

## Betjeman Poetry Prize 2019 – Finalists (in alphabetical order)

### Blank Paper

I have never seen the Arctic.  
Its dream-pale coast is populated with  
No memories.

I know it only through flat maps and brittle names.  
I trace the frayed coast of Greenland  
Laminated map smooth under feeling fingers.  
The Svalbard islands; frosted fragments,  
Sharp shattered shards.  
'Spitsbergen' and the icebergs  
with sapphire shadows.  
'Baffin Bay' and the dark fins cutting the glossed water –  
'Cape Farewell', and a girl straining her eyes  
To watch the distant white sails dip – and a man  
Who will never come back, listening to the crack  
Of encroaching ice.

The Vikings knew the power of a name.  
They called their new land 'Greenland'  
Tempting settlers with a fragile image  
Of rolling hills and woody hollows.  
And settlers came – with tense shadowed fear  
As the icicles grasped the stiff bows. The hope  
Of something better ahead – and at last the hot pang  
As the bleak coasts spread before them.  
That familiar, matchless pain  
Of dreams melting to reality. Wan ice crumpling  
Gulped down by a groaning sea.

I know the Arctic from dimmed illustrations  
And dusty dull-covered volumes;  
Quaintly technical, formal and aloof accounts  
By whalemens, and the voyagers  
Seeking the passage through the elusive  
Shifting ice floes.

Between the stiff sentences I glimpsed bravery, recklessness and glory  
Sparkle of frozen wrecks and cracking cold-winged skies  
The worn white bones of a forgotten story  
Torn breath, timbers splitting as the frost bit deep  
Blue broken mirrors and misted melting blades.  
Snow; as silent, deep and dangerous as sleep –  
Northern lights hurling across spinning ice-sheets –  
High-beating danger, black seas  
And the red midnight sun when light and darkness meet.

Steel-edged winds; salt searing, sea swelling, mast felling  
And the white wild heart of a land that is never telling.

## Where I Shine

I am the sun that shines  
so bright  
I grow the plants  
where I shine my light

I am the moon  
that shines at night  
that covers wrongs  
now out of sight

I am the fox  
you may hear me bawl  
from belly of forest  
you hear my call

I am the tree  
that sees it all  
my leaves in autumn  
wrinkled, they fall

I am the sun  
that places you near,  
like sky-born compass  
I steer you here.

Lillia Hammond (10)

## Evensong

The path runs with a river  
of cow parsley and campion.  
White and pink.  
Air heavy, honeysuckle sweet  
draped over hogweed heads which push up  
and up in fat green knuckles  
to grasp at hawthorn  
her clustered blossoms like  
fragile snowflakes, slowly melting.  
Blackbird sits amongst the buds.  
Black against white.  
Dappling the path  
with his evensong  
which unfurls in spirals and swirls  
like the tendrils of vetch,  
moving to the pulse of insect hearts  
softened by dusty moth wings.  
He sings for me and I listen  
until the trees disappear into dusk.  
Grey upon grey.  
Until his song slips into silence  
and we flow  
safe in our secret  
towards a new day.

Emily Hunt (12)

## My Place

To wake up to  
Hear the  
Everlasting beep of the horns

Constantly smelling the sweaty workers  
And every now and then the  
Pong of the street men  
In the door of the shops  
The smell of my gran baking  
A freshly caught tray of fish  
Longing for dinner and sleep

Offensive language  
Flying from the streets

Removing the skin of  
Oranges and getting  
My fingers dirty  
Another  
Night  
I dream  
Another day I scream

Vlad Mototolea (12)

## The Corridor

The door slides shut and I gaze, eyes wide,  
At the wire-crossed window, far too high.  
Stay there, said Granny, this will all be over soon.  
Hold onto Teddy, you won't feel alone.  
So I stand on tip-toes, brave boy, chin up  
Pulling on Teddy's ear for luck  
If I learn my times table, Teddy I say  
My mummy will come home today

One times one is one.  
I remember the last time Mum  
Was home, smelling of lip gloss and cookie dough.  
Watch the oven, she said. Don't lick the bowl.  
But I wore her out, and she lay.  
While the shadows slid back into day,  
On the sofa still, white face, grey hair.  
Just too tired for the stairs.

Two times one used to be two.  
Fingers on the ledge, peeking through.  
Grown-ups huddled together, pulling out tubes.  
Seagull squawking of seaside shoes  
Are they getting her ready? Packing her case?  
I hope she remembers the card I made.  
'Get Well Soon' in red felt-tip  
Heart made of glitter, I love you. Kiss, kiss.

Footsteps, running now. Gowns like wings.  
Crowding the passage, door closing again.  
Granny crying. 'Please God, do something!'.  
Does she mean me? Did I look too soon?  
Is it because I licked the spoon?  
Will Granny be mad? My tummy in knots  
Oh no! Teddy's ear is coming off.

Two times two. Is it six or four?  
I stand, my face pressed to the door.  
Then out they file, I'm pushed aside.  
The door left open, far too wide.  
Too bright, too silent. And I can see her there  
Lying still, white face, white hair.  
And next to the bed, forgotten on the ground  
My Get Well card,  
Glitter face down.

Fin Perry (13)

## Renaissance Rondeau

A choir sings Monteverdi,  
The sound echoes back as T30\*.  
With a flat roof, the voices ring clear,  
A dome makes them bounce by the chandelier  
In a church or monastery.

Best proportions express harmony:  
Echo notes both piano and forte.  
Ratios pleasing to see and hear,  
When a choir sings.

World and water become spheres readily,  
Saw Renaissance architect Alberti.  
Perfect shapes delight eye and ears  
Like Greek theatres where sound was sharp as spears,  
From ancient times to seventeen-thirty  
Maths sails in the air, where a choir sings.

\* T30 is the standard reverberation time in a church.

Herbie Wares (10)