

1st Place Night Bathing by Rosaleen Lynch

We're teenagers bathing at night in the Irish sea, a bath of laughter and lemon scented washing-up liquid, stolen from our summer kitchen jobs in a seaside chipper, squirted into hands and rubbed onto hot and greasy bodies from nights of chip fat and no extractor, careful not to get cold or the fat congeals and instead of washing off, spreads a layer of moonlight-white on our sun-browned bodies and you say, come winter we might be glad of fat and take it in handfuls from the grease trap, we might even wear it to swim the English channel, go to work in London and have the baby there and I say I just hope we don't end up sleeping on the beach in snow, and when the tourists leave and that last night before it all, unwashed in blankets by the driftwood fire, we eat cold chips, our fingers slick and gritty with salt and sand, and you say something and I look out, inhaling the sea air, smoke filled and seasoned with the smell of chips and vinegar and a faint hint of washing-up liquid lemon, and I wish the stars were the off-white plastic stick-on ones my nan put up when I moved in with her, that glowed in the dark she said for me, and next morning on the shore of our young lives, when the clouds have swallowed all our stars, and the sea has taken away our fire, and the lemon scent is truly gone, we watch a seal pup wash up on the beach.

2nd Place Heartland by Carolyn Carter

The path to the beach was sandy, pock marked with shells and sea kale the summer we arrived. My coming and going turned the edge like a pleat in a pasture. The first time, I crept along, uncertain and fearful. Compared to the suburbs it was extraordinary. Gusts strong enough for tamarisk trees to lurch sideways pushed me off my feet. I reached for the hand rail and pulled up, breathless.

A boy ran past, into the wind. I'd seen him in the village so often he was landscaped. He came back, saw I held the railing and turned away.

I wore a blue dress on my fifteenth birthday, the day I spoke to Michael. The hem flapped against my ankles as I ran across the sand. The water mark stained.

I walked every day, swift and shoeless. I was lonely, the beach, hazy – inviting. Michael was drawing. Tangled kelp and ferny fronds rippled across a pool at his feet. I sat beside him and remember the paper – thick, creamy, clipped to a board he held out.

The folds of my dress transferred to paper. The weight of the hem pulled the fabric; precise and clinging. In the drawing I lean over a smooth, grey pebble, strands of wet hair cover my face. A few strokes of charcoal secured the heart of me and I gasped. I didn't see the drawing again, but I have it in mind – still.

Walking together, gulls cruising on the updraft, Michael chose words with care. He listened, as if my hesitation mattered. He was my beginning.

In the airing cupboard, among feathered pillows nobody needs I find a box. Inside, tucked away as if it might hatch, the pebble; a reminder of an empty beach and a boy who knew me.

3rd Place Charlie Up A Mountain by Audrey Niven

When Charlie was a wee wee boy, maybe three or four, his Granda put all the furniture in the middle of the room and covered it with old sheets.

‘Right,’ he said, opening out the stepladder he’d brought in from the shed. ‘Let’s get busy.’ He rolled up his sleeves, tucked his cigarette into the corner of his mouth, and started scraping away at the wallpaper. Charlie’s Gran busied herself through in the kitchen and didn’t come out until lunchtime.

When she brought them both sandwiches and a glass of milk, Charlie was sitting at the top of the stepladder, quite the thing, watching his Granda’s bald patch bobbing away as he shucked the flowery paper from the wall.

‘Chris Bonnington, are you now, boy? How’s the weather up there?’ she laughed, although Charlie was too wee to understand. His Granda straightened up and said something about a fine view from the summit and gave his Gran a wee kiss. Then he leant one elbow on the ladder by Charlie’s knees, and admired the bare wall as he chewed through his cheese and pickle.

When the time came for painting, Charlie was allowed to stir the can with a bamboo stick.

‘Man’s work, Charlie,’ his Granda said, ‘Do it right and it’ll always show.’ Charlie used both hands and stirred for all he was worth.

In a few days, the room was transformed, everything fresh and bright and modern. His Gran put up new curtains and set her ornaments in new places on the mantelpiece and display cabinet. Charlie watched it all from the top of the ladder, dizzier with every change.

‘Come on down, now, son,’ his Granda said at last, fitting his big hairy hands under Charlie’s oxters to lift him. ‘Ladder’s got to go back in the shed, eh? Yer Gran can’t be

dancing around this all day with her Hoover, can she?' Charlie cried for a while and then, as wee boys do, just seemed to forget all about it.

One time, a lot of years later, Charlie was sitting on the damp grass at the top of the Ben looking out over the loch. He watched the sun and the clouds dancing sparkles and shadows across its surface. He watched the greys and greens and purples of the landscape changing moment by moment and felt something stir at the very back of his mind, something familiar but just out of reach. As he bit into his sandwich he found himself thinking of his Granda, his big hands, the smell of him; remembered a feeling of being high up and comforted. It took over his whole being just then. It caught the back of his throat. And then, as quick as it came, it passed on, like a shower on a day in June.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Ships on Their Tongues

By Brian Holland

Some men catch butterflies and pin them to a board.

The check-out girl stared vacantly into the diverse displays arranged around the shop. A spangle of silver nose-rings spoiled her translucent skin that glowed as if it had been glazed and fired in a kiln.

She would be quite a catch – to the right collector.

The girl, blush with goodness, slid his groceries across the scanner.

Not for gloat value or collecting's sake, no. The possession of beauty is its own confirmation of their need.

She screwed her delicate lips together in a wasted kiss and shuffled more items off the conveyer.

Some fall in love at first sight and, although knowing nothing about the other, are so overcome by beauty they need to pin it to a board in their minds. SO, then they can possess it, forever.

He watched through bottle lenses as she silently completed her work. His latent thoughts hovering over the moments like a net above circling fish.

But, alas, the confinement of such beauty deprives the object of its very essence, then all that is left is a hollow spectre of what was originally there, a mere simulacrum of its authenticity.

'You're as pretty as a butterfly,' he said, passing her his credit card.

She smiled uncomfortably at the moisture on lips protruding venally from the rough scrub of a greying beard.

‘Men with love on their lips have beauty in their soul,’ adding as he left.

But men with iron in their hearts have ships on their tongues fraught with phoney cargoes that can slip easily into unmastered waters.

Looking beyond his shoulders, through the wide supermarket windows, she suddenly notices how dark the day had become.

And rain came like a lifting tide...

HIGHLY COMMENDED

The Girl Who Rides A Clydesdale Bareback Upon The Sand

By J.P.Relph

The beach is warming to the morning. The sea in frothing alarm, retreats. A girl on a galloping Clydesdale wakes the sand. She wears a dress the colour of tomorrow's sky and her dark curls whip, bring the taste of the sea into her mouth.

The big horse responds to the pressure and release of her coltish legs, the small hands entangled in his black mane. She doesn't sit still like a child on a grinning carousel pony, she rides him. He feels her fearlessness, he shares it.

Free from fieldwork, his legs create thunder, fetlocks swishing like Spanish dancers. Massive hooves plough crescents in the sand that are soon breeze-brushed away, as if the passage of the horse were a mirage, a secret.

In time, they leave the sand, the Clydesdale's feet disappearing into tall, coarse grasses. To a fence and the meadow beyond. Verdant velvet on which wildflowers appear hand embroidered; daisies, buttercups and the brazen flash of scarlet poppies.

The girl dismounts with grace, practiced. The Clydesdale stomps the ground, whinnies an ancient song. Summoned, the mare separates from the shade of Rowan trees, finding form. She is the colour of winter in a summer painting. Freshwater pearl, dappled like tree-shade, she shimmers the air.

The meadow colours brighten as the mare glides past, her hooves lost in flowers. At the fence, the two horses exchange hot breath, speaking a language too secret even for a girl who rides a Clydesdale bareback on the sand. Sitting on a tussock, bare feet explored by

seashore bugs, the girl picks tall daisies. Her sister will wear the joined stems in her hair, believe they are from a magic place.

The rendezvous comes to an end, as it must. The mare turns away, a shiver of gunsmoke kicking, a silvery whinny and she becomes shade. The girl back on the Clydesdale, daisies shoved in a sandy pocket, from grass to sand and he rockets. His mane, her hair; dark victory flags flying, her eyes squinting against salt spray.

The beach has warmed to the morning. The sea a blanket turned down, pressed smooth. The girl stretches along the galloping Clydesdale's gleaming neck and closes her eyes. She feels his joyous abandon, and she shares it.

Tomorrow they will shake the sands again, free and flying and fearless. To a rendezvous with a spectral mare. The girl will wear a dress the colour of meadow poppies and sea-mist in her hair.