

Results and Adjudication Report - Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (February 2017)

It is always difficult to judge the entries for a Sentinel competition where the standard is so high and this time I have found it harder than ever. There were many that jostled for inclusion in the final list and I hated having to leave them out.

There was a rich and varied assortment of themes and styles, all handled with originality and craft. Although there was wit, lightness of touch and pleasure taken in the subtleties of language, I felt the overall mood of the entries was sombre, tinged with uncertainty and a sense of menace. There was anger too and many images of violence and wounds. Themes about gender issues played a large part as did issues concerned with economic and social divisions, care (or its lack) in the community, the tragedy of the displaced.

Many thanks to all entrants for intriguing, enjoyable and thought provoking poems. As I say, many of them were outstanding – especially, of course, the nine I have chosen as prize winners.

1ST PRIZE: 'POTHOLES'

There is an original mind at work here which reveals itself at the outset with the title 'Potholes'. Whoever would think of writing a poem on this topic except to curse the things for the damage they do? This poet, obviously, who uses a commonplace subject as a jumping off point for associations and images that move slowly and seamlessly from childhood memories triggered by the smell of hot tar, through to a beautiful, almost visionary ending.

This poem captured me from the start with its image of potholes as fungus, a contagion: 'I watch potholes emerge through Autumn/as though the road is developing a disease.' Later, we have another quirky image as the narrator remembers himself as a boy trying to stifle 'a queue of coughs' and there is the delightful picture of present day road mending which 'takes the time it takes all the birds to line up/on the telephone wire overseeing the job.'

But it is probably the final stanza with its blend of humour and mysticism which finally hooked me. You'll see what I mean. Here it is, quoted in full:

'Where will the stars, who took nightly dips
in the potholes, go I wonder? For some weeks
each year, the dark wet road is alight and patterned
with their constellations. Occasionally, a red moon.
Is there anywhere else we can look down
to watch the ISS twinkle and glide by overhead?

2ND PRIZE: 'SWALLOWS TO PLETT BAY. SA'

I love the rhythm of this poem, the musicality of its long lines, the languorous accumulation of phrases, lists and repetitions, all connected by the central image of swallows – swallows diving, skidding, flitting, flirting, swallows doing u-turns, the narrator following them, 'swallowed by swallows'. There is such movement and richness of language in this evocative poem as the narrator

'bare-foots sunshining air', meets 'cheetahs out for a stroll, a skirmish of locusts'. No wonder the speaker feels dizzy in a land that 'whirs with wings', is intoxicated by the 'roll-call of so many birds', is 'sun-blinded' on beaches 'so wide, soft, curved, empty.'

A superbly beautiful , unusual poem. I feel privileged to have read it.

3rd PRIZE: 'IN WHICH I TELL MY BLUES'

Here is a poem written in unobtrusive, brilliant rhyming couplets. A poem in an urban setting where the language is modern, colloquial, idiomatic and lyrical at the same time. The opening lines of the first stanza caught my attention immediately: 'One third bona fide eejit, part soi-dissant genius,/semi-poet, tyro clown.'

But before this we have the title and then a line from Verlaine which translates as 'it is raining in my heart like it rains in the city' and with these images the poet sets up a series of associations where rain is both a reality and a metaphor and the quote finds an echo in a Buddy Holly song where, as in the poem, no memories of the past, no weather forecast promising sunshine, can conceal the pain of lost love.

The more I read this stunning poem, the more I appreciate its richness and the skill behind its writing.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: 'LITERACY'

I kept returning to this poem again and again, finding it evocative, moving, enigmatic and so haunting . The setting and back story are ambiguous, deliberately so I think, but this is a love poem – love in the sense of caring for need. The 'you' is struggling, coping with problems of holding a pencil, coping with speech or lack of it, coping with the spelling of words.

There are sensuous images –the memory of eating lychees , the stirring of 'buttery/black daal', the shopping list of 'rice, onions, lemons, lentils, bottled water', the echo of all these in the final line where the last word, the most important, is love.

A beautiful poem and written with such subtlety that I didn't realise until I studied the form that it is a Petrarchan sonnet. This is a poem I shall remember for a long time.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: 'BY THE RICE PADDY'

This poem is dark and sinister, atmospheric with menace. Throughout, there are references to the machete, a word which carries its own connotations of horror, suppression and massacre. The narrator reads the word, thinks about it, dreams about 'machetes wielded in the air'. There is an unsettling image of the 'dead chick/half buried on the black sand beach' and a sense of unease conveyed through details of sound: tins clank in the rice fields, a cow moans at dusk, there is the constant 'savage bark of dogs.'

A masterly poem, assured and perfectly crafted.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: 'WORKINKITCHEN'

Ostensibly, this is a poem that contrasts laborious domestic work in a non-technological age with the smooth running ease and comfort of present day mod-cons. However, there is more than a phrase 'to chill the heart' here for this is a poem, skilfully written, about inhumanity and exploitation. Understated details convey the misery of a woman's life where a machine retches 'brown bilge' and washing frozen on the line cracks 'Like a stiffened corpse.'

There is humour in the last three stanzas of the poem where the woman is no longer a subservient drudge. I love the idea of clothes in a washing machine being compared to 'A percussion family/Of zips and studs'. Here the tone of the poem is one of pride with pleasure in the fact that 'the former things have passed away'. A neat touch, this oblique reference to Revelations where the passing away of things includes pain and tears.

COMMENDED: 'CATCHING THE TRAIN'

I found this an intriguing and tantalising poem in that I kept wanting to impose a narrative structure on it, to know more of the back story – which is probably exactly what the poet has chosen to keep out. I'll have to be content not to know the content of the 'last sentence' that the woman writer says 'hurts so much it ruptures something inside her', not to know why the relationship with the man on the beach seems to turn, suddenly, from failure to success, from potential rejection to last minute hope.

Nevertheless, a poem must be evaluated on what is there, not on what isn't. There is much to admire here particularly the use of language in the last stanza, the vibrant, surreal and almost mystical images that 'erupt' as 'the jack-in-the-pulpit/thrusts its phallus away from its pale-petalled sheath/ ... and a crowd of snowberries/bursts from her head, white as fungus, soft as her breath.'

Whatever has led to the woman's realisation that she is about to lose something priceless there is no disputing the emotion in the last line – which is why I knew I had to include this poem. 'She runs –', says the poet, 'oh God how she runs for that train.'

COMMENDED: 'LASCAUX HORSE'

I love the lyricism of this poem, the evocative image of the horse 'rust and bonfire coloured' as it runs across 'the eggshell coloured postcard'.

'Where are you running to, Lascaux horse? asks the poet, the implication being the answer is nowhere, this is not a real horse but a representation painted in a cave, a permanent image yet one that is passing, half in shadow, half out, somewhere 'between the earth/and sky'. Everything in this poem is transient – the horse, the painting, the person who, inspired by imagination and observation, chose the colours, the old and faded postcard, the message of love, the anonymous writer.

This is beautiful writing. Perfect.

COMMENDED: 'VIRGIL SENDS A POSTCARD HOME'

There is a very clever blending of the classical and the contemporary here – both in allusions and in language. Throughout there is an undercurrent of everything unravelling, not just 'the sky's collar and cuffs'. I love the laconic style of writing that the poet uses to convey significance: 'I woke in discombobulation/to news of flotsam refugees littering the holiday shore/where we swam yesterday.' The ending is brilliant, as concise and punchy as a message on the title's postcard: 'So what can history teach/us? Answers on a postcard. Dunkirk. Anzio. Life's a beach.'

Mandy Pannett

1st Prize

Potholes – by Pat Borthwick

2nd Prize

Swallows to Plett Bay. SA. by Val Bridge

3rd Prize

In Which I Tell My Blues by Al McClimens

Highly Commended

Literacy by Sam Burns

Highly Commended

By the Rice Paddy by Ian Corcos

Highly Commended

Workinkitchen by Laura Thompson

Commended

Catching the Train by Catherine Edmunds

Commended

Lascaux Horse by Ciarán Parkes

Commended

Virgil Sends a Postcard Home by Al McClimens