



# Liverpool Poetry Prize

Winners &  
Contributors

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### A word from our judge:

I would like to thank Gregory Kearns and the team for organising the competition to help raise awareness of The Brain Charity and the valuable work that it does. I also wish to thank all the poets who took part and say how much I enjoyed reading the submissions. There was humour as I would expect, but moreover, many poems that really touched the heart. I have no direct experience of many of the neurological issues and conditions that featured, and if I'm honest, occasionally found myself out of my depth in some of the neuro-specific medical language. However, the over-riding impression the poems gave was of courage, determination and acceptance.

Choosing the winner from each category was particularly difficult, and more than once, I found myself wavering. However, a judge's job is to be judgemental, so I put on robes, my wig, and judged. Congratulations to them both.

*Roger McGough CBE*

## It's like being in an Ames Room

When they demand  
I read aloud,  
or stand in front  
of my classmates.

Their mouths distort  
in a weird mirror.  
*The mirror cracks from side to side*  
eating my face  
*for the curse is come upon me*  
in this house of fun.

Walls without right angles,  
a honeycomb trap.

Ground slides,  
quake-tremble-shudders  
under my chair.  
The page shrinks.  
Words magnify.

My stammer grows  
like an infection.

The ceiling descends  
like an angry sky,  
crushing what's left  
of the strange shape  
I've become,

My sore brain overblown,  
limbs stretched  
on a medieval rack.

By Maggie Mackay



### Who had the sharpener last?

Ok children  
too much time has passed  
We need to uncover  
who had the sharpener last?

It's not in any of the designated places  
I'm looking at the usual faces  
The ones who sharpen their time away  
Especially when we come in after play

Everyone look on the floor  
Someone check by the door  
I've Looked on the side  
Where else could it hide

We may have to empty pockets  
Sharpeners don't just jump on rockets  
If it is true and its with you  
Telling the truth is something you must do

I didn't want to say  
But it looks like there won't be a second play  
Unless the sharpener is found  
It must be around

Now what do you know  
It seems on our third go  
After so much to-and-fro  
Someone did know

Hip Hip Hooray  
How very true  
It's amazing what you can do  
When the consequences will impact you

It's been found  
It wasn't on the ground  
I saw that grin  
When you pulled it out the bin!

By Natalie M Downey

## Open Category Highly Commended



### Resta Con Me\*

As light faded under dusk  
rust fell from sight, and  
pines blended to shadows  
*Il caldo del giorno sei n'è andato (The warmth of day gone)*

A dark alley, small and safe  
Crunching leaves and  
breaking twigs;  
*il centro delle nostre menti (the focus of our minds)*

A welcomed gift each day;  
from a caterpillar in palm  
to the tender song of bird  
*volando tra le cime degli alberi (flying among treetops)*

The pale moon rises  
In a myriad of diamonds;  
Infinite stars of crystal  
*brillano nel cielo di zaffiro (glisten in the sapphire sky)*

It was the last summer  
Gliding down rolling hills  
of childhood eyes and porcelain skin  
*ha lasciato il posto ai sussurri autunnali (gave way to autumn whispers)*

A lonely park, a lonely road  
A gentle flowing swing  
Running, beating the sun, stopped by  
*ringhio del traffico serale (The snarl of evening traffic)*

\*Stay With Me

By Ella Potter

## Jigsaw Nostalgia Implant

She kneels by a jigsaw  
of rows of teacups  
with flowers inside them –  
clusters of internal organs.

Each vessel is unique  
but all have gold leaf rims  
and fit, neat and secure,  
into the saucer's inner circle.

She hears the breakfast tinkle  
of coach holidays, white cups  
slotted into their coracles  
each with a steel paddle.

She starts to make sense  
of the dissected bodies  
of these harlequin belles,  
made whole by her touch;

Like a luxury package deal  
where everyone slots in,  
and people tell themselves  
their cup is complete, full.

By Helen Kay

## Open Category Highly Commended



### Giz

Wet with remorse, walking his usual route,  
spots himself in car window, *when did we get so old?*  
John Waynes his hips to the side, attempts a stride!

Giz a ciggie, *God's sake, maybe pack these in?*  
Corner shop small talk, tuts and sighs, *this weather aye?*  
Nods to anecdotes as he reaches for the door, welcoming his exit.

Giz a hand, old lady links him hard as they climb onto bus  
snide smirk, the beginning of an eye roll, *chocker* again!  
Catches reflections of himself, passing the park in black & white,  
the teens enjoying vodka al fresco under umbrellas.

Giz a chance, muffling buzzes of headphones and  
the tinned orchestra of rain,  
he begins to drift away; cover almost blown.

Giz a shot of– interrupted. He spots Rosetta strolling  
with fluffy poodle Polly. Fumbling as he  
John Waynes himself up again.

Giz a kiss, voice breaking, Rosetta with her reluctant simper,  
offers a stroke to Polly with soaking woolly hair.

Giz a look at ya, she lets out a sigh of recognition, *give over!*  
finally, she laughs–

the kind that makes his veins like static.

By Jessica O'Shea



## Open Category Highly Commended



### Bomb

Someone found a hand grenade  
beside the River Thames  
It was mentioned in the Herald  
and then the Oxford Times.

Right next to the bridge there  
where I take the boy to swim.  
It was killingly hot last summer,  
sweet relief to just wade in.

Before it was identified,  
it must have lain in wait.  
Tightly bound small package,  
a remembered wartime fate.

Little nut of anger,  
possibly coiled to spring  
who knows, I couldn't tell you.  
We only go there for a swim.

I don't care for the swimming pool  
its chlorine or its throng.  
I favour the peace of the river,  
and her unexploded bomb.

By Vanessa Lampert

## Open Category Winner



### Hangover At The Vaccination Drop-in Centre



Tap-dancing toddlers thrash the boards  
in the room next door.

Between towers of stacked, plastic chairs,  
we sit in a circle. A well-drilled Hokey Cokey,  
locked on to our mobile phone lights  
or unthreading gloves,  
raising brows only for ringtones  
ill-suited for those who own them.

A fossilised Christmas tree rolls up its sleeve,  
baring skinny arms; minimal fir.  
The fermented sugars of hand sanitisers, or other,  
pervades the air  
and stirs stomachs like pots of acid and carrots,  
lentils and technicolour matter.  
Move one seat along. Remember to drink water.

In the gymnasium, a ghetto blaster sputters Slade  
and through its oily windows, seagulls  
appear to gesture with feathery middle fingers  
to remind us of the hysteria which the Bird Flu made.  
Noddy Holder's rusted hand-dryer voice  
visibly reverberates  
and my head spins, swims like fish  
hunted in pavement puddles  
while the nurse spiels about side-effects,  
chest pains which sink into the abdominal,  
seizures, weakness, fever, chills,  
tenderness, nausea, the dangers of mixing pills.

*continued overleaf*

Take ten minutes to sit if you're feeling ill.  
The hooded steward at the fire exit  
opens the door, and winter's chill  
is as welcoming as tingling ASMR.  
I walk past the tinsel-tied lamppost  
where the motorcyclist died,  
while a neutron star explodes in my blood

and the queue inside  
move one seat along. Remember to drink water.

By Stephen Watt

# Neurodi-Verse Category

## Highly Commended



### Adult Assessment

Are you an environment compelled to do things?  
Do you function as an interruption occurring alongside other problems?  
Can you spot energy leaving your place of fidget?  
Click to continue.

How often do you expect a deadline to remain seated?  
Do you tend to have a reluctant workplace in your avoidance?  
In meetings, are you a motor blurting out lengthy noise?  
Click to continue.

When out with obligations, do the symptoms squirm in conversations?  
Are your challenging parts able to wait in line?  
How often do you lose or damage a hobby, butt into external stimuli?  
Click to continue.

Are you prone to meeting mistakes in restaurants?  
Do you pay close attention to listening to someone's unrelated thoughts?  
Were several of their sentences present prior to age 12?  
Click to continue.

Are you an extended period of side-track?  
Do you require sustained thought?  
Are you driven by finding yourself  
as a completed answer?

By Vicky Morris

## Neurodi-Verse Category Highly Commended



### How we know where we are touched

*'Haptic memory is the branch of sensory memory used by the sense of touch... (it) seems to decay after about two seconds'*

They told her it would be normal to feel some extra sensations now. Her skin was paper and the words came out of nowhere, pressing in, inky and slow, writecrawling along nerves still tender from what went before. In the morning her left cheek flushed bloodred, pillow etched lines bunching under a twitching eye and the word was *hot*, then *itch*, then *pulse*. It made no sense that when the lines had faded, *pulse still flickered off then on, absence becoming presence, an invisible weight, like waves beneath the sea, pushing at her.*

She stopped trying to read the words. Her left knee buzzed and tingled, and *hungry* was a baby's cry banging in her ears. She thought how this could be her superpower and what her name might be, new girl to the ranks of X-Men. *'Haptica and her extended skin memory'*, or maybe *'Haptica with the lasting feelings'*, although that sounded average, made helpless by lost love. And what good could it do, to offer more pain to the world? What benefit to feel for so much longer, all these spun out touches bruisehurting the mind till all it felt was *help?*

*continued overleaf*



When the consultant brought her scans she asked to keep them, checked which lobe the lesion pressed on, kept quiet about everything else. *'Haptica feels things so you don't have to'*, she thought, her shin elasticmarked by the hospital sock, and the word became *soft*, remembering.

By Di Slaney

## Neurodi-Verse Category Highly Commended



### Leaving

After he woke, but before he could speak,  
he held my finger in a baby-strong grip  
so I couldn't leave, smiled with his whole face  
so I wouldn't leave, and when I said  
*He could wiggle his ears*, he wiggled them  
to show me he was still there.

Before this were monitors, tubes, a hole  
in his throat, hiss-clunking vent, a blurred  
scan of his brain because the dark patches  
made him thrash about, and so the sedation,  
coma, and the Scottish consultant who said  
*Another infection could carry him away.*

He asked if I could see plane wreckage  
through the window, if he'd killed Mum  
in a car crash – forgot he'd seen her earlier.  
He spent an afternoon organising a conference  
from his private room with ensuite, worried  
there wouldn't be enough wine for the dinner.

Now he speaks to me with old-style respect.  
He's polite but I miss his teasing – he should  
pat my bottom or tickle me out of a hug.  
I fasten his coat, I take him to the toilet.  
I wish away the time till his supper is served  
so I can leave without a leave-taking.

By Jill Abram

## Neurodi-Verse Category Highly Commended



### Appointment

Elliot is dressed for summer in December,  
prefers cold air to weight of fabric.  
The chair accepts his teenage body,  
his fingers stim over plastic bricks.

Years do not mark him in the usual way -  
he is best reached through his mother.  
She says he absorbs information for fun.  
The news said a vaccine was important.

When the syringe is positioned by skin  
Elliot's automatic response is flight.  
For the first time his gaze is direct.  
He looks the needle right in the eye.

His body will protect him. He imagines  
building viral proteins from Lego.  
Then antibodies, bound for destruction.  
Eye contact is lost, his breath becomes calm.

By Gillian Mellor

## Neurodi-Verse Category Highly Commended



### Exhibits in the Museum of Dyspraxia

An old bruise, dark purple in colour with a hint of yellow, overlaid by a second bruise acquired two days later, smaller, with a touch of green.

Routine, framed and neatly labelled.

A room of unimaginable noise. This is an interactive exhibit. Earplugs provided.

A dropped dinner: smashed plate, spaghetti, bolognese.

The pulsating aura of a lucid dream.

An overflowing hug of empathy in solid gold.

A lost grip, slipping away.

The pressure of time on the brain.

Spotlights of fascination: the length of a leaf, squawk of a crow, flash of a seagull swooping.

A cushion of air between the body and the mind.

The soft static between memory and recall.

A duvet cover, forever tangled.

A surge of words from deep inside. They settle on the floor, the chair, the sofa, ruffling their feathers, cooing, waiting.

By Rachel Carney

## Neurodi-Verse Category Highly Commended



### To My Autistic Son

There is a world that exists beyond mine  
Its cosmos filled with matter  
And places unfamiliar  
Yet known through your excited chatter.

You routinely visit every day  
Reciting dates to mesmerize  
Sharing facts; recounting tales  
Curiosity that intensifies.

Your favourite topic is ailments!  
Proclaiming every health condition  
Usually quite loud!  
Graphically with animated expression.

Overflowing with tactile love  
Gangly arms embrace  
Cheeky smiles and one-eyed wink  
Illuminate our space.

But I spot the signs you're home sick  
Your eyes glaze and pupils retract.  
Immediate action required  
To help you safely back.

So to my beautiful autistic son  
I bid you farewell and adjourn.  
I'm grateful for your presence  
And long for your return.

By Naomi Joy Doughty



# Neurodi-Verse Category Winner and overall winner of the Liverpool Poetry Prize 2022



## Dementia Butterfly

Peering at the scan  
you're thinking: butterfly wings.  
I think Rorschach test,  
and a mirror which reflects  
another mirror cracking.



Evening looms like  
a giant slowly standing.  
Together we wait  
for him to speak. You squeeze my  
hand as if it is a cure.

Time will regress you  
from hereon. Soon you'll be a  
child, then eternal  
like grass. Change is part of life  
you say. Ask a butterfly.

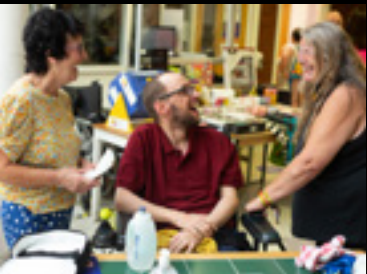
Like a butterfly  
you accept what you'll become.  
A pair of dove white  
petals unsurprised when the  
wind transforms them into wings.

By Paul McDonald



The Brain Charity helps people with all forms of neurological condition to lead longer, healthier, happier lives

There are more than 600 conditions affecting the brain, spine and nervous system. We're the only national charity providing practical help, emotional support and social activities for every single one.



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