

THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER POETRY PRIZES 2020

TREES

Judged by Peter McDonald A. E. Stallings Rebecca Watts

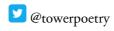
OXFORD TOWER POETRY 2020 Tower Poetry is an organisation based at Christ Church, University of Oxford, which offers opportunities and resources for young British poets.

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.

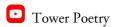
> **Tower Poetry** Christ Church Oxford OX₁ 1DP

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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.

FIYINFOLUWA TIMOTHY OLADIPO

SECOND PRIZE

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.

AHANA BANERJI

THIRD PRIZE

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.

JOYCE CHEN

COMMENDED

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 dishwash 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.

SABRINA COGHLAN-JASIEWICZ

COMMENDED

Burial Rites

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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

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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
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-- 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.