



## Geoffrey Weeden Poetry Prize

Winning and Commended Entries

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#### **Category A 9-12 years old 4**

*1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Seasons by Jin Lee 4*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Draw Breath... by Isobel Sudhakar 5*

*3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Omisalj by Emma Kecskes 6*

#### **Category B 13-18 years old 7**

*1<sup>st</sup> Prize: I still hear your call by Nabiha Ali 7*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Eulogy by Daphne Harries 10*

*Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: My Parents Still Ask About You And I Have Nothing To Tell Them by Magdalena Bone 11*

*Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Something I drew by Nina Brown 14*

*Commended: The Cull by Leah Wiseman 15*

*Commended: Please don't ask me what I've learnt at school by Anais Lipscomb 16*

*Commended: Draw breath. by Wang Xu 17*

#### **Category C Over 19 years old 18**

*1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Small Duties: The Woman of the House by Noel King 18*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Ventolin by Gabriel Griffin 23*

*3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: The Purpose of the Place: the yellow-blinded fable by John Gallas 24*

*Commended: A Kind of Circle by Jenny Mitchell 26*

*Commended: Shed by Anna Botwright 27*

*Commended: What is about to happen by Alison Binney 28*

*Commended: Pilgrimage by Michael Heery 30*

*Commended: That's where I draw breath by Heather Mathew 32*

*Draw Breath by Geoffrey Weeden 34*

## The Geoffrey Weeden Poetry Prize

Geoffrey Weeden was a Quaker and a Poet. His Quakerism shaped his whole life. He wrote a poem ***Draw Breath***, much loved by Quakers, about the experience of attending a Quaker Meeting for Worship. The Quaker form of worship is a silent collective practice created in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century and still in use among the worldwide community of Quakers.

Geoffrey's poem hangs outside the Meeting Room of Kingston Quaker Centre in Kingston upon Thames in South West London. It is reproduced at the end of this booklet.

Geoffrey died in 2021 and left a generous bequest to Kingston Quaker Meeting without specifying a purpose. Our Kingston worshipping community, together with Geoffrey's family, agreed that it would be a fitting memorial to him to hold a poetry prize competition on the theme of Draw Breath. This booklet provides the winning and commended entries from the competition, selected by three Quaker Poets, Kathleen Bell, Harvey Gillman and Stevie Krayner, to whom we extend our heartfelt thanks. There were well over 200 entries and we greatly appreciate the time and skill which the judges applied to the selection of winners and commended entries.

We also warmly thank all those who submitted entries to the competition. We have greatly appreciated them. Thank you, friends young and old. We hope that the reader will agree that these poems show great creativity and technical skill.

Copyright of these poems remains with the poets.

## Category A 9-12 years old

### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Seasons by Jin Lee

Draw a breath, then let it out.

Does it travel with the wind on an autumn evening,  
Ready to deliver your thoughts to Fall?

So where does it go after it passes the gates of orange,  
Does it get captured by Winter,  
Like a monster in its lair of white?

Does it manage to escape from the Ice Queen's grasp,  
Slithering to the trees to play with the giggling blossom,  
Where it meets the start of the fiery sun's slumber?

Does it rest for a moment then begin its journey,  
To the sound of crashing waves and screams,  
Of children devouring ice-cream and the warmth of the sun?

Then what happens,  
After you've waited and waited,

Does your breath come back to be let out by you again,  
As you sigh admiring the world's four kingdoms?

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Draw Breath... by Isobel Sudhakar

Keep living, Draw breath,  
If the world is unforgiving,  
Draw breath,  
If you lose the one you love,  
Draw breath,  
If you are alone,  
Draw breath,  
If you forget who you are,  
Draw breath,  
If you are different,  
Draw breath,  
If you aren't loved,  
Draw breath,  
If you forget to love,  
Draw breath,  
If you feel this poem,  
Draw Breath...

3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Omisalj by Emma Kecskes

I came out of the freezing water  
And placing my foot steady on a rock  
Climbing out I pushed myself up  
Onto the second floor of the heavy rock

I looked down  
The water flashed threateningly blue  
One more level and I'd be at the top  
The familiar tightness in my body grew

The rocks stinging my hand  
At the top the wind howled  
The smell of sea water hit my face  
My heart beat in my ears loud

I told myself: I got this!  
I heard my cousin yelling words of fun  
I gathered myself and looked down in the endless blue  
And drawing a breath, I jumped

## Category B 13-18 years old

### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize: I still hear your call by Nabiha Ali

Grand  
father, I do like  
to circle past our  
wild pond at dawn  
when the air is still  
cold and blue and  
breathe in the crisp,  
clean air and  
light a match  
and throw it down  
and stand and  
watch the coral flames  
foaming over  
those red-knuckled peonies  
we planted when I was four years old (you told me  
they were the homes of butterflies, those big, green  
things) and the  
poetry I had written  
when I was four  
teen and insipid and  
needed some  
thing to grip  
between my teeth  
  
before the peonies are all  
gone, before the morning ground  
vomits its black reeds

over my awkward ankles  
I will sink, snail-like, back into  
that mud as though  
after all, I am only  
ever roots stripped  
bare of their bulging mother-plant;  
I hear the siren of this sea pass  
over the shingle and sand; imagine  
the mermaids, their  
glittering skin and perfect tails  
and streams  
of cold, black hair; and I  
know: this is where we go when our minds are  
number than our hands  
and feet, where the  
sea-coloured flames duck  
and flinch, curving in  
side their shelled cups and  
the unborn leaves blink blue  
over the rim of the sky  
and the flowers never sing un  
less it rains  
and the people all  
remember that they have  
no face and their  
hands crawl up in place  
of their eyes  
and they forget  
to wake up each morning;



Grand  
father I confess  
that sometimes I  
have dreams of you  
clambering barefoot  
over the silver-peppered stars  
before you tumble  
back down  
to earth again  
and that when I wake  
the terracotta roof  
folds in on me like  
a fat, green sea

Grand  
father,  
these are  
the shells of our marine world;  
and when  
the world  
spills apart like a great pink bean  
in the auburn sky, slowly  
I will rise up for air  
clamber back into that other world,  
and kneel down  
beside the waterlogged leaves  
to make new words from this violet ash like  
the ash we sprinkled back into the sea moments  
after you had left.

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Eulogy by Daphne Harries

Heart monitor bleeps

when red flares at me with

contempt,

a reminder of my failings.

Hold a pruned, paper-thin hand

in mine that somehow feels frailer. Shutting my eyes for a man,

a god, I don't believe in.

Fulfill the cliché of trading places,

so you could draw breath once more.

Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: My Parents Still Ask About You And I Have Nothing To Tell Them  
by Magdalena Bone

7:17pm

Some Wednesday evening in December

And I'm standing out on black frost, toe on a ball Because training was cancelled (again).

Draw breath,

Tilt my head and lock with twinkling eyes

Exhale; watch the tumbling stream of cloud

And I wonder if it condenses on the walls of my lungs

For why else when I try to speak

Would my words come out so sickly and wet?

Another plume of breath

And I wonder if it is seeping into the chambers of my heart and

Turning them cold; freezing

Numb and unfeeling, like bare fingers in the snow,

And I wonder if my ice heart will ever thaw in summertime,

Or if there will ever be another summertime to thaw my ice heart.

Draw breath

And my tongue is heavy,

I want to rip the skin from around my neck

And iron out the folds

And I wonder what use to me are love handles When everyone I love can't seem to handle

Gazing at themselves in my ice heart.

Claw at the crevasses of my palms

Dried to white scales

And half of me wants to only eat dust

Like the Serpent should

The half that fixates

Obsesses; the ceaseless drive

Blind to a future that is not the one  
I lay out for myself each night  
With next morning's clothes  
And I wonder what life is there to live if it is not that?

Draw breath,  
I check my phone  
And he's been ignoring me religiously for weeks but  
She's posted a picture of his cat  
The tsunami that follows the earthquake,  
The overwhelming urge to disappear  
To delete all evidence that I ever did exist,  
And thought and felt and am, but  
Oh, the swallowing impulse  
To throw my empty, futile reflection into the gnawing abyss  
So I don't have to watch her suffocate.  
The fear of failure;  
And I wonder how much more I can endure  
Before I shed my sinner's skin and slither into the coward's new form:  
I'll be a boy called Thiago freshly arrived in Massachusetts  
With a passion for basketball though only 5'4"  
Who always knows exactly what to say and  
Who only gives his fire heart to the right people  
Who sings and dances and never wears headphones and  
Who never grows weary from carrying expectations  
And he could grow all hues of flowers in his window box  
And he would be bold enough to take the hand of his friend When he needs the touch  
And he would never have to grieve the living  
And he could love  
And he would love, and love and love  
Incandescently, feverishly, with everything he has and is

And I wonder if Thiago would smile, in the rain and cold,  
Even when his breath formed a crown above his head?  
And I wonder if they would notice that the girl with the ice heart is gone?  
And that she isn't coming back  
And I wonder if they would rejoice  
For death and birth are both just the start of something forgettable,  
And the Earth still spins  
And the sun still rises  
And the days are still cold Exhale-

7:18pm

And I realise I've been wondering too hard  
Too fast  
For too long  
Like sliding down the handrail of an endless spiral staircase.  
Draw breath and it's shaky, Sharp and stinging  
Close my eyes and count to four  
As I trace the mountains and valleys of my fingers  
Draw breath, exhale. Draw breath, exhale.  
Pause.  
Draw breath,  
And this time, when I exhale,  
The mist is just mist;  
My heart is just a heart;  
And I think fervently of the summer to come.

Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: Something I drew by Nina Brown

The first thing I drew as a child was not a scribble  
not a potato with eyes and stick-like limbs

not a Picasso or a masterpiece.

Something too well-drawn to be hung

in the

National Gallery but something vital

something the birds

bears beetles

would be gone without. Something

as prepossessing as Aphrodite

if we could only see it.

## Commended: The Cull by Leah Wiseman

She is standing on the ridge of the meadow, engulfed by the gentle grass surrounding her.

Painted 100 shades of brown and sprinkled with white.

She steps towards the foxgloves, the sun gleaming off her glossy fur.

Walking towards the forest her small ear twitches.

She sniffs the warm breeze, drifting across the meadow, rustling the oak trees. Nothing.

She carries on in a gentle trot.

You approach her carefully, so as not to disturb her dream of happiness. In one hand, a map, in the other, a gun.

She senses you, her prey instincts kick in. They were never enough against mankind.

Sneaking round the side, you hide behind a boulder, an island in a sea of grass. She has spotted you, her dark eyes focus on you.

Why are you hiding human, why are you scared?

She steps forward, defying her will to run away.

Walks towards you, braver than you ever were or will be.

Time is slowing, your finger reaches for

the trigger, you pull it back in

One

Long

Movement

The bang echoes in your ears, you will never forget that sound.

For a moment you lock eyes with her, her dark pupils widen as she glimpses her fate.

In that split second your cold heart is filled with regret. Too late now.

Her eyelids start to flicker

You turn away.

Commended: Please don't ask me what I've learnt at school by Anais Lipscomb

Please don't ask me what I've learnt at school

I'll tell you what I've learnt at school

Sartre said "Life begins on the other side of despair."

I think Sartre was never too scared to turn the heater on because he couldn't pay the  
bill

Or saw his mother drinking gin on an empty stomach because the rent was overdue

But look enthusiastic or your own ethics teacher will tear you apart.

Sometimes it's like waiting for your hair to grow. I'm sorry, that was a horrible thing to say.

I'm angry because you're ill and I know it's not your fault but it breaks me. I am selfish and I hate  
these vile thoughts that keep me awake at night.

I am even jealous of your induced unconsciousness

Rolled into a ball, Free of pain,

So beautiful.

I love watching you sleep

but forgive me for switching on the light every ten minutes

to check that you're still breathing.

I'm just having a bad dream, that's all.



Commended: Draw breath. by Wang Xu

1, (Draw breath 1)

The mother said in her dream: It's time to eat

I said outside my dream: Hmm

I and China woke up

2, (Draw breath 2)

I was born in the village before crying

Grandpa arrived in heaven before the cooking smoke

My mother twisted my thoughts into threads and carried me on the soles of my hometown's shoes

3, (Draw breath 3)

The mother knelt on the ground

Pick out grains of earth

The rest That's food Niang said

Niang said

We are outsiders

Don't care

Beneath the soil is life

## Category C Over 19 years old

### 1<sup>st</sup> Prize: *Small Duties: The Woman of the House* by Noel King

Removing all metal clasps and fasteners  
from your wedding dress, in case of rust damage,  
placing it in lint-free paper for long-term storage.

Sewing in a bit of home straw to repair  
the shop-bought cheap hat your husband  
is wearing in the meadow.

Tying a muslin cloth over your enamel jug  
to filter the unpasteurised milk  
into the glass pint bottle for Mr Devane next door.

Sweeping with the same brush-handle your mother-in-law used,  
numerous brush-heads nailed on.  
The holding part has the print of the woman's grip.

Gathering the newspapers the men have read  
and almost in temper  
shoving them under the armchair cushions.

Washing the ware and allowing them to drain,  
enjoying a cigarette and cup of tea  
before the drying and putting away.

Opening all doors to let the coal-men through  
with their loads, tut-tuting the marks left by their muddy boots,  
sweeping them away.

Jolting the odd time a bird goes smack  
into the kitchen window,  
checking that the latest one hasn't cracked it.

Dropping tiny drips of Parazone into the T-towels  
soaking in a pan, making sure the detergent spreads evenly,  
not cause white spots on the cloth.

Folding the edges of lettuce leaves  
so that they don't protrude untidily  
between the slices of bread in your children's sandwiches.

Turning the television off  
and going down on our hands and knees  
to say the rosary.

Covering the television set at night with an old circular table cloth  
to keep the dust away,  
your fingers catching in the static on the front of the screen.

Shouting *Tom and Gerry*  
whenever RTÉ unexpectedly shows one of their cartoons,  
as a gap between programmes.

Running a damp cloth the length of the washing line  
to take the bird-shit away  
before pegging the clothes up.

Briskly whipping off your apron  
and putting on a clean one

when the priest's or doctor's car pulls into the yard.

Kissing the corpse of your mother-in-law,  
a secret sight of relief  
from the number of times she berated you.

Pulling the hard-rind edges off the rasher scraps  
after tea-time before feeding them to the house dogs,  
assured they couldn't choke.

Only answering the front door when the caller taps the window,  
treating with suspicion knocks on the hard front door,  
peering out a concealed window to see who's there.

Watching your Black & White television silently  
with Sonny Devane from next door  
as the US soldiers withdraw from Siagon.

Turning the television off and plugging it out  
when thunder and lightening is in the air,  
regardless of what happened to be on.

Smelling the first hint of porter from the breath  
of your seventeen-year-old son, the whiff of cigarette smoke  
off your sixteen-year-old daughter.

Taking stock of your medals, miraculous and otherwise,  
disentangling the pieces of wool  
that formed necklaces around them.

Asking your lads if their homework's done

and knowing from the yes or the no  
whether they were telling truth or lies.

Trying to *shoo* a stray pigeon  
back out the back door  
uninjured.

Listening for the approaching family car,  
the relief now you could sleep  
as the elder ones are home from the dances.

Scissor-slicing the full-length of a trout  
your husband caught  
on his hobby fish.

Finding time in the evenings to read Trollope's,  
Palliser novels because they are on the telly  
and you want the back story.

Making an egg-cup size portion of wallpaper paste  
to touch up the guest room  
before you brother comes home from America.

Admiring your English-raised granddaughter  
all dolled up in tartan, listening to her explaining  
her love for The Bay City Rollers.

Kneading with your two middle knuckles a full circle edge  
of an apple tart ready for the oven –  
apples of the windfall your grandchildren collected.

Letting your snow-white hair out of its bun

to hang down at bedtime, in the morning your dexterous fingers  
magically put it back up in an instant.

Reading Walter Macken's, The Silent People,  
trying to comprehend your own grandmother's  
struggle through the famine.

Mourning the deaths  
of your infant twin grandsons  
one day after the other.

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Ventolin by Gabriel Griffin

It's not just a matter of  
wind and washing; rice fields  
ripple and shimmer like  
satin bolts of sky unrolled,  
poplars shiver, coughing crows flap from  
frayed nests.

On the line tights struggle  
to leap off and run, legs elfed  
in their own mesh. I breathe  
cold scents, goose pimples  
bud feathers on my naked arms  
I could fly with the wind.

Sheets mute into sails,  
whicker, tug to break free,  
to sail off unpegged towards  
the hills horizons, skim  
over tossing seas, land  
in some far country where

washing isn't top of the list  
on Mondays, where you can run  
without knotting your heart strings,  
breathe and not catch your breath.  
My chest whistles, the cock gyrates.  
I breathe in, breathe in, but cannot  
b l o w

3<sup>rd</sup> Prize: The Purpose of the Place: the yellow-blinded fable by John Gallas

Then somewhere I arrived -  
who travelled dumb & careless there by plane & bus & bumboat,  
bored, with faded worry, & in light as clean as glass - till sleepysoft I stood, a little shaky in the sun,  
& watched the sea wash up towards my toes -  
& saw the waves' whole softlypumping ring  
around me & this place -  
smaller than my sister's lawn.

A few bent trees - some bunches of bamboo, a little torn,  
fingering the air - one hot 'aute bush, purpleburned -  
& nothing more. Even the sea said hush around my feet -  
& so I stayed, stillstood.

The only house was near enough,  
its two brightyellow wall-blinds tied  
between the two blue vasts of sky & sea  
& me -  
like squares of sunshine's skin.

Imagine: in

the atlas of my soul  
I could not make a thing so emptied of all thought.  
It was not beauty, but a blanch: & I dissolved, brought,  
outdone and dazzled, to an island blank  
and bare as being's breath.

Later, who knows when, the bumboat burbled back to pick me up,  
who had not moved. The yellow squares took fire.  
I watched them fall astern, distilling to a tiny orange flare.



I found a sticky seedpod in my hand - but not one memory –

only the yellow blinds between the sea,

the sky,

and me.

Commended: A Kind of Circle by Jenny Mitchell

Breathe on me,  
Breath of God  
my father sings  
on his last night, laid on a sunken bed.  
Every breath he takes slowly pulses through the  
ward until I feel his strength – almost lost –  
becoming mine. When a crooked hand reaches out,  
I forgive the days he was not there when I was young,  
the nights my mother cried his name or cursed –  
her final, low-key song sent round the room with grace  
and force. I was surprised  
to know her love still lingered  
as she sang Breathe on me,  
Breath of God.

Commended: Shed by Anna Botwright

Mine will be empty,  
Water tight and warm  
And smell of sap  
And cut edges.

I might admit a chair  
To sit obliquely  
To the window.

I will sit, just sit  
In the deliquescent light  
Until I am dissolved in it.

The sun will warm my shed  
And the timbers will draw breath.  
We will be peace.

Commended: What is about to happen by Alison Binney

might not be a catastrophe.

There probably isn't a blood clot  
behind your left eye.

That invisible tumour you've nursed  
for thirty years could give you  
a few decades yet.

There's no need to check your pulse. The plane will stay up just fine without you knowing how.

Your friend has almost certainly forgiven  
the joke you told,  
forgetting her dog had died.

You're bound to have locked the front door;  
grills are not known  
for turning themselves on.

No one is coming to take your degree away,  
or your Brownie badges,  
or your passport.

Most likely they won't find out  
you're a fraud at work. You're not  
going to be eaten by cats.

So what is about to happen?  
Just this: the gift of your next breath  
drawn up through soles

planted on good ground,  
held in the swell of your ribs,  
released into generous light.

Commended: Pilgrimage by Michael Heery

We reach the end of Lleyn  
opposite Bardsey Island.  
Beyond headland and shoreline  
the steel flat Irish Sea  
shining with amber light.  
A thousand gulls scream overhead  
streaming out toward their roost  
scratching into our nerves.

The sea below slices the land  
cutting a wound in the cliff.  
Rag-stone steps climb the gash  
broken relics of pilgrims who  
struggled with wind, rain, mists  
their memories of home  
to divine some hopeful meaning  
in God's clockwork mysteries.

Pilgrims sought the Celtic saints  
Cadfan, Dyfrig, Deiniol.  
They believed sins were shed  
crossing the sea to Bardsey.  
We watch in silence as  
a seal appears, wheatears flit  
choughs wheel and fall  
ravens make their mournful calls.

We seek relief from other troubles  
those ticking cancer cells

that divide and multiply  
in the flesh of your breast.  
Whispers blow in off the sea  
stirring the spirits of pilgrims  
the raven souls of saints.  
Listen, listen to this prayer.

Commended: *That's where I draw breath* by Heather Mathew

Here.

When I push my feet into the diamond glitter of seashore sand,  
and lean against the hunch and shrug of wave and wind.

That's where I draw breath.

I dance to the pointe and patter of sanderling toes  
and chase the gasp of ebb and flow

As worm cast mouths exhale,  
and the dew of conch and cowrie splutter in the foam

There.

When I scuff my boots against the autumnal crush, And my  
hands explore the frown and furrow of ancient bark. That's  
where I draw breath.

I sing to the tune of wren and robin,

The mezzo and quaver of the forest fret.

My stage is lit by a sycamore smoulder,  
and twists of saffron suspended on a spider's thread.

Then.

In the space between the swallows turn,  
when the cheeks of cumulus puff and swell,  
and ease like putty in crosshatched hills.

That's where I draw breath.

When church bells caw and shimmer,  
a hawthorn peal of blossom mist,

I lay in their confetti, as all around me  
the hedgerow ruffles with the cricket's leap.

Now.

When my head thumps from thinking, and tension holds me tight, and  
my eyes hurt from screen time, and my mind is closed and sore,  
I breath in wave and saffron, and exhale a rescue flare, and settle in



the drifts of memory, suspended in their balm.

## Draw Breath by Geoffrey Weeden

Breathe in the quiet purpose of this place;  
Through outward stillness, seek a calm within.  
Here we can find forgiveness and forgive,  
Here find the healing miracle begin.

Breathe out the busy world, the teeming mind,  
The follies, fears and failures of the week;  
Breathe out contention, pettiness and pride,  
And wait in trust for "that of God" to speak.

Breathe in communion, friend with quiet friend,  
Each drawing closer in this timeless hour;  
As all our different needs and gifts are drawn  
To the one source of comfort, love and power.

Breathe out at last, to God, the heart's full thanks  
That we have seen this vision, known this grace;  
Renewed through love, let us that love extend  
Through all our daily life beyond this place.

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