
up in the tip-topmost bough of her uppermost branches
please see me after the lesson.

And do take off that ridiculous No Poaching sign."

Hoot hoot hoot hoot
hooting in the dormitory

Part Two:

When Jennifer brought a hermit into school -
an anchorite, if you will -

and we disguised him as one of the girls,
smuggled him into Spanish Conversation.

Mrs Septimus didn't suspect us, not for one second,
until

"Will that girl on the pallet of straw
with her head crudely cushioned on a stack of Old Moore's
Almanacs please see me after the lesson.

And do stop fashioning rudimentary furniture
from tea-chests. Wad of dry bread - spit it out."

Hoot hoot hoot hoot
hooting all night in the dormitory
except at midnight when we're feasting in the dormitory -
feasting on yeast-extract and jam-sandwiches,
crisps and Dundee cake, piping hot.

Spoonbill paté? Bit of straw?

Oh go on then, why not?

The Poem that was really a List

Francesca Beard

The spade that was really a symbol.
The queen that was really a son.
The king who was really a rock-star.
The madman that was really God.

The milkman that was really dad.

The waitress who was really an actor.
The actor who was really an artist.
The artist who was really a pornographer.
The photographer who was really a pornographer.

The small boy who was really a helicopter.

The car that was really a toy.
The toy that was really a bribe.
The toy poodle that was really a baby.
The baby that was really a last ditch attempt.

The cafe latte that was really a milky coffee.
The soup that was really a meal in itself.
The studio flat that was really a bed-sit.
The short cut that was really a cul-de-sac.

The nine-to-five that was really a ball and chain.
The pain-free diet that was really a cash-loss weight gain.
The commercial success that was really a sell-out failure.
The check that was really in the mail.

The leaked statement that was really a press release.
The statistic that was really a cooked book.
The one night stand that was really a date rape.
The mercy fuck that was really an act of love.

(Continued . . .)

The apology that was really an excuse.
The excuse that was really a screw you.
The anecdote that was really an extended slap in the face.
The helping hand that was really a kick in the teeth.
The stiff upper lip that was really a cold-shoulder.
The last laugh that was really an own goal.

The little bird that was really a can of worms.
The fresh start that was really a wrong turn.
The youthful radiance that was really soft focuses.
The race riot that was really a political protest.

The spiritual journey that was really an ego trip.
The ego trip that was really a spiritual journey.
The inner child that was really a spoilt brat.

The home that was really an investment.
The marital relations that were really a form of rent.
The sofa that was really a bed.
The park bench that was really a bed.

The cynic who was really a romantic.
The romantic who was really a sexist.
The sexist who was really a phobic.
The love that was really fears.
The fear that was really nothing.
The ending that was really nearly here.

What Rhymes with Love?

John Tozer

What rhymes with love?
I haven't worked it out,
Could it be there's nothing does it justice?

What rhymes with love?
I'm in considerable doubt,
But my heart tells me to celebrate what just is.

Thesaurus and dictionary, the lexicon is so contrary...

What rhymes with love?

There is no word
That I have ever heard
For all the feelings rushing round inside me.

There is no sound
That I have ever found
That echoes in a way that satisfies me.

Thesaurus and dictionary, the lexicon is so contrary...

What rhymes with love?

The alphabet
Hasn't been invented yet
To construct a suitable expression.

The page is blank
And I have love to thank
For the failure of this literary digression.

Thesaurus and dictionary, the lexicon is so contrary...

What rhymes with love