SECRETS

Judged by
John Fuller
Christopher Reid
Peter McDonald
Tower Poetry is an organization 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.

THE CHRISTOPHER TOWER POETRY PRIZES 2018

First prize
Richard
TARANEH PERYIE
Bristol Grammar School

Second prize
untold secret to my mother
LUCY THYNNE
Lady Margaret School, London

Third prize
A Secret No Longer
ROBBI SHER
Highgate School, London

Commended
How to Invert a Hyperbolic Function
ANNIE FAN
Rugby High School, Warwickshire

Corner table at Tom’s Cafe
MIRANDA GREEN
Wells Cathedral School, Somerset

The Mermaid
ZIQI YAN
Westminster School, London
Richard

I used to think all men were slaves to me, but
with the keen flick of your eye, faster than a serpent’s tongue,
you swept through Jerusalem and called me to the foot of your bed.
You smirk; some strong aphorism has played on your lips.
Sweet, cool ablution; confessions to men in red; hermits fasting.
All answer to you. The smooth lines of your neck, the arch of your back.
I wake sweated over, filthy with want, full of threat and fallacy.

I want to scream, to sing about the whiteness of your throat,
your cool nakedness. Ungodly red infection of the mind.
Like the black-faced eremite on his pilgrimage
from Edessa to the Holy Land, my feet will blister on stone.

You know me by an unspoken name.
Like the hailing chorus of Gabriel’s wings,
sounds that roll off your tongue, prickle against my skin.
I’ll never see fire or hear the sea again.
From fertile sin, out shall spring an apple tree,
share its fruit with me. I will stand by you.
King of England – dead, a sexless bedfellow.

I gave you my soul. I damned the sweet rivers of wine and
the protection of the archangel’s wing – seized hell as my home.
And you gave me your sister. A marriage of starched sheets.
Her sweet eyes aping your own,
a reflection so dear it made me weep.
And is this how you’ll keep me? A dog on a chain?
A mocking ghost of the memory I kept of you.
The faint likeness of blue irises? I will not ask.
Two crowns cannot kiss.

I want to rip out your tongue with my teeth.
I want to ask why your face is so calm, as if you don’t remember
the embrace we shared, heat that passed between
our bodies like ghosts. I could tear the hair from my head,
watch it scatter like leaves, the hours burning
on their own funeral pyre.
If only god had reached down from Elysium
and scorched my tongue to blistered snakeskin.

You will forget, and history will never know,
like water slipping through cracks in the sky into the ocean
petrified into pillars of salt useless to a parched beggar’s throat.
We will disappear, but even now I will collect each moment,
each sound, each soft sighing whisper like precious stones.
I will etch into rock Once, I loved the king of France
and keep it as a pebble in my palm,
quietly turning its smooth sides around in my hands.

Offish waters
give their colour to you.
The Seine.
Now, we can say nothing at all.
now, a canvas of skin, lathered
in orange foam. they bend her back
in a wide arc: this
to spread out your ribs
and i think of moth wings, eyelids, legs—
things that open as though to reveal us
but cannot.
see how easy it is to push that first
needle into her, swallowed then out
to be replaced by larger tubes:
 puncture, reflush, aspirate—
a stomach slit, easy as tongues
through freshwater.
soon they will haul out the body.
it will be grey-blue, and alive.

Robby Sher

A Secret No Longer

but somehow we know it will heal itself
in the morning. what is left to say
about this night? shy, the sky begins to fold
in on itself; presents the darkness we know
only behind eyelids. i don’t know who to tell
so i shout it, huge, down my own throat—
while you are kissing my forehead, cool,
the sheet so thin it leaves a bruise.

Shy, the sky begins to fold
in on itself; presents the darkness we know
How to Invert a Hyperbolic Function

After Chen Chen / After Cathy Linh Che

Take the cone away from the cone and
don’t applaud it. I like to say that the body
is a feat of engineering – how God himself
plotted the range of arcsinh, these bright
mountains and light pollutions. Even if
God has never spoken of anything like
the night sky, cityscape to cityscape.
In my sister’s long decade of a kitchen,
we shell boiled peanuts and she says
learning the area is all there is; that
Kepler himself used the constant
for his calculations of Hyperion,
hamburger moon. She fries mu’er
with steak and laughs and runs
about her kitchen, a place that she bought before
I was born. My sister, who predates
the Internet. What is it like to know a quasar without
accretion, to spin before the vast imagined
planes of her cooking in 3D? I like to say
every hand that’s touched my body is modern maths,
German: the word for dream, traum; the fusions –
I thought holomorphic and holographic were
the same word. Do you know? Does she
care? I can add the number one to the
number one. New York is the meat
of our distance, fashioned brilliant
in its false orbits, the large kitchen.
A dream of every post-racialism and damn
kind of flesh. So, what am I eating?:
A partial differential of my mother, stranger
Gods and their hypersurface domains.
She does not know about the night I ran
and threw myself onto a bridge, another
feat of engineering. The steel was not
New York, a cityscape, a microlocal analysis,
a girl left unlocked and slipped right inside;–
this is the least remarkable thing:
I am my sister’s sister. I don’t know how to
solve the years, a construct connecting us.
It took more than a decade of planning to find
the God particle; its science and differentials,
a pulling force; to bind Earth to light and her to me.
Corner Table at Tom’s Cafe

He had only just sat down,
She’s late, she was doing her hair
And couldn’t decide what to wear.
He says he has to leave town.

He doesn’t have time to stick around,
She just feels a chill in the air.
She got those falling down the stairs.
He’ll stay for half an hour.

She already ate,
He’s doing great,
She gets a text, from No-one.
“This has been... fun.”
She’s sorry she made him wait.
He’s going to be late.

The Mermaid

Enter a wanton dreamer of wrinkled and tarnished water.
Who’s this strange fish rising, shivering, shrivelling, gliding,
thirsty eyes thirsting for shore?

She could be any woman at all, and yet
better mad with the crowd than sane all alone.

Legless nymph of sleepless sorrow.
Since fear is cracked and shame misshapen,
the water torture of her secret pours into
the evacuated channels of her spine,

This scar, racing down the insides of her thighs,
left / right: both her protection and her mutilation:
in cutting her tail, she carves out a home.

Of course, the children point and cry,
not incurious, nor nocent yet:
why she smells of blight, white froggy
webbed fingers and a need to have her
brittle bones near the great opulent water.

They know there is something they do not yet know,
better mad with the crowd than sane all alone.