

Sojourn

First prize

On the thirteenth day of the first month we
began to feel we would never belong
there. - That deep lane to the house by the sea,

the gnarled orchard trees and the mournful song
of the Cornish wind in the phone wires that
haunted us at night. We thought it was wrong

to get up and leave but did it matter?
Once, in a great storm, a flock of small birds
came inside. We sensed the rush and clatter

of their brittle wings against glass and heard
the motherless calves moaning as they climbed
up the field to shelter. There are no words

that can explain the strangeness of that time.

Alyss Dye

The bench

Joint second

My father with the pencil, me the measuring tape –
a team, in some ways – only with the last
of our four saw-cuts in the reclaimed plank
did we work out why each was angled, sloped:

we weren't square from the outset.
My father said he thought it wouldn't matter;
and given where we'd reached, I felt it better
to fix these sawn struts to the readied bench-seat

rather than protest. So then we lugged
the new bench to the hallway, where it stood,
and where it stands still, on the uneven floor –
levelly, as my father said it would.

Richard Meier

Rosary

Joint second

Imagine them gathered, those girls –
the side-lined or the fallen – unwanted

on St. Stephen's Eve, a watchnight
of their own design; a silent parlour,

hearth laid, nascent flames, firelight
shadows fluttering like their hearts

as, in turn, they thread the chaplet.
Sweet-earth and pepper allspice grains,

then holly berries, red as the blood
that beads on punctured finger tips.

Allspice, holly, earth then blood, until
at intervals of twelve, an acorn each:

an oak-seed for the hope of love.
Their devotion twined around a log

and set into the fire, they wait
for answers to unholy secret prayers,

for the forms of future husbands
to appear between them and the blaze.

Phil Kirby

,