

THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER POETRY COMPETITION 2020

# TREES



TOWER  
Poetry

THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER  
POETRY PRIZES 2020

# TREES

Judged by  
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OXFORD  
TOWER POETRY  
2020

Tower Poetry is an organisation based at Christ Church, University of Oxford, which offers opportunities and resources for young British poets.

We aim to develop the role of poetry in education and enable new poets to develop their talents through a series of exciting initiatives ranging from courses, competitions, and workshops to readings and publications.

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THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER POETRY PRIZES 2020

**First prize**

*Woodland For Sale*

NADIA LINES

The Broxbourne School, Hertfordshire

**Second prize**

*Sonnet to Palm Sunday*

FIYINFOLUWA TIMOTHY OLADIPO

Varndean College, East Sussex

**Third prize**

*The Banyan Tree*

AHANA BANERJI

Putney High School, London

**Commended**

*Eating*

JOYCE CHEN

Westminster School, London

*Burial Rites*

SABRINA COGHLAN-JASIEWICZ

Newstead Wood School for Girls, Kent

*Treehugger, Summer 2005*

ZARA MEADOWS

Belfast Royal Academy, Northern Ireland

*A Tree*

TOBY MORRISON

Oakham School, Rutland

## NADIA LINES

## FIRST PRIZE

### Woodland For Sale

I would work on a development  
of fairy rings; loop after loop  
of polka-dot, poodle-skirt  
toadstools, rehoming the fairies

falling from heads in exam halls.  
I'd reintroduce the wolf  
to his old friends  
and end the practice of pond dipping

in favour of pond diving.  
The lakes I would decorate  
with the eerie jewellery of frogspawn  
and big breasted lily-pads;

the streams I would fill with miniature  
belugas and all the tuna I regret eating.  
I would seed a few forget-me-nots  
next to a swing, which the centaurs

could look upon, but not sit on,  
mourning being born, foreign  
under their own firmament.  
It would rain beetles, spit spiders,

drizzle deer, which would land, unphased,  
antlers raised, spun with bone and grace,  
trotting on. I'd have unknowable bird song.  
I would plant daisies as deeply as tattoos.

I would make kingfishers less camera shy  
and find the water voles and mice and  
kiss each of their baby heads, one at a time.  
I would sprout rabbits in holes

like spring- pricked bulbs, I would  
melt dinosaur toys back  
to dinosaur oil, give it proper burials.  
I'd toil in my woodland

for hours, hoping that somehow  
with love, and grubby thumbs,  
I could salt the flowers with bees  
and give back all the trees.

**Sonnet to Palm Sunday**

You know it's Easter when all the plantain  
Trees are dying. Black fronds burning without  
Flame. Hasan with the Madam, sugarcane  
Go do better in this our kind of drought.  
Our backyard rippling with stillborn shoots, but  
All we can quote is that one parable  
Of the Sower. In three years, they have come  
To look like my father, roots like ankles  
Buried deep in London's concrete, leaves curved  
Like his spine domed over the Atlantic.

The grass is the shade of green we had bribed  
A man with en route to church: a traffic  
Warden with a gun the colour of palm  
Fronds now being set aflame by Hasan.

**The Banyan Tree**

Mother and daughter share a bed,  
 sleepless in the unfamiliar night-time heat.  
 Daughter leans her cheek against the cool,  
 iron-barred window, feeling the thick breeze  
 and watching the cars scrape dust on the tracks.  
 Mother turns, a warm shift in the shadows  
 and a pale scent of lemon and salt,  
 and tugs daughter down, back onto the bed-sweat.  
 Daughter begs mother to tell her a story,  
 her voice thin against the shroud of air.  
 Mother sighs, and purses her lips to the  
 canal of daughter's ear, and whispers,  
*Do you know why the banyan tree cries?*  
 Mother traces daughter's temple with her fingertip, feeling the  
 softness of dark, innocent skin as she shakes her head.  
*The banyan bears a fruit, but*  
*it is not sweet like the mango, or curative like the amla.*  
*Banyan fruit is bitter and bloodshot like an eye, bulging as it rots*  
*because it can only be stomached in the worst of all famines.*  
*But that is not why the banyan tree cries.*  
 Mother wraps her arm around daughter like a root.  
*I was around your age when it happened.*  
*I was walking home from school, kicking stones so hard they slit the leather of my shoe,*  
*when I passed the banyan tree.*  
*An old woman was perched in its ropes, skin wrinkled like a shawl,*  
*and she waved to me—*  
*"Beta," she called, "I am an old woman and I am so very poor and so very helpless.*  
*I climbed the banyan to try and pluck its harvest, but my sandals slipped as I clambered.*  
*Will you please pick them up for me, and put them on my feet before you go?"*  
*The sandals were brown and tough, caked in layers of earth and car oil,*  
*but I picked them up as I was told, looking up into the canopy of the banyan*  
*for the old woman. She beckoned, and swung her legs over the branch with her hands*  
*the same way a fishmonger might slam his catch onto the ice.*  
*I readied myself on my tip-toes to place the sandals on her feet,*  
*but she did not show me feet to place her sandals on.*  
*That is when the banyan started to cry, as*  
*she presented me with two bloodied stumps,*  
*worn and raw as mutton,*  
*and I dropped the sandals and ran as fast and far away as I could.*  
 Daughter nuzzles into mother's breast, her small breaths  
 drubbing like a heartbeat.  
*Do you understand, now, why the banyan cries?*  
*The banyan cries because it has so many hungry souls trapped in its belly,*  
*it has forgotten how to feed itself.*  
*The cowardly, the liars, the witches and the poor—*  
*they all have nowhere and no one who wants them,*  
*so, into the belly of the banyan they go*  
*where their tears turn cold and feed the fruit of the banyan.*

**Eating**

Chopsticks hold onto your hand quietly,  
whittled from the blind roots that held  
the earth, tasting its tunnelled depths,  
arching their aged backs against the topsoil  
pressed densely by shuffling sandalled feet

The worn wood is soaked with broth  
and dishwasher and cloudy rice-water,  
Swollen with the hot resentment of rarely-shut doors  
and the overflowing chatter of old friends  
Separated by seas and embassies,  
colliding in a clatter of tongues and  
snapping bamboo.

They clench in time like knitting needles  
To stitch together the outgrown seams  
of frayed memories,  
To remind a weeping mouth of family,  
of fading foreign soils,  
Dipping in and out as eroding waves  
that relentlessly reclaim the sand.

Far from these opening arms,  
Wide brushes of green stalks  
pillow the heavy sky  
Waiting to be sliced and sanded  
and scattered across vast nations  
and lie at last above a steaming bowl:  
The shrunken pillars of a fresh home.



**Burial Rites**

I  
Over the bruised cheek of the world  
The veil of blue quiet rippled, furled  
Inward as the soldiers stirred, sighed,  
Disturbed the night with their sightless

Weeping. The earth, seeping purple,  
Hardened itself under their trampling,  
Drained last battle's blood, and steeled  
Itself against sun-up's new spillage.

II  
In the yawn of darkness, the living  
Set to work. Among the littering  
Of limbs, they lit upon their kin,  
Closed the staring eyes, kissed their cold skin,

And took them gently into their own  
Arms, as mothers might have held their sons.  
With care, each soldier raised them up,  
And burdened, lumbered slowly back.

III  
Emerging from the shadowed coppice,  
Which rung still with the crack of axes  
Meeting oak, soldiers came with arms  
Filled with boughs. They took them to where,

Upon a bed of broken branches,  
The dead were laid out like packages  
As yet undelivered, and balanced  
The new wood around them like tents.

IV  
The men gathered, some distance away,  
While others advanced with flaming  
Torches in hand. Each pyre stood  
A dark mass of dismembered limbs,

With wounds still dripping their tender dew  
Of blood, and the watching soldiers knew  
That they themselves and the trees were one,  
Fated to be felled by men and burnt.

V

When the bodies were lit, and clothed in the shroud  
Of purest fire, the men's own armour  
Blazed against their skin. And so, each man,  
Watching the slowly purpling sky and

Fearful of the horrors dawn would bring,  
Cradled that which Sibyl told their King:  
*The gates of hell are open night and day;  
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way*.\*

\*from *The Aeneid*, trans. John Dryden

**ZARA MEADOWS**

**COMMENDED**

**Treehugger, Summer 2005**

Memory is wet ink, sticky to touch,  
So that when you do, your fingerprints peel  
And cling to the image, my dad's toolbox-glue.

Memory is wet ink, underdeveloped,  
As I am only two, my brain as soft as the  
Bark I sink my softly swollen palms into.

Memory is wet ink, a permanent annoyance,  
Brown-green stains on denim knees, arts and crafts  
Gone wrong; no one ever told me what to do.

Memory is wet ink, wet branches after rain,  
Sap slicked like baby's hair post-bath, I laugh: oh, tree,  
I don't remember being born and neither do you.

## TOBY MORRISON

## COMMENDED

### A Tree

This daily tree  
Is like a half anchor  
    of routine.  
Many days I've passed  
    It  
Easily forgotten days.  
The unforgotten tree  
Is a well-shaped arrowhead  
But one large branch  
    Swings  
    Out  
        And pockets the air  
        And sometimes sunlight  
    --  
        --  
            -- Is like a slide  
I ignore it in the morning often;  
At the early angle, it's obscured by housing.  
Returning, I notice that whimsical arm, etched in intricate bark  
Waving good afternoon.