

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2018 Manchester Poetry Prize
Short List

2018 Poetry Prize Finalists

Zillah Bowes

Zillah is a writer and filmmaker. She has won the Wordsworth Trust Prize and Poems on the Buses Competition, and was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize, Alpine Fellowship and Listowel Poetry Awards. She has received a Creative Wales Award and was a Hay Festival Writer at Work. Her poems have been published in *Mslexia*, *Wasafiri*, *The North* and *The Next Review*, among others. Her films include *Small Protests*, nominated for a Grierson Award, which won the Current Short Cuts Award. She is writing a first poetry collection and several screenplays. Zillah is based in Wales and works regularly in London.

Katie Hale

Born in Cumbria, Katie's debut pamphlet, *Breaking the Surface*, was published by Flipped Eye in 2017. She has won the Jane Martin Poetry Prize and the Buzzwords Poetry Competition, and in 2019 will undertake residencies at The Wordsworth Trust, Passa Porta (Brussels) and the MacDowell Colony (New Hampshire, USA). Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry Review*, *The North* and *Interpreter's House*, among others. Katie's debut novel, *My Name is Monster*, will be published by Canongate in 2019. She runs creative writing workshops in schools, and is working on a first full collection of poetry.

Libby Hart

Libby Hart is an Australian author of three collections of poetry: *Fresh News from the Arctic* (winner of the Anne Elder Award and shortlisted for the Mary Gilmore Prize), *This Floating World* (shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and *The Age* Book of the Year Awards, and longlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards), and *Wild* (shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and named one of the Books of the Year for the *Australian Book Review*, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*). Libby is based in Melbourne, Australia.

Maggie Millner

Maggie Millner is a poet and teacher from rural upstate New York, USA. She is the recipient of fellowships from Poets & Writers, the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, the Stadler Center for Poetry, and elsewhere. Maggie holds degrees in creative writing from New York University and Brown University and teaches in the Writing Program at Rutgers University. She lives with her cat in Brooklyn, New York.

Molly Underwood

Molly Underwood graduated with a degree in English from Queens', Cambridge in 2014, and has spent most of her time travelling and working abroad since then, in Spain, Ireland and Vietnam. Last year she returned to the U.K. to complete a Master's degree in Social and Cultural Theory. She is currently living and writing in London.

2018 Short-listed poems

Zillah Bowes

The Village and the Belly
The Sum of the Valley
John Evans, Thomas Belt and the Light
The Valley, the Air
The Valley with Me

Katie Hale

I was born in the morning
Scrapped in Bilbao, Spain, 1965
Shap Abbey
Nimbus
Pin

Libby Hart

Óiche Shamhna
Fyre
Totemic word-hoard

Maggie Millner

The Touch
Consanguineal
Ode
Summons
In Barcelona

Molly Underwood

Genesis
Corinthians/ John
Song of Songs

Zillah Bowes

The Village and the Belly

It's strange, a place. You'd think it was about what it's like on top, what it looks like, how the bricks sit, how the profile is, the line, the fine silhouette. But this place, *this place*, it's a village grown out of mountain.

So the Brynawelon row with Huw's orange-rust shed, Paul's paused car park, rubble pile and all the weeds, I don't see them. Or Eve and Gar's flaked pebbledash, the other Paul's dented, too-blue van, and Owain's new fleet

of faded-slush taxis, still called *Toby's Taxi*, I don't see them. The jumble of back gardens, fenceless with slate posts, sloped down the valley, I don't see them. Or the bundled shine of cars on the back quarry lane, I don't see them.

*I see the Dulas slate-heart beating.
I see the stomach of Cader,
rising, rising, lowering, lowering.*

And when the double fighter jets pass, always on the rare sunny day, always just after nine, always a couple of metres above the top chimney – that's Bronwen's – I don't even hear them. I don't hear the drive of them,

the bottom-thunder of their bass. The weekly Chinook, the odd Hercules – they're just the blip of a horn, the bother of a set-off alarm. They're not their true rumble. They're not because the ground is up, its belly open.

The Sum of the Valley

Most days start with the pillar of cloud
that props the blue at the bottom of the Dulas,
the one with the low wisp that grows high
and spreads to vault the close sky.

This cloud disappears at some point –
a morning moment usually –
but it's a slow absorbing so you don't notice
because by then the others are out:

the mystery kites, guessed by their tail prongs,
distant over the fir bend but calling, girding,
helping. The tumble and mini-murmuring
of wood warblers, great tits, blue tits, finches –

the valley bundles the birds.
It's the view down on them as they fold
between trees, together and separately.
And then it's the people too.

Catrin's fire smoke from her whitewash,
the line between her chimney and high stable,
handsome by the hands of her father.
The lorries even, driven around the village

always to the line, never overstepping;
the wheel-water and gravel-crunch.
It's the gentle reverse of Eve's carer
and the slam of her Fiesta door.

The padding of Elsa with Ingrid,
even if I can't see them, faithful
mornings up the opposite valley side,
like all the dogs and all the owners.

It's Gwilym's wife knowing when to put out
and take in her washing, it's her walk
along the path between the houses,
her latch-lifting, her hanging up of trousers.

John Evans, Thomas Belt and the Light

It was when John Evans drove down the pass, past Cader on the walled
slope after the turn, just before the lake comes into view.

It was this moment, with Tal-y-llyn rising towards me, over me –
cloudy but with a sky-patch kicking up – calling me.

Before then, there was Thomas, my great-great-grandfather.
Self-taught geologist, naturalist, engineer, he'd been

a miner, a gold miner, and he'd catalogued these rocks,
the gold-carrying slate, and his son, my great-grandfather,

was born up the road, up the top beyond the mountain.
And Thomas had written a book, travelled the world

scurrying with gold-seekers, investigating, drawing a salary,
noting rock and natural life. He'd died of a mountain fever.

He'd died in Colorado. He'd landed and entered the rock-belly here:
his light had spread outwards under the ground and upwards

over this valley, this village, and it had flickered to me the minute
I saw it, the minute I came over the hill with John Evans.

The Valley, the Air

Let's take a morning, an August morning,
when the rain says *go in, go in, take in the valley*.

The air creeps under the door, over the *croeso* mat
and travels to me, stilled on the sofa.

The valley's in this air, remember.
The air's travelled up, to north, caressed by firs, kites,

the osprey pair at the top of Abercorris, and up,
up to Top Corris, and here, over Bronmeirion.

The air's received the large and the small of the valley.
And all this, this morning.

The air's a crow that flies through a hedge right in the middle
because there's light the other side.

The air knows to travel through wool to my skin
and then through skin to my blood.

And here, look, suddenly the air's in my blood,
the valley's in my blood, and I'm not moving.

The valley, the air, the valley air, they're the same.
My heart beats the valley air around me.

The Valley with Me

It'd start when I passed through the Borders
between the border rolls of concrete on the road

past Halfway House and Middletown, towards Newtown.
I'd see the hills stacking to Builth and Rhayader,

those curved oblongs, sage green behind birch,
with the blue of fir calling like my slate valley.

My body would slither itself against the seat, now held
in the Dulas belly, however many miles away.

The closer I drove, the more my arm pressed to the car side,
the more my feet flattened to the pedals

until entering town at last, my body would flow again,
joy-flow and water-run to the edge of tears.

Then I'd drive over the bridge at the foot of the valley
and be running like the Dulas, the river,

as I followed it up to the village, purring as my own vehicle.
The change would be so sure, so like nothing else.

Then I'd go away again, and then I'd return,
and notice that I'd take the valley with me.

I was the click of fingers to this valley,
I was the dropped whistle of bird.

Katie Hale

I was born in the morning

slithered out of the cut in my mother,
a thing no bigger than a bacon rind

and squalling. *There was something
of the fox about you*, she said later,

a cub lifted too soon from the den.
She watched my birth

in the sheet-metal ceiling,
her other self a storm-cloud

brewing at dusk, a small fire
far too far from the beach.

Then my mother unfurled her body.
Her arms were scrubbed tough

and she caught me. All through my life
she has rocked my reflection,

as I head for the uncharted deep.

Scrapped in Bilbao, Spain, 1965

No – the ship, you tell me, burned in New York Harbour.

The ship was a metal womb. No, the ship was a woman, lumbering through squalls, rough as guts and harder than bone, her belly filled with children. She birthed you and your daughter onto a baleful shore, and, years later, burned in the harbour.

The ship, you insist, gave in to engine failure, or a cigarette tip, or any other searing hurt that sets a life ablaze – unlocked her rivets and let her joints reach wide, unfolding herself on the quayside like a paper boat. The deckhands were thumb-smears and she swallowed them whole.

You say: the ship could not be saved, not by all the waters of the Atlantic. She burned, white-hot and credible as your American Dream. She blazed for days, and all the women of my family tossed their own truths on, to fuel or quench her, nobody could say. The menfolk told how she screamed with burning, a sound metallic and loud as her own body, but the women said no – this is what rapture sounds like.

The ship was magnificent in her ending. The procreating pillar of her smoke could be seen across three states and seven intervening decades.

You tell it like this: the ship disassembled herself into the sea, the crowds dispersed and water lapped at the monochrome docks, and that was the end of that. I say, if only we could go back, raise her from the waves, still grandiose with flame – if only we were close enough to burn –

Shap Abbey

the stones mouths full with old rain
are balancing on the edge of spring

can't you hear you said *they're singing*
plainchant but I was in my buggy asleep
and my mother in her reversible mac
said *nobody's singing mum*

so as if the ruin had a centrefold
and this was it you stood
where you could choose to read
forwards or back and listened

later I will tell a child who is not
my daughter why the abbey is so quiet
because the king wanted a boy and also
he stopped fancying his wife

later I will listen to the lost air its single melody
see how lifting off the roof lets the light rush in

Nimbus

Some days, my grandma is a cloud –
her face a god-ray and the sheets
blue-white as the insides of wrists.
Some days, she needs only air
to hold her aloft from the bed
in the big dark room. There must be
a moon, somewhere, because
my grandma is a swatch of snow.

In the fourth episode this morning
about a man who still talks
to his partner's ghost, the furniture
is floating of its own accord –
though really this is done with electricity
and magnets. Some days, my grandma
has her own current inside her,

and maybe this is how I can stand
in the space beneath her, scratch
the plastic floor with my shoes
where she casts no shadow,
where she has lightning pent
in her breast. Some days, she is
heavy as rain. Her body is a flood
making all the roads out impassable.

Pin

One day, outside a town I've not yet visited,
behind the wheel with the hazards on
in a layby on the quilted counterpane of a moor,
I will read you in the word 'pin' –

its sharp precision on the page,
the hard pip of it in my mouth
(I cannot stop my mouth
shaping the point, the powder-dusted head) –

as if you picked it that day the planes came
to the siren dark of the bomb factory, then planted it
in the rich soil of some unexpected text

where I will find it, where I will always find it
glinting like dropped change,
eighty years on and still germinating.

Libby Hart

Óiche Shamhna

ending on lines by Charles Wright

When she steps down
the darker and darker stairs
of this Sibyl-spoken night

she'll remember Minoan bull-leapers,
unmoored whirl. Full double, full tuck.

She'll remember hearts astray,
swaying and swaggering. Seasilt and saltsick.

She'll remember
how her own heart is stripped and spent.

As a pull of haunting takes hold
she'll whisper, 'Lead us to those we are waiting for,
those who are waiting for us.'

Notes | 'Darker and darker stairs' is from 'Bavarian gentians' by DH Lawrence (*The complete poems*, Penguins Books, New York, 1993). 'Lead us to those we are waiting for ...' is from 'Flannery's angels' by Charles Wright (*Bye-and-bye: selected late poems*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011).

Fyre

Time is, it is done. —Samuel Pepys

I.

Evening stitches up
her long black dress
before all things ignite.

This dark river,
nightwatery slither,
restless with wet whispers.
Oarlap. Boatmen. Heave.

Thames as snakeskin,
as uncoiled backbone.
Its belly of relics—
button and pin,
Roman coin and love token.
Bodies of the dead. Spearhead.
Pistol and dagger.

A flux of voices
ride the lug
of drought-filled wind.

II.

I dream of rainmaking. Thunderstorms.
I sleep on my left side to protect the heart.

Sweet-lipped one, when does a word catch on fire?
Hematite, dragon's blood, madder.
This vermilion memory of you.

And what is fire but this, here now?

III.

Alight.

My vixen-red pith, smallest sun.
My hankered heat.

He says, 'A woman might piss it out,'
but I lick up the baker's house.

I eat my way through Pudding Lane.
I grow. I grow insatiable.

IV.

I wear your hunger in my mouth.

Firedrops.
Tumblings of smoke.
Weight of wreckage.

I sing your transgressions of roar and crackle.

I sift through your cinders.
I twist around their corners.
I climb my sky.

V.

The moon watches
how I bury my gold
as fire raves
the river's skin.

Scramble of boats
now laden with best things.

Men in nightgowns
press against a solar wind.
This unholy music.
This wrath of light.

VI.

1. London Bridge is burning.
2. The plague houses are alight.
3. All about, the sound of screaming.
4. Terror in every lung.

5. One hundred skittish horses.
6. The loading of carts.
7. Chairs. Tapestries. Bedding.
8. Each burning heart.

VII.

Exodus shuffle.

Then
tall grasses
in a field
high above
the bonfire.

All of sky
like the top
of a burning oven.

VIII.

Carried by thirsty wind—

soot and silk,
and words that flare
when you touch them.

IX.

This hush of voices.
Hope and nevermind.

Who among us can live
with everlasting flame?

X.

And where are you, my darling?
My lovely man.

I'm bone-worn. I'm breathless.
I'm sweat. I'm dirt. I'm loss.

XI.

Charon asks
for the coin
under my tongue.

For blood and time.

For the thing that is unutterable.
Be it love or trauma.
Be it erasure.

XII.

And Cerberus is growling.
And the dead are burning in their graves.
And prison bars are melting.
And lead bleeds from St Paul's.

Caen-stone has become cannonball.

XIII.

Circles of protection
and circles of Hell.

Darkness into darkness.

Obsidian. Charcoal. Jet.
Piles of smoulders.

Gone geography.

Wasteland with hidden things.
Broken things.

Wind-rasp and ash.

Notes | 'A woman might piss it out,' was reportedly the Lord Mayor of London, Thomas Bludworth's, initial reaction to the outbreak of the Great Fire of London of 1666. 'Like the top of a burning oven,' is from John Evelyn's diary. 'Who among us can live with everlasting flame?', is a variation of Isaiah 33:14. The poem's epigraph is from Samuel Pepys's diary.

Totemic word-hoard

Wolf tooth.

Bird tongue. Bee bling.

Bat cloud. Owl swoop. Hare skin.

Sheep fold. Bear bulk. Deer kin.

Whale gulp. Fox skulk. Rook wing.

Furwarm. Hoofprint. Scent/sting.

Maggie Millner

Poems removed at the request of their author

Molly Underwood

GENESIS

I woke upon the wastes of time: 'let us settle, tooth for bitten tongue'
Was forward ground. Surrender was a sandfill site,
Eye for an *I was wrong*—

All for a war-waged peacetime toll, and the sound was high and wrong.
Better to find the old loved wound, and bleed it clean,
And charge when it has gone.

So: backward through unsettled dust, on the rack of an opened lung,
To the mortgaged birth of an epitaph. The best mistake
Is an expensive one,

Recalled when greener wartime scores have dried in the fixing sun
To covenants; remaindered when it costs too much
To keep beneath your tongue.

Backward, to a closing deal on the heels of a nonsense sum
And damned advance. Since sand in every clotted wound
Will worry it undone,

I wasted time. I suffixed duty to some infant sin and wished it gone,
And, having sunk, I could not meet its open eye
With mine, and could not mourn.

We keep between our teeth the charge that should have been returned
For fear that we might overshoot the guard and mark
The heart of the upright wrong:

The leeward spit of a prologue pip, and a shame that would not come.
Our oldest ghosts are underfed.
We learned to bite our tongues.

CORINTHIANS/ JOHN

In the beginning was the word, the one
Coughed into three, undone
And spoken into ten.

In the beginning was the broken sound that, shrinking,
Knew itself at home in throats of men.
Careless skies were caught with little words, shot down,
Would not be whole again:
The first tongue was too straight and slow
To keep the space that light, spent lungs had found.

A darker glass was then our little home,
A shattered thing, the thing that showed us men.
The first sound was already fifty sounds, the first and fallen cry already wrong,
And love was never love was love was love
But two with loss,
Terror half the splintered hearts of those first men.

The first word hissed through twenty teeth and one split tongue,
We know in part, we prophecy in two and three and ten.
The first voice was a breaking one, its edges stained
With shadows of the sounds not made that day
To bring the late unshown into the sun.

The first lung was already two in one,
Already coughing with the little weight of home,
Too stuffed with sky to feel itself half-drowned and hope the perfect end
Was one that shattered tongues could name or know.
Completeness came too slow, and saved no men.

In the beginning was the broken word, the one
That, spoken, opened into ten,

Broke darkly from the first heart, promised partly, fell apart again:
In the beginning was the great unsaid before the said, the quiet before the flood,
The breath before the filling lungs of men.

No, in the beginning was the old, late sound
before the silence and the sunburned tongue that split it,
Called it, spitting, to the ground.
The silence never was, until its end.

In the beginning was the last first word,
In the beginning was the tongue-cupped, unspilled end,
The shadowed several in the sunlit one, the two or framing ten.
The first word caught the silence that it broke and named it, then.

SONG OF SONGS

Stay me with wine, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.

Name me in your bed or stray, for there are finer names than mine
And plainer ways to prove your perfect love;
Stranger games to pay for, weigh away with words of love.
You brought me to the banquet, and your banner over me was cheer enough.

I wasted in the summertime, tamed, and dined on love,
By leavened bread and mackerel skies I starved, I died
By salted limes and sage, I died for love.

Lay your gifts below the banner, leave, and leave me love:
Bring me ships of sandalwood, and bring me turtledoves.
Bring me hemp or bring me honey, bring me hemlock if you must,
Bring me fennel, bring me figs that look like love.

Bring me wheat and walk away, for there are ruder, redder stains than love
Like sun that blooms behind the eyes, like fingertips, like blood
Or bruised tomatoes on the vine or perfumed wine or wine that tastes of vinegar and mud.
I once forgot your name when spices set the world aflame, exploded on my tongue and made me cough;
When milk and honey saved me, I knew no more use for love.

Bring me flax, then. Bring me copper.
Bring me bream and eel and thyme; bring me linen, for I never have enough;
Bring me books that tell of amber and the last, lost giants inside;
Bring me oxen, barley, birds, but never love.
Bring your banner down and burn it, for I have no love for love
As I have known it. Cinnamon and horses are enough.

Leave and let the apples stay, for I am sick and have no need of love.
Leave and leave the wine behind, that I might taste the bitter vines
That ripened in the sun and bled before the breaking of the bud;
And all to cede to harvest-time

The shoots that burst too bravely from the mud and bloomed, and were not saved by love.

Leave and let the silver save me, I am brave, and silver is enough,
For I will gladly lose to needled pine and winter skies the part of me that chose a kinder love.
There are wilder ways to die
And higher prayers than love,
There are horses in the night and bridled waves at morningtide
To veil the bays with whiter lace than any I have lost,
There are traitor thighs to climb, and herbs in brine, and new Julys to love.

Lay your gifts below the banner. Leave me, love,
For there are oats, and antelopes, and good, red earth to love.
There are dying lines to face in faces that I hate and that I love,
And night-time names, and peacetime plains, and new goodbyes to love.

You brought me to the banquet, and the banquet was enough.

Leave and leave the clementines,
For I am sick of love.

Since its launch in 2008, Carol Ann Duffy's Manchester Writing Competition has attracted more than 17,000 submissions from over 50 countries and awarded more than £155,000 to its winners. These are the UK's biggest prizes for unpublished writing. The Competition encourages new work and seeks out the best creative writing from across the world, with Manchester as the focal point for a major international literary award. The winners of this year's £10,000 Poetry and Fiction Prizes will be revealed at a gala ceremony on Friday 1st February in the atmospheric Baronial Hall at Chetham's Library in the heart of the city. The event will feature readings from each of this year's finalists and a celebration of ten years of the Manchester Writing Competition.

This year's Poetry Prize was judged by Adam O'Riordan and the original 2008 judges Gillian Clarke, Imtiaz Dharker and Carol Ann Duffy. The Fiction Prize was judged by Nicholas Royle, Niven Govinden, Livi Michael and Alison Moore.

The Manchester Writing Competition was devised by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy and is run by her team in the Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University: www.mmu.ac.uk/writingschool.

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If you have any queries, or would like any further information, about the Manchester Writing Competition, please contact writingschool@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 1787.

Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

The 2019 Manchester Poetry and Fiction Prizes will open to entries in March 2019: www.manchesterwritingcompetition.co.uk. We are looking to build relationships and explore opportunities with commercial and cultural sponsors and partners, so please get in touch: writingschool@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 1787.