

Adjudication Report - Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (May 2016)

by

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The 270 poems entered in this competition presented me with a fine selection to choose from. As always, it was hard to put a number aside from the final shortlist and poems shifted backwards and forwards several times until I chose the winning ones.

I feel very lucky to have been given a large group of high quality poems many of which possessed an extra dimension lifting them beyond the category of very good poems and into the realm of exceptional. There are always a few poems like this in a competition but this time there seemed to be even more. Many poems were stunning, covering a wide range of themes in a variety of styles. Originality seemed to be a key feature or at least a decision to come at the subject slantwise and leave possibilities and interpretations open.

My thanks to all the entrants for giving me a lot of reading (and thinking) pleasure. Congratulations to the nine winners, particularly the first three. I hope, when everyone get chance to read them, that they'll agree with me that the chosen poems are outstanding.

Here is a list of poems that I feel should have a special mention. There were others as well and I am sure I have overlooked some that will, elsewhere, receive the credit they deserve.

Wild Woman. The Gentle Goodbye to my Whore. Largo. The Apotheosis of Ceyx. One to Four. The Box. Knowing is Believing. Meeting My Grandfather On The Train. A Kind of Grief. Athena Nike. Zweisamkeit. Helen's ghost. Vox Ingenua. Indelible. Down the aisle. The Milkmaid. Northern Love, 1970. I'd forgotten how much I love this poem. prologue and morning. L'air du temps. Tear catcher. Labyrinth at Chartres. Anemnesis/In the Absence of Light. Behind the pristine country of the sea is the way I came. Flickers of the Dead. The Elements House. The Poet Does Not Marry. Dyslexic Student Uses Extra Time in a BSc Exam. The Bog Pool. Angelology. Love Tweets to Naturalism. Snow. Mrs Uomo sends Billy Collins another two reasons why guns should be outlawed. The Owls are Not what they Seem. Advice to a Stripling.

Here are my comments on the winning poems:

Hutton's Unconformity – Commended

The narrator here is apparently John Playfair, companion to the geologist James Hutton. The tale is well told but two aspects of writing in particular put the poem securely into the winners' list for me. Firstly, the use of sayings and rhymes cleverly twisted to provide humour and a slant on meanings. I particularly like 'I must make-do and mend and create/If not something beautiful, at least something I would be seen dead in.' Secondly, and this struck me from the beginning, the rhythm and tone of confidence and self-affirmation in the narrator's words. The final couplet is a fine example of this: 'I look around and see with your eyes, sir,/But I hold this pen in my own left hand and write.'

Slapton's sand trails – Commended

This is one of the loveliest and best crafted poems of love and loss I have read. It is told in the words of a woman looking back to a teenage romance that ended, possibly in death. She recalls how she has mourned and buried the boy in 'poetry's casket' with an 'adolescent seaweed-string of syllables' that she used to fill the gaps and edges 'that we never got chance to go beyond.'

I particularly like the stanza where she comments on 'all the things that you/didn't say ... the way you made/my little world big' and also the lyrical final couplet where the sand trails of memory 'always lead back to what/we held, like water, in our already full hands.'

The Markfield Tomb – Commended

The setting for this poem is a graveyard, overgrown and full of tombs, carvings and stone memorials. The poet has noticed one in particular to *A Fine and Noble Wife*. This tomb may be sunken and possibly waterlogged below – 'a lapidary swimming pool with four/stone pineapples'.

I chose this poem because I admire its metaphysical quality, the way the author combines the images of water with the concept of infinity. While 'an angel sucks his trumpet' the wife 'treads water' and waits for eternity as she floats 'to the north, south, east and west'.

An evocative, fascinating poem.

A Smallholding in the Fens – Highly Commended

This poem intrigued me from the start. It begins with a quote from Michael Ondaatje – *We began with myths and later included actual events* – and as I read on I wondered if this may be seen as a poem about memory but, in reversal of the quote, as memories of events which, over time and re-telling, have assumed the quality of myth and family folklore.

This is a beautifully crafted poem with strong, vivid images. One of my favourites is the pike that was 'so huge, it had to shunt back and forth/at the river's mouth in order to turn.' Possibly the most memorable is the linnet that pecked its catcher's hand 'but it was the small heartbeat/he felt through the gourd of his palm,/that made him set it free.'

Civil War – Highly Commended

I chose 'Civil War' for its skilful evocation of a war zone and its immediacy and vigour of language. The first stanza immediately grabs the reader's attention: 'You skitter like lizards through fallen/leaves, kick crisp clouds of red and brown/to scratch the autumn air. Quick! Duck!' In this zone one is told to 'keep your nose/out for Napalm', gun fire whines 'like a crow dying', the character Harry is wounded and his 'strategic stomp softens', a body is 'still' on the ground – a 'red body that you could cup/and warm in your hands.'

All brilliant but what makes this poem so exceptional is the uncertainty of viewpoint, the shifts in perspective whereby the narrator is both onlooker and participant, a child observing present horrors and a future adult killer.

Still Life – Highly Commended

A painting by Caravaggio is the starting point here and provides a central motif but this is an art poem with a difference where associations 'out of frame' are the aspects of the theme that matter. A complex, ambiguous, skilfully laid out and orchestrated poem which draws the reader in gradually to the full horrors 'somewhere' as the

crowd 'screams for one more song' and receives (A wedding in a crater), (A bombshell for an eye), (A vacation to war).

I was particularly taken with the lines 'I push myself towards the fruit at the centre/and wait for the rest.' This, to me, says something about the writing process with its the need for patience, trust, the willingness to wait for the heart of a poem to reveal itself, the acceptance that the process may involve self-searching and pain.

& Bless – 3rd prize

I love the texture of this poem, the visual impact of the ampersand and the italics for emphasis. There is a clever use of space within and between lines while the lack of any punctuation creates ambiguity and allows phrases to be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. Most of all I love the use of repetition and alliteration which give the poem a drive and an urgent and insistent voice.

There is only space here to quote a few outstanding phrases but there are many more:

'I bless this copse this gussied-up graveside/chat antipodal woolly muddied
smear what drear/ measure what a month to die and blesshangers-on
released/to creep & tarry matched sets paired birds all set/for the Sunday shoot &
bless the frog-of the-field/ stacked bump-backed and clutching ...'

sylvia plath knew my mother – 2nd prize

The title immediately sets up expectations of anguish and suicide and the poem goes for impact with the very first line: 'a single red eye and a flick of ash'. Images that are shocking pile on: 'she's a bitch for thinking I can give her up/cold turkey for the chicken flesh of my husband's scrotum/worship at his fun-size totem/instead of taste her sacramental flesh upon my tongue.'

The world we are forced to confront is bitter and grim. Here rubber dingies lie deflated on the shore, there are barbed wire fences, refugees at gates, tear gas, razor blades, bombed cities and blood. As an extra, this poem provides the pleasure of linguistic twists such as 'that's how it's done/that's how it's donne/that's how it's dun and drear/he calls me sweet she calls me drear'.

This is a brilliant poem, an odyssey where the landing is death.

Les Fleurs D'Azur – 1st prize

From the start this poem rose to the top of my winners' list and refused to be budged in spite of strong contenders.

The setting is Hiroshima, 6th-8th August 1945. Horrors are depicted – clearly but without comment: 'The undead, open-mouthed,/gulp as globules of black rain fall.' When the mother discovers her daughter 'A white liquid oozes from her. Maggots/spawn in yellow wounds. I brush/ them away but they multiply./'What are you doing?' she asks.'

What, for me, made this a first prize winner is the way the author has combined beauty and compassion with these horrors. The theme, in spite of everything, is love. The central motif of the poem (made explicit in the title) is the daughter's 'lustrous shawl' which is a gift from her fiancé. The poet describes this shawl in detail. It is 'embroidered silk: delicate azure,/palest lilac, embellished with tones/of purple, turquoise, threaded gold, silver, bronze. A filigree of leaves/and roses. Cameos of lovers, children/lovebirds, wistful watery pearls ...'

Later, in lines that are almost too painful to read, the mother wraps her dying daughter in linen and silk. 'Across her chest/an imprint of roses and leaves; a blessing/ of love burnt upon her peeling skin.'

The final verse decided me, although I didn't really need persuading. I will quote it in full. This is the mother to her daughter:

'I talk of her childhood, of how we walked
along this same riverbank, of how she'd fish
with makeshift rod, cavort along the edge
catching cicadas.'

Mandy Pannett. July 2016

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