

**TRIO  
INTERNATIONAL POETRY  
COMPETITION  
2024**

**WINNERS**

**1<sup>st</sup> Prize**  
**Paul Weidknecht**  
*Shadow of the Kayak*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Prize**  
**Dean Gessie**  
*“on the consolation of elegy”*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Prize**  
**Esther Lay**  
*Dropping Simon Armitage in the Bath*

**COMMENDED**

**Marion Hobday**  
*Night of the Basenji*

**Jonathan Chibuiké Ukah**  
*My Grandfather's Second Wife*

**Jenny Mitchell**  
*The Understanding*

**Paul Francis**  
*Building the Future*

## Comments by Angela Graham

The variety of the entries was exhilarating, and it was a privilege to engage with so much good writing. Time and again what impressed me was the ability of a poet to maintain a level of energy from the beginning to the end of a poem. A poem must be heading somewhere if the reader is not to feel short-changed. And even if the ending has to be a lack of resolution, the poet must be in control, certain that this particular ending is the stopping point par excellence. The best poems have about them a sense of both internal balance and momentum.

The winner, 'Shadow of the Kayak' knows where it's going. Beginning, 'If...', it takes us on a journey through memories, speculating on what the speaker hopes might have happened but can never know for sure. The final line is perfectly placed to echo, with powerful poignancy, an image set up earlier in an unremarkable context. Tragedy honoured, owned and shared with great tenderness.

Second place: "on the consolation of elegy" is a poem of astonishing clarity about the aftermath of a suicide. The prosaic details buttress the horror of the act and abut the hard fact of such a death being somehow beyond imagining and yet it must be faced. An excellent sense of the need for structure to contain this difficult material, and honesty in its treatment.

Third place: 'Dropping Simon Armitage in the Bath' is a poem which conjures up an impossible conjunction of language acquisition and a toddler. It would be fanciful in the lightest sense if it were not for the clarity and assuredness of the expression. Here is a solidly registered everyday event that becomes a springboard for a beautiful possibility. It is the poet's control and pinpoint focus that raises this subject matter far above whimsy.

The Commended poems, whatever their genre or format, are all vivid, fully inhabited by the poet, by which I mean they are coherent in their own terms, telling their story with momentum, and creating a sense of satisfaction. They set up a world in miniature and allow us to enter it. One's experience is broadened by being party to these poems.

There were many difficult decisions, and I would like to mention the following poets who were closely considered for the final selection.

Fiona Walker  
Ann Westgarth  
Joanna Benjamin  
Laura Theis  
Damen O'Brien  
Estelle Price  
David Walrond  
Hilary Elder  
Sadhbh Moriarty

## Shadow of the Kayak

If we were winding along the drive  
that traces the little river filling the lake,  
I could speak about things that mattered to me,  
and unless you fished, you might not care.

I'd point to where I caught that 21-inch largemouth,  
a best to this day, the Eagle Claw-impaled nightcrawler  
inhaled right under my shoes, beneath the foot bridge  
where I stood for decades in ignorance.

I would tell you about drawing a spinner upstream  
—gold blade on sunny days, silver when cloudy—past  
stocked brook trout pouncing from undercut banks  
and submerged root lairs, far too proud of each dull fight.

As we'd come upon the lake, I might mention how  
my friend and I would pedal there on banana-seat bikes,  
cast into the cove for pickerel, complaining about the  
coontail weed fouling our lures on the retrieve.

I probably wouldn't tell you about how they called  
him pizzaface on the middle school wrestling team bus,  
me saying nothing in defense, or him stuffing my sleeping bag  
with leaves after an argument on a Boy Scout campout.

But as the lake widened and houses appeared on the shore,  
we'd approach the spot, and I'd recount the day many years  
later when he took his two small sons out in that raft to pass  
along his facts about fishing, then of a child's headfirst pitch.

I'd finish, saying he went in after the boy, and sank,  
those work boots he always wore laced tight,  
but then I'd want to speculate, hoping he spied up through  
the green water, emerald-columned in shafts of sunlight.

Watching from beneath the shadow of the kayak  
—that miracle kayak—the man plucking the youngster  
from the surface, a final memory cleansed, and my friend  
unconcerned about the coontail fouling his legs on the retrieve.

**Paul Weidknecht**

**“on the consolation of elegy”**

today, I looked at my son in his casket  
I stared at his beauty mark  
and I gave thanks to God  
for a non-cancerous tumour

today, I looked at my son in his casket  
I saw the record of an absent father  
whose investment included one very  
small deposit and zero interest

today, the doctor spoke to me about rope and  
auto-erotic asphyxia and I said that  
my son’s erection a few inches from  
my nose had already made the point

today, the doctor offered me a COVID vaccine  
and I refused to take it because I am  
not *against* anything at all except,  
perhaps, the contraindication to death

today, I collected his personal effects at school  
I took the clay ashtray that he  
had once made for his father and  
that I now use exclusively for him

today, I collected his personal effects at school  
I bagged his princess hat and his  
Juliet Capulet costume [without, of  
course, the cord already at home]

today, I met my son’s boyfriend at McDonald’s  
I bought a Happy Meal that came in  
a red box and included a toy clown with  
a thrill kill smile and a body bag

today, my son’s boyfriend decried the *ten  
second rule* on Snapchat and then he  
cried into his French fries because my  
son no longer existed in his virtual world

today, poetry chose me like a POW at Buchenwald  
in the gas chamber, I was kilned into the  
shape of an immortal bird [a Phoenix in  
mourning with a feather pen in its beak]

today, poetry chose me like a POW at Buchenwald  
because my son’s dead body remains in my  
mouth like an elegy baited with barbed hooks  
that I must perforce chew and spit eternally

**Dean Gessie**

## Dropping Simon Armitage in the Bath

As I sit on the edge reading,  
adjusting hot and cold,  
my hand slips —  
and the orange cover slices through the water  
like a heron diving for a fish.

I pluck the book out, ease the pages apart —  
only the words on the edges are soaked.

A recollection shimmers into view: that time  
I dipped my toes into the simmering occult,  
a day course on Renaissance herbalism,  
bent all day over a tiny stove  
in the velvet basement of a hedgewitch shop,  
stirring a rosemary decoction  
to make a memory tonic.

And surely now wet fragments, too,  
will turn the water fragrant,  
ink's brief influence on the bath  
enough to infuse it with essence  
of a godless Yorkshire poet,

so that when my daughter  
lowers herself in,  
theatrically reluctant,  
ratios of potion strength to mass  
will mean absorption of those few damp letters  
into her small, defiant body,

and tomorrow, from her toddler's mouth,  
precocious terms will tumble:

*watershed*

*pillion*

*balcony*

*slight*

**Esther Lay**

## **Night of the Basenji\***

Dog days, the wells ran dry,  
red earth dusted the acacia like pepper,  
stalks of maize brown and sparse  
crumbled into the gaping ground.  
Baggy-skinned, elephants blundered  
into our compound desperate for water  
the pi dogs lay gasping under the verandah.

I lay on the kitchen floor beside the yellow dog  
both of us keened at the ceiling, an ululation  
outside of language, sharp as a scalpel  
light spun off your glass where you left it,  
with the empty bottle, its last drops  
stuck, with jagged words  
in my throat.

I thought I would never get up

I think I did not get up  
whole, climbing out of the sepulchre  
I had made for myself, still damp  
in my winding sheet, the grain  
of the wooden floor imprinted on my cheek.

Only the sleeping children drew me up,  
a puppet with broken strings.

The first heavy drops of rain  
rattled the windows  
machine gunned the tin roof.

But something that was open and soft  
as a sea anemone, is hard now  
as the Shetani lava fields  
where the devil emerges black, from the earth.

\* An African hunting dog that does not bark but produces a yodel-like sound

**Marion Hobday**

## **My Grandfather's Second Wife**

My grandfather's second wife was wealthy,  
if wealth was the number of eyelashes  
a woman plugged into her eyes like a socket,  
and covered the upper layers of her eyebrows  
like an umbrella constructed with skill and poise  
to give shelter to the eyeballs and pointed nose,  
or to provide light and fire to the rest of her body.  
She opened her eyes like an afternoon sun,  
the thick light of her eyes oozing like a thick smoke  
that stood in the sky like a giant guard tiger,  
though I felt that she cupped her eyes in her palms,  
perhaps to see what clothes I wore under my skin,  
the structure of my bones under my clothes and pants  
or what the colour of my intestine and blood must be  
or what monster built my muscles and internal organs  
that I used to ridicule her in my grandfather's house.  
She wore three layers of dresses in summer  
and when Harmattan arrived, she was a naked Gorgon,  
though the heat reached a crescendo like a burning furnace.  
I asked her what she would have done if she were Moses  
invited into the burning bush to watch a fire.  
She glared at me with her thick and flashy eyeballs,  
her eyelashes sweeping the ground before her,  
licking her swollen lips, baring her clattered teeth  
and let out a loud sound like the clap of the oil bean,  
which scattered its pods around my mother's cassava farm.  
When my grandfather died, she turned black and red,  
claiming that death caused her to change her skin,  
after she went into a covenant with eternal youth.  
She mourned through partying, cried by laughing,  
claiming that her nerves needed a smooth awakening  
if she left the baying of the extended family outside her home.  
She became a woman of virtue and vice, a body of water  
full of dryness, full of dust and the ashes of an ocean.

**Jonathan Chibuiké Ukah**

## The Understanding

after Raymond Antrobus

Mum stands up again, one day after  
being buried. I walk into my kitchen  
as she opens the fridge door, plunging  
a spoon into a bowl of strawberry jelly.  
'This is my food,' she says. 'I will not share.'  
Her mouth moves quickly. I ask about the will.

'Nothing to do with you. It was my money.'  
She picks up a tub of vanilla ice cream,  
tearing off the lid. I say, 'How could you  
leave the house to charity?' She scoops  
ice cream into her mouth so quickly,  
it dribbles down her chin onto her clothes.

'Why should I help to make you rich?'  
I turn to get a bowl but find I am alone,  
no jelly in the fridge, no vanilla ice cream.  
In my bedroom, she stands beside the bed  
as I wake up, takes a scoop out of the tub,  
laughing with her mouth wide open.

Ice cream flies out, raining on my duvet  
as she says, 'How much rent do you pay  
for this dump?' She points towards the cloud  
of mould on the ceiling. I close my eyes  
again. A stream wends through the room,  
all the way back to her Jamaican home.

Outside the shack where she grew up,  
her father, shaky on his feet, unzips  
his trousers, aiming piss at the top step.  
He is not drunk. She's told to say he is besotted –  
in love with the shebeen and hitting out,  
her face still stinging from a slap.

Lignum vitae leaves fly across my room,  
as she runs to the stream, clothes dumped  
along its bank. On her knees, hands rough,  
she pummels clothes on rock looking at  
the sky – a cloud of mould above her head.  
She sings about ice cream and jelly.

**Jenny Mitchell**



## **Building the Future**

*for Yasmeen Lari*

The rules were clear. The architect is God,  
a fact of building life everyone knew  
although to some it might seem slightly odd

to see a Pakistani woman who  
appeared to be more macho than the men.  
She was the boss. Obedience was due:

“Not good enough. That must be done again.”  
Such confidence, such vast ballooning pride  
which in an instant burst, that morning when

her boss persona shrivelled up inside.  
Later, the earthquake blew her world apart –  
a trail of devastation miles wide.

The faces of those kids, that broke her heart;  
their parents’ flimsy shelters, useless now.  
It’s then she sees the need for something smart

to fashion out a future, so somehow  
victims become survivors, active, keen  
to build. They need solutions which allow

them agency. Colonial systems mean  
a ton of concrete, standing in a queue  
and poison for the planet. Being green

means using earth and lime, cutting bamboo.  
All here to hand, easy to use, and cheap,  
so next time they will know what they can do

and do it for themselves. It makes her weep  
how much is wasted by official aid,  
a reflex where the brain has gone to sleep.

It must be them, not her. What she has made  
is not one striking feature, but a way  
of working, living. Once, she was afraid

she might not be the star. Now, it's the play  
that matters. It's her role to organize  
for a tomorrow better than today.

While locals build earth walls her group supplies  
cheap rooves. Unusual, but the logic's clear.  
Out of despair communities can rise

protect their children, overcome the fear  
of helplessness. They know that they can cope.  
It's such a buzz, transforming her career

from frail ambition to substantial hope.

**Paul Francis**