

First Prize

Thessalonians

We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together....
4:13-18

And then we were falling.
The air rushed in our ears
and loosened our clothes.

Beneath our feet there was nothing,
We fell towards nothing.
Beside us the Frobishers were falling.

He still held his keys
and Pattie was upside down,
one loose shoe chasing her.

The newly-weds from the corner
were falling – the gap between
their outstretched hands grew wider.

It was all in silence.
The children from the flats
were falling like tossed dolls -

one clutched a cell phone
in her fat little hand.
Other youths were falling.

They thrashed about them
trying to catch the air.
Clouds gathered around,

swirling clouds of falling people.
Their dense multitudes darkened the sky.
Then the silence ceased.

Christopher North

*

Second Prize

FINAL REPORT

A credit to the team

Decreasingly distinct
to night vision scopes,

the dying corporal fades
from bright to dark
as he surrenders heat.

Must try harder

Twelve hours on
his looted body lacks its eyes.
Cashless, a discarded wallet
spills two photographs:
a girl wearing a paper hat;
a soldier from another war
sitting, headless, in the snow.

Nil for conduct

He did two months in Colchester
for decking a sergeant.
Knocked a girl up in Exmouth
and promised to marry her.
And now the dwarf headmasters
dance their fury
as he leads his platoon
up over the rooftops,
waving new banners,
and singing new songs.

Duncan Brewer

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Third Prize

Wild Half-Can

Measure for Measure, IV) iii, 17

Tea break. Potts put his feet up
and his feet stank.
I told him his feet stank.
He had a silly grin
so I stabbed him.

They put me on sick,
sent me to Infirmary.
Doctor had one of them things
that flick open with a screen.
She says I have a dodginess depression.

I've got the biggest file in Personnel.
Potts calls me *Firedrake*.
Dizzy joins in.
I take it on the cheek and carry on.

Ed Reiss

*

Express Delivery

I am waiting for you in a holiday Inn Express,
A Travelodge hybrid in an industrial park.
It's a Soulless clone in shades of beige
with seascapes of paradise, mocking from the walls.
You rush in, late, anxious and start to undress
telling me of the near miss you had.
This terror of exposure cuts me.
Then you smile and I am in another place.
I am real, not just an asterisk in your diary,
somewhere between the ironing and the school run.
For now, this moment, you are mine.
We are alone in our rented bed,
though you don't turn off your mobile...the school might ring.
I would give you my love
but you have nowhere to keep it.
Even your cries escape me through the open window,
lost amongst the smog and the juggernauts.
Wet sheets, transient love brand, will be stripped from the bed.
A Brisk smoothing of the mattress and we were never here.
You shower me away with complementary gel,
fearful of bruises and the passing time,
though I will return you undamaged,
like a borrowed book.
You kiss me, a sexless peck, perfunctory goodbye,
then leave to cook another mans tea.
I send you a careless text, foolish love note
and even that will be deleted.

MaxineBarrett, Runner-up

*

Making Space for Water*

Closer than breath or pulse he hears the sea
which laps as gently as a cat, or hurls
its breakers down, arcs foam across the quay
and grinds the shingle when each wave unfurls.

His aerial snapshot shows a garden plot,
a house with smoke blown from the chimney-stack
across striped lawns, his trailer with a yacht,
the cliff, the beach and lines of tidal wrack.

All that is left him is a strip of land
and caravan. The house was undermined
by high tides scouring, sucking clay and sand
until it fell; and now he cannot find

the will to mend the dangling fence, or do
much more than prop the board that reads Belle Vue.

**Title of a Government Consultation Paper setting out their
strategy of non-intervention against coastal erosion.*

Jean Watkins, Runner-up

*

Please Listen To What I am Not Saying

Last night in class the tiredness took over
I found it a struggle to listen, to pick over
the meaning of a client's drawing
of a child's mathematical toy, a square
in particular, red, hunting out a square hole
or slot as if the client believes life holds
these perfect squares we can square up to
like falling back again into the perfect print
of our body in the snow or like
a gingerbread man stepping into and
existing for the rest of his life in the confines
or comfort of his gingerbread man cutter.

Peter Knaggs, Runner-up

*

String Figures

One of us asks. He feigns deafness. A son
or daughter fetches a length of string, ties
a loop, places it across his hands,

a token gesture from the old rules
he still likes to play by. The muscles
round his mouth ease then, the austere scowl

folds to a jester's quizzical frown:

his party piece, a chance to reel in
the affections of a squabbling family.

He shuts his eyes, parts his hands
until the loop's strung taut, a simple cradle
to weave a story from.

We know it well, not for the words,
but the illustrations sleighted from the loom
and shuttle of his fingers' memory:

tallow candles, scissors, a tall chair and a ladder.
Grandchildren may lose the plot
but not the moment. Everybody claps.

He next makes thunderclouds and lightning,
an albatross, a man climbing a tree
to look down on his past.

Wrapped in its map his face wrinkles
as he shakes the net he's caught in,
knotted joints, string limbs.

A sudden deft flick and his startled look
stares back at us, straight through the open loop
for which there is no story yet.

Mike Barlow, Runner-up

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When the wren sings

When the wren sings its round body is a mouth
opening at a beak. A wired radius,
it points sonic needles upwards and outwards.
Where it is it becomes song. Streets away
it clips idlers who start, stare around for aliens.
What planet it sped from is beyond reach,
tucked in a thorn turret. King secret,
it is green inside, for bugs. Once, twice it appears,
oscillating on spiny feet, switches back inside
at a glance. Signals flood the scope
and yes, it says, yes, there is, there is.

Pamela Coren, Runner-up

*

Fatalities

1

Stiff as gristle,
freeze-framed in its last daredevil trapeze act,
the squirrel hangs in the power line

where an opportunist current made a
snap decision
to divert through the splayed length of its nerves:

front paws back paws glued to different wires,
it spans in the whip-crack second its forgotten past,
its aborted future.

Schoolkids (their day made)
marvel and mock
at the squirrel stapled to the sky.

2

Sky-paddles taut as rackets,
hull-plates
crackling with emerald light,

the dragonfly
has made a fatal touch-down
in wet tar

(mistook it for a deeply-shadowed pool
where larvae might subsist?)

and so the road has claimed
a lord of fire and air

and wears him like a medal on its chest.

Anthony Watts, Runner-up

*

LANCE-CORPORAL ELLIS

Boys' Brigade
All London Challenge Cup 1923.
On the left a young stranger, my father,
Lance-Corporal Ellis,
18 years old,
pill-box hat, cross-belt,

smart as a sunrise.

The photo over,
they swap punches,
have a smoke,
chat a bit,
head off home.

Out of the gate
he turns right
and walks whistling
down a winding road.
Behind a tree
amputation stands waiting;
round the corner
my mother moves into ambush;
at the second bend,
doctors aim their stethoscopes;
up the hill
madness crouches in the bushes,
swinging his great cudgel.

Michael Swan, Runner-up

*

Pause

Watch how water comes to the lip of the jug
and pauses. Even a bullet
stutters in the chamber,
carving its unique pattern of spin.

Rain on a window. Trembling
hesitation. See how
each trickle veers off to meet
with another.
if you are very sad, or very calm,
you notice these things.

Mothers die like this. Their breathing
stopping, then starting again
as if practicing.

You pause, lifting every item
only so far from the supermarket shelf.
Indecision has a lovely rhythm. It takes skill
to stop your arm, holding a heavy tin,
pretending to read the label.

A first kiss; the tiniest pull back,
then the sudden move.
Arms trembling under the weight
of a pillow held in midair.

In multiple universes, this is the unifying moment
before division: left, right, spill,
or stop; crying for forgiveness.

Mandy Coe, Runner-up

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Reflection in a Samovar

September, it was; the sunlight poured limpid as oil,
trickling in mellow pools over the time-faded chairs,
the sill where a butterfly pattered trapped wings on the pane,
the cloth with the bobbles I often would chew as a child,
my sister-in-law snapping beakily, 'Stop that at once!'
--Under the table, my small niece was doing the same,
my tiny accomplice...'Auntie,' she'd say, 'come, let's hide!'
We'd lurk in the raspberries, grinning at guinea-fowl shrieks.
Later, by lamplight, I'd bring lacquered boxes to life,
telling her stories of golden birds, magical wolves,
women whose empty arms cradled a child from a root—
fables I told with my fingers, my tongue and my heart.

In bustled my brother: 'Now, Masha, you never forget;
surely it's tea-time?' I looked at the urn hissing steam,
and thought of the night when young Kolya was choking with croup,
and Sonya was screaming, 'No, Masha, you can't let him die!'
That other time...'Boil some more water. I can't save them both.'
Air scissored with cries as I winced in my tight silent flesh.

I opened a jar of last summer's black cherry preserves,
tasting their sharpness, the slight curdled tang of sour cream,
sweat salt on my lip as a cucumber pickled too long,
as Sonya continued, 'That dress doesn't suit you at all.
Brown isn't your colour... Why, who's that out there on the porch?'
Parasha came panting: 'Oh, madam, that gentleman's here,
the one with the whiskers, that bought the Apraxins' estate...'

Fyodor Ivanovich blinked in the doorway, one eye
clenched against brightness. 'My compliments...' 'Masha,' she hissed,
my sister-in-law, 'for goodness' sake give him a spoon!'
I watched as he twisted a button worked loose on his coat.
'I've bought a new colt—a fine chestnut...Rye fetched a good price...'
He looked at me awkwardly: 'Anna's eleven next week,
the image of Katya...She misses her mother, poor lass.'

I'd looked into mirrors at midnight when I was a girl,
and now what I'd never seen shone in the samovar's side,
showing the best of all fairy-tales ready to start:
a lumbering bear who becomes, not some simpering prince,
but true man at last in regaining, though clumsy and gruff,
unpractised, those most human qualities: laughter and trust.

Susan Halstead, Runner-up