

SENTINEL LITERARY QUARTERLY POETRY COMPETITION (February 2016)
Results and Adjudication Report

Commended Poems

Baikal by Catherine Faulds

Peter Barton's Lessons of History by Caroline Davies

Peace in the Balkans by Joe Hackett

Highly Commended Poems

Fly-Tying by Fran Baillie

Foreign Languages by Christina-Varvara Palmou

Showman by Virginia Astley

Prize-Winners

Third Prize: *Out of Niger* by Jill Fricker

Second Prize: *On Thursday* by Joy Winkler

First Prize: *A green activist considers the police state* by Bruce Marsland

Adjudication Report

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According to some poetry competition adjudicators, one way to attract attention is to give your poem a striking title. And, indeed, there were plenty in evidence in this Quarterly Competition, as this alphabetical list shows:

- *A Synopsis Of The Modern Irish Novel As Described By A (Largely Incidental) Garlic And Chip Baguette*
- *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
- *& bugger the going of it all & the fiddler too*
- *Assassinated comrade Nimalarajan's Mother*
- *At Tea with the Cholmondeleys*
- *Braving reality*
- *By Shakespeare's Grave in Stratford Parish Church*
- *Circle of Sorrow*
- *Conversation Over Pistachios*
- *Cry the Unloved Child*
- *Diamonds Through Windows*
- *Dis Alter Visum*
- *Educating Education (That Child Marching Ahead!)*
- *Elocution lessons from Madame St John*

- *Filleting the Dish*
- *Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will always remain*
- *Her Home Is Where My Heart Is*
- *How to Create a Bird Painting*
- *I Am Considering Ants*
- *I Don't Want Heaven*
- *I'll Knit You a Prayer*
- *Life as observed by a terraced house*
- *Love is a Stephen Spender Thing*
- *mary from a wild water crying*
- *Of Bottle Brushes and Cornishware Dishes*
- *On the bust of Shakespeare, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon*
- *One Memory of Moss*
- *Poem on a yellow sticky notepad*
- *Selection and Maintenance of the Aim*
- *Skyping on a Saturday Night*
- *Somewhere in her heart*
- *Souls of Hibernation*
- *Thames River Retirement Blues*
- *That I May Know You By Your Fingers*
- *The Arcade by the Mediterranean Sea – (A chippy on New Brighton front)*
- *The Hamster Gangs of Hackney*
- *The Night and Her Raven Hair*
- *The Outermost Edge of the Sun*
- *These Lines Are Not Meant For You*
- *TransitionalTripInsideParalysis*
- *Two old men at the buried swimming pool*

It goes without saying that it takes more than that attention-grabbing title to make a prize-winning poem. Such matters as the purposeful partnership of content and form, so that the “what” of the poem (its subject, message, idea) is supported by the “how” of the poem (its structure, poetic devices, means); the use of appropriate diction that hints rather than overstates; the application of fresh imagery, neatly-conceived, that makes the reader forge new connections over familiar ground; the subtle use of rhythm and rhyme (both internal and external using assonantal patterning); the transforming nature of tone, so that meaning is shaded but simultaneously unambiguous – though occasionally an element of ambiguity may add levels of meaning. All these, and more, are elements that combine to produce an attention-grabbing poem. And, as is to be expected, my list of final poems includes writing that exhibits these and other associated qualities which I hope will become clear in my report.

The three **Commended** poems while in many ways so very different share the fact that they are all located in explorations of overseas landscapes and events. However, they all successfully avoid the trap of falling into postcard description.

- Judging by similarities in presentation, type-face and style, *Baikal* comes from a quartet of entries about similar geographical locations, any of which could have received commendation. This particular poem records a visit to “the deepest lake / in the world” in Siberia. The writing, like the landscape, is stark and spare, almost without emotion other than a sense of “unease” which pervades everything and haunts the writer, forcing him to leave the “tiny museum” with its “fat jars” containing “the eye of a fish under glass”. What detail is given is minimal, but effective: every word in the poem’s 5 tercets is made to count. How suggestively-accurate is the use of the verb in the opening line, “The village lurks behind a stockade”; a similar exactness is shared (also by the verb) in capturing the insecurity in the gaze of the tour representative who “has a face built from anxiety”. This is very accomplished use of poetic diction.

- *Peter Barton's Lessons of History* admirably celebrates the photographic and archaeological research into the mass graves of soldiers and tunnel excavations at the Somme by the First World War historian and author, Peter Barton. Each of the four short verses begins with a negative: "A trench is not just a trench"; "A tunnel is not just a tunnel"; "This passage is not just a passage"; "A map is not just a map". This connective structural device, while echoing the cataloguing of historical findings, gives the poem a factually-unsentimental tone, but without any dilution of sentiment. This in turn endorses the celebratory nature of the soldiers' work "dug out spade by spade" and with "perfectly square shaft" while recording the fact that they "have no headstones" or just "a cluster of crosses". This is a moving poem, made more moving by the fact that it does not tug at emotional strings.
- *Peace In The Balkans* is a very effective description of the enjoyment of a country-visit with "home-made brandy, whirling dances / and gold-toothed greetings" in harmony with the wonders of the natural world: the "frog chorus" from "bubblegum throats", the "swallowtails like splashes of sunlight" and fireflies "like lighters sparking us up the hill to bed". The imagery is fresh and richly inventive; and the creation of atmosphere masterly, capturing whole lives in a few lines:

"Later, we ate black cherries plump with juice,
paid pennies for taxi rides, laughed aloud
at the indecipherable alphabet."

I, too, laughed out loud at the skilful recording of events.

Each of the three **Highly Commended Poems** celebrates human relationships.

- *Fly-Tying* uses the language of fly-fishing to explore the tenuous relationship between the angler with "His mellow voice", and his lover who while "lured by ... names" of the "painstakingly fashioned" flies he is instructing her to tie (in his words "*as easy as tying your shoelaces*") knows "instinctively" "this was not how it was". However, levels of tolerance exist, even to the nice touch of humour in one of the names: "Woolly Bugger - / a forbidden word / so it was whispered". The detailed use of specific angling terms is effectively applied in an inclusive way, drawing the reader skilfully into the delineation of the relationship, and building to the poem's final carefully-constructed punchline.
- *Foreign Languages* is constructed via a series of short questions and commands which are used to explore the physicality of love and "the million things you do to my mind". The opening question – "Can we speak in eyes?" – is immediately arresting; and the three almost practically-impossible commands of the remaining verses – "Speak to me in hugs"; "Hear me in silences"; and "Carry me in kisses" – incrementally structure the exploration of the relationship. This is a direct, unequivocal poem, enviable in its economy of means, and whose strengths become enriched with repeated readings.
- *Showman* is constructed in three octaves that ripple with intimate suggestibility that is partly couched in the punning ambiguities of the title: the Showman is more than someone "juggling in the square". And the strangeness of coincidence – planned I wonder? – is carefully, almost delicately, explored, from the opening isolated word, "Unexpected". This dramatic start creates a system of tension underpinned by uncertainties – "wind-torn", "falls apart", "never noticed", "muddled", "Strange", and "pausing". Counterpointing this is a hope of possibilities – "flashing", "throwing high", "catching my smile", "leeward side". These two agencies are to be resolved in some future, undated, unplanned meeting, but one which is inevitable, for though "it's been a while since our paths crossed", the poem open-endedly suggests "you show me ... this is where I'll find you". Overarching the poem's sensitive exploration is a keen use of visual description – once again, economically applied, but very effectively.

Now to the **Prize-Winners**

- Third Prize, *Out of Niger* deals in dignified compassion with refugees “less than cargo”, following “the maddening / orb” of the sun, to “negotiate north” on route to “Algeria ... a better life than here”. The writing to begin with is unemotional, centred on an almost factual cataloguing of event, as they have “paid to leave”, with “all sold” and their “mean harvest traded”. The description of the swaying truck journey, “itself a mirage”, is depicted with precise detail: “oil drips like a wound”. At the last resort and the death of a “feverish and parched” sister, events are treated with a resigned dignity – the mourning is contained by the moving description of her burial:

“we dig her grave in sculptured dunes,
their parting grains a flowing amber.”

As with *Showman*, the poem is written in three octaves, but with an additional isolated last line whose sentiment is strengthened by its spatial structuring:

“We have no tears”.

This is accomplished, thinking writing. Well done!

- Second Prize goes to *On Thursday*. The poem’s rather detached title is emblematic of the sequence of events in which the jointing of a chicken, putting it to boil, until eventually “the carcass [is] rendered down” provides a parallel image for the accidental/coincidental meeting between the poem’s narrator and a woman in the street. This could happen any place, anytime, anywhere; and so everywhere, every here and every now. Despite “years of neighbourly / routine” there has been little direct contact between them. We are not given a full biography in the poem’s 16 lines, but there is a suggestion that the woman is possibly a bag lady: “she fell, a bottle / of gin, small jigsaw pieces in a knotted / plastic bag”. Thus the physical contact between them is used almost as an element of self-criticism, a comment on the detachment between folk, and the way in which people become so much the world’s fodder: even “the paramedic called her the wrong name”. Human life is reduced to a commodity; a neighbour no more worth than a dismembered hen. The success of the writing resides in the use of clear visual parallels, exquisitely conceived and finely executed, so that verbal ideas are presented as visual rememberings, and vice versa: a sort of pictorial-verbal punning that serves to help to identify emotion and question human communication. The sequential detail; the precise stages in the action of preparing the fowl; the incipient self-criticism merging into compassion are skilfully communicated – and very moving. This poem haunts me.
- The First Prize poem, *A green activist considers the police state*, might be viewed as having an attention-grabbing title (!), but its searching content lives up to it, even given the somewhat detached nature of the word “considers”, in itself disturbing by its un-emotional tone. The poem pursues the way in which “for the crime of having an opinion, / for the treachery of being free” the process of complete surveillance, “working me undercover”, has compromised friends, colleagues and family and become a controller of laptop, mobile, even bedroom. That this has been done by “my ring-wearer” with “licence to rape” in the name of the law who has “fingered ... every inch of my anatomy” is shocking to the point of destruction of self. The awareness of the betrayal is incrementally built: “the phantom other half, faking like mad”, “on her majesty’s bedroom service”; her children the “offspring of the secret state”. What holds together this progressive accumulation of what is to become classed as “algorithms of subversion” is the use of three parallel-structured and spatially-isolated lines that punctuate the longer stanzas: “I don’t write to my friends so much these days”; “I don’t talk to my colleagues so much these days”; “I don’t look at my family so much these days”. What is further disturbing is the way in which the poem’s opening “There was a spy in my bed ... I did not know” is both echoed and intensified via change in tenses from past to present in the poem’s final lines:

“There’s a spy in my bed,
a spy in my head
I do not know.”

Instead of being an involved member of society and trying to further its environmental survival, the activist has been betrayed by the person with whom she has presumably been most intimate. The consequent process results in being increasingly isolated and driven inwards, searching self and discovering the possibilities of self-betrayal. The activist realises she has been “green” not only in her political standpoint, but also in terms of naivety and gullibility. This is a chilling realisation in itself; but is made more unsettling by the sparse writing. Indeed, throughout the poem there are few qualifying adjectives or adverbs, so the burden of events and ideas is carried by the listing of the inroads and intrusions that “I read about”, “heard about” and “overlooked”. Notice the repetition of “every” and the employment of present participles: “logging”, “tracking”; “scanning”, “filing”, “noting”, “loading”, “working” which are used to convey the totality and continuity of the surveillance.

This is poetry of the first order: challenging, thought-provoking, illuminating: an enviable achievement! Many congratulations!

My sincere thanks go to all competitors for letting me loose in their poetic worlds; and congratulations to all the placed folk and prize winners. Long may poetry thrive!