

Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition – November 2016

Adjudication Report: Roger Elkin

What a life-enhancing and enriching experience the adjudication of a poetry competition is. Here there is an opportunity to immerse oneself in the amazing and imaginative worlds of writers. What never fails to amaze is the sheer ingenuity that the poets exhibit: from the fascinating choice of subject matter to the wonderful delights of expressive techniques. There are in reality two major problems that today's poets face: what to write about; and in what style.

As the prizewinning and commended poems show, there was the usual range of subject matter: the pattern of living from conception through adolescence, to ageing, dying and death; the world of Nature, especially but not exclusively, birds; travelling to, and living in overseas locations; responses to Art and Music; historical characters and events; war and warfare; and contemporary political events including ecological and environmental concerns. Similarly, there was a wide range of poetic approaches: from the regularly-rhymed and tightly constrained in sonnets and villanelles, to looser forms in free verse. What was dazzling was the skilled use of poetic techniques, especially the choice of appropriate diction and effective imagery in the creation of an individual voice. Time and time again, it was the newly-coined metaphor that helped to locate and strengthen the poem's impact via its exact and imaginative visual depictions. What is particularly noticeable is the economy of means that differentiates poetry from most prose writing. This feature is exhibited in my final nine poems: most of them have short lines, and all are under 22 lines in length.

Commended (in alphabetical order by title)

Blackcap

Mr & Mrs Andrews take exercise

Sonnet 74

The three **Commended** poems share a delight in the use of a slant approach to their subject matter coupled with the application of appropriate and effective stylistic devices. In *Mr & Mrs Andrews take exercise*, Gainsborough's mid-eighteenth century eponymous double portrait is updated to have the couple watching TV as they exercise in the gym: Mrs A commenting that while another woman "executes sit-ups" and others wear the "correct gear" of "black Lycra / embellished with go-faster leg stripes", she "removes hat, shakes white lace cuffs" and looks forward to the more stately activity "Tomorrow ... let us walk in fields". I smiled at the almost coy tone implicit in the writing, the comic juxtaposition of period language with contemporary comment and values; and the imagined detail.

Sonnet 74 (perhaps the most effective from a group of similarly-number-titled) also made me smile. This time it was the invention of a twenty-first century cod-Chaucerian language and grammatical syntax coupled with the use of a strict rhyme scheme and regular syllabic count. What was evident was the sheer fun that the writer had had in tackling the demands of the sonnet form, while simultaneously being able to make a slant comment on modern politics as the "laytest tydyngges fromme ye U.S.A. / extyngwyssh'd have alle howpe and happynesse". I reeled with laughter at the image of "drynkers who forsake thayr Spryte" and converge to "daunce Saynt Vytus jyv wyth armes aloft".

There is less to laugh about in *Blackcap*. Here the subject matter expands to move from an economic portrayal of the bird – “the world’s judge / in eez black cap” - to include the execution of “Mary ... [who] sports er black cap, / haid on the block” waiting for the striking blow of the “Executioner fae Calais” in “eez black cap”; and concludes with the singing of the bird who “kens aa about daith” and has “seen it aa afore”. The striking adoption of a Gaelic voice (perhaps initiated by the reference to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots?) and the repetition of the blackcap image serve to keep the poem grounded. This is crucial, given the sparseness of the writing: every word is made to count. One caveat, though: I believe the executioner from Calais was for Anne Boleyn. This detail apart, the writing is effective and moving. I have been haunted by this poem.

Highly Commended (in alphabetical order by title)

Belonging

Chiang Mai Fire

Game

Belonging also uses a bird – a hawk – to initiate the events of the poem. This time, however, the visual writing is made effective by the economic description of the physical realities of the natural world – “this silent crag”, “the landscape”, “the bedrock ... unyielding”, “the roots of heather” and “the shirtless farmer, / Whose ruptured shoulders and iron mallet / Drive a stake through the greasy turf.” These very real and “welcome” qualities are contrasted with those of the writer who although also “made in Northumbria” is more usually at home in “hallowed halls” with “waxed wooden floors and weak tea” “where the brain games come too easily”. If this is a comment on the poem’s achievement, then it is self-effacing indeed, and unjustified.

Similar properties of writing capturing the physicality of the real world are also in evidence in *Chiang Mai Fire*. Here the accumulation of description relating to the distant taming and planting of the countryside – “a farmer ... staking out ground” seeds a catalogue of catastrophe and disaster, as “the forest is burning, our hopes too”. Innocent observation becomes a commentary on greed and economic environmental despoliation. As the concluding lines returning to the image of the farmer confirm: “the sound / of hammering then, misaligned, / the sight of numb violence.” How poignant, powerful and ominous is that “misaligned”.

The exploration of differing and contrasting gender roles and values is explored in *Game*. The title with its rich punning is the key to the poem: “she” is seen as “the prize” “unwrapped, revealed” in the marital stakes. But what is at stake is a “game” of pretence, of each side living up to the lie of each other’s expectations. This is a poem about detachment, about living separate lives within a partnership, about the network and shallowness of feelings that surface when folk are taken for granted. How devastating is that final image of the couple’s fragile sexual relationship: she will lie “panting by numbers / while he skinnydips, / dabbles in the transparent pools / he thinks she is.” And how skilled the misplaced “painting” to become “panting”; and the use of “skinnydips” to set up the image of the “transparent pools”.

Third Prize: *To become One with Nature*

Of the several poems dealing with the relationship between man and the natural world this struck an early chord. Its particular appeal is the close identification with the rhythms and being of the flora, fauna and the elements as “each day my knowledge of the natural world expands”, “the light of my knowledge edging past daylight ... / into long hours of brightness.” From a start of external observation that leads to learning, the poet becomes totally identified, absorbed and at one with Nature: “I sweat rainforests ... / I am a bud opening ... / I quaff questions from the rain and sip answers from the sun.” (What a superb word is that unusual “quaff” – notice how it picks up the alliterative pattern.) What might have been helpful in the development of the poem’s idea-system is the use of verse paragraphing: the inclusion of blank space can be a powerful tool of communication, pointing the ideas and allowing the poem to breathe. That feature and a slight adjustment to lineation would be beneficial. But, as it stands, this is a fine, and moving poem. Where the poem scores is in the final few lines and the realisation that though man might wish to be in command of the natural order demanding of badger and vole “what they do, / why they are here and why it should matter”, those demands might be equally applied from Nature to man. Food for thought indeed.

Second Prize: *Foetal Position*

What a wealth of imagery lies herein! The six unrhymed tercets depict with emotion, humour, imagination and wit the unborn child. The worlds that are addressed to the “child to be” include the domestic – the “sleeping dog / in a flesh basket” – a “cartoon” image of shushing “hands to lip” – the musical bass clef notation, with the heartbeat its punctuating “bassline” and “eyelids a buzzing drum skin” – the spiritual world of “a Buddha balloon ... / a zen smile playing across your mouth” – “an apostrophe” that represents the missing space between the parents’ worlds soon to be filled. There is some delightful punning throughout – note the description of the foetus as “a new world, your gravity dragging us together” – in which “gravity” as well as the magnetic pull bringing the worlds of parent and child together, also hints at the serious nature and responsibilities inherent in bringing the new-born into the world; and the word-play in “parentheses” linking the idea of parents as the enclosing brackets lying in embrace. That the poet is aware of the word-play is evidenced in the poem’s final line, and the abstract notion that the two parents added to the third entity, the child to be, constitute three individuals becoming a single unit of family. This is a skilled piece of imaginative thinking. Well done!

First Prize: *Notes on an Expedition to Mexico*

If the notes on which the poem is built are those few words that appear in italics – “*native*”, “*far from home*”, “*not more than ten days before*” – then this demonstrates what an imaginative and moving achievement this richly-detailed poem is. The poem initially has a detached tone that complements the cataloguing of the birds snared by the two bird-catchers and recorded in a book. However, this precise listing of birds – “*hawks, kites, doves*” – becomes expansive as the poem’s narrator enters not only the continuing list of trapped birds, but also the worlds of sound and colour that these specimens inhabited when living. Here the full battery of hearing and sight are employed in the exploration of the life of these birds. The mechanical world of written record is replaced by

imagination: "I close the book on lost whistles, whirrs, squeaks, trills". What replaces that is the extensive and exploratory description of the actual dead birds, "carcasses emptied of sky, skeleton wings spread in cases // that used to be trees, under glass that seizes light like water". The description of the fly-catchers - "five brides / asleep on russet veils" - and broadbills - "their emerald breasts a line of hills" - is both masterly and moving, while simultaneously laying the way for the poem's last line - an isolated sentence whose final word is the emotional nexus of the poem. This is an admirable and enviable accomplishment. Thank you for letting us share it.

The Results

Many thanks to Roger for a job well done, as always. Now to match the winning and commended poems with the poets.

Commended

Fran Baillie - *Blackcap*

Lesley Burt - *Mr & Mrs Andrews take exercise*

Richard Craven - *Sonnet 74*

Highly Commended

Stephen James - *Belonging*

Christopher James - *Chiang Mai Fire*

Fran Baillie - *Game*

Third Prize

John Lindley - *To become One with Nature*

Second Prize

Simon Jackson (UK) - *Foetal Position*

First Prize

Jackie Wills - *Notes on an Expedition to Mexico*

Congratulations all.

Nnorom Azuonye | +44 (0) 7812 755 751 | nnorom.azuonye@sentinelpoetry.org.uk

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