

**Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (February 2018)**  
**Judges Report by Mandy Pannett**

There were many entries and they offered a fine variety of themes. Poems about depression and mental health figured highly and there were moving pieces about stillbirth, ageing parents, religion and religious doubt. There were some powerful poems on gender equality, abuse and danger (mental as well as physical). Other themes covered were love (including desertion and betrayal), nature, geology, landscape, houses, rooms, travel, the seaside, the seasons, mirrors and shadows, myths and legends, memories, ghosts, addictions, war, technology and the modern world.

From the point of view of form and tone, quite a number of people seem to be writing 'After' poems – following the style or theme of another poet. There were some very good prose poems as well as skilfully handled sonnets and villanelles. There were several interesting sequences and a good use of white space and the 'pause'. I enjoyed several amusing and surreal poems and where the tone was witty or sarcastic I found it particularly effective. One thing I found extra pleasing was how, in many cases, rhyme was used with imagination and variety.

One thing struck me about font and point size which may be helpful to the writer. It doesn't actually make it any easier for someone to read the text if the font is completely in bold or is larger than point 14. I personally think point 12 is fine but others may disagree on that.

I felt the strong feelings behind a number of poems could have been conveyed more effectively if the tone adopted had been less judgmental. Writing that declaims 'we should/should not' does not come over as convincing and may have the opposite effect to the one the poet intended. In a similar way, poems about being sad, happy, worried etc may benefit tremendously if the writer includes some particular, individual details that the reader can relate to.

I had a very long list of poems that I liked for various reasons and was sorry not to be able to include many of them in my final selection. I have been looking at the ones I have chosen as winners, commended poems or for special mention to see if they share any criteria that may have influenced my choice, but there seems to be wide range of themes, styles and techniques. One thing they all have in common, in my opinion, is perfection of word choice – the poet may have sweated blood to achieve this, edited again and again, but the result appears effortless with every word chosen and placed in exactly the right way for the line.

Many thanks to everyone who entered. You have given me hours of pleasure. Special thanks to those who made my final list. I think your poetry is outstanding.

Mandy Pannett.

**1st Things I Have Advertently and Inadvertently Taught My Daughters This Past Year**

This is writing with a kick. After an intriguing title there are several arbitrary but straightforward examples of things the narrator may have told the daughters. There is a light touch here and some humour. Half way through, there is a shift in tone, an increase in menace. There is the dilemma of what advice to give the girls 'if a stranger, friendly or not,

approaches.’ Then words start tumbling out, lines are long, short, full of panic, the danger of violence is immediate: ‘Get out of there as fast as you can,/Please my darlings, fast as you can’. There are reference to a speeding van, the implication of a terrorist attack, fear that the precious daughters might be victims.

There is even more. The narrator has taught the girls ‘What to do in case of fire./Otherwise known as Don’t Trust Authority’. In an implicit reference to Grenfell Tower we have the comment ‘this is useless knowledge.’

The final line of the poem is as brilliant as the rest of it. It is necessary to teach the daughters ‘Techniques for sprinting.’ A shocking, dystopian lesson.

This poem caught my attention on the very first reading and refused to go away. I don’t think it ever will. It is outstanding in the way apparently simple comments and events are used as a random, surface veneer for violence, terror and loss.

A chilling, unsettling but totally brilliant poem.

## 2<sup>nd</sup>     **Opus 131**

This poem is exceptional in its synthesis of craft and emotion. There is mastery in the way the technique of hypotaxis is used to create strong pauses, twists and turns, the juxtaposition and transition of ideas.

There are eighteen lines before a full stop is reached in the first part of this long poem. The music emerges ‘out of silence’ and moves into the ‘slow rising-and-falling’ sounds as other instruments join the first violin. Simultaneously, we have the movement of thoughts about divinity that culminate in a moment of doubt: ‘if there were such an entity’. Next, is the contrast of a single line: ‘And now, thanks to deaf Beethoven, there is.’

Throughout, the poem’s thought parallels the music. A ‘jerky, dancing tempo’ leads into the meditation that ‘even among tragedies/to be alive is to know gaiety’. There is the urgency of a ‘desperate battle’ as instruments like horses achieve ‘a rising vehemence of affirmation’ which is also that of the human spirit struggling for epiphany ‘in spite of, in the teeth of, everything’.

The poem’s ending is perfect, moving through the general to the individual with the image of a few people in a small church in Ireland feeling something ‘not unlike a candle’ which to them may signify immortality – ‘though of whom, or what,’ says the poet, ‘we can’t be certain.’

An unforgettable poem.

## 3<sup>rd</sup>     **Game in a Dutch Castle**

I love the movement within this sestina, the shifts of tone, the repetitions and connections, its creation of tenderness and poignancy.

Most effective are the variations in meaning and sound. For example, the first word in the title is 'Game' which is also one of the poem's keywords. Already we have a multiplicity of meaning: game as an activity that's enjoyable, game as a competitive sport, game as a creature hunted down as quarry.

The cleverest variation is the use of the creatures' names – a different one in each stanza and in the envoi. Here we have Bear, Boar, Wolf, Deer, Hart and Plover.

In this poem the technique underpins the emotion perfectly. 'It is the pity of it,' says the poet, showing us 'More small birds than one can bear ... it's like seeing the dawn chorus, dead ... So tiny.' There is one stanza that's almost mystical in tone with its description of 'the silence, early mist ... almost holy, life breathing everywhere, beyond pity or our small selves.' At the end the dead creatures are addressed as 'my lovelies' and the loss of their 'throbbing lives' lamented. 'This is an awful game' says the writer.

### **Highly Commended Into The Wood**

In the first line we are given the setting: a Relaxation class. 'It makes us anxious' says the narrator. Laconic comments such as this continue throughout the poem, juxtaposing what should be the 'healing' with unspoken mental distress.

Voices in this poem are vividly conveyed, especially that of the out of touch facilitator. The sense of unease is enhanced by the repetition of 'painful' words such as twitch, wince, jolt and jerk. This is an original and striking poem.

### **Highly Commended The Wise Child**

A poem on the grim themes of war and loss but written with such lyricism and exuberance it feels almost euphoric. The magic of the poem's language would suffer if I were to try and paraphrase or quote from it here. It needs to be read in its entirety, both silently and aloud. Suffice to say that here we have a feast of words. This is a poet who must live and breathe the sounds and essence of poetry.

### **Highly Commended Anorexic**

This is a stunning poem in which the metaphor of an elephant in the room underlies the reality of anorexia which the daughter of the house suffers from but refuses to admit. Small details create a feeling of desperation as the family colludes in avoiding the facts, alternating between false 'jollity' and 'anguish'. A striking poem, both poignant and hard hitting.

### **Commended Parish without postcode**

This exceptional prose poem has been high on my list of choices from the start. There is an intriguing surrealism in the narrative which explores the idea of a cataclysmic event where people continue as before, unaware and floundering 'in all directions.'

An imaginative and thought-provoking concept but it is the cadences of language I enjoy most. Here we have writing where every word feels right.

### **Commended Bird in Me**

The title 'Bird in Me' is significant. The poem appears to illustrate aspects of birds and several oblique ways of considering them. All the depictions, however, present vulnerable, defenceless creatures that are captive and trapped, lured and exploited, blinded, drowned, plucked, cooked and eaten. The implication is that we, as humans, are both perpetrator and victim. The poem offers us a 'they' but also a 'me'.

### **Commended Unrequited**

This poem hooked me immediately with its opening lines: 'I walk into a room and/the way you pull back a chair for yourself/tells me how afraid you are of hurting it.' The 'you' is concerned only with him/herself and it is the chair, an inanimate object, that is the focus of attention. In this poem 'unrequited' involves empathy and tenderness but these qualities are one-sided. 'Where is your heart?' asks the narrator. There is no answer returned.

### **Special Mention Past Midnight**

Every word, every pause in this cameo of a poem, feels spot on. Like the man's cigarette tip it is 'incandescent' with sounds. I love the whole effect created by the sibilance of words such as 'displaced', 'glass', 'reception', 'swoosh', 'dancing.'

### **Special Mention Noosing the Dead**

Many aspects of this poem appeal to me – its lyricism and musicality, the finely chosen images, the poet's use of assonance and sound patterning. Most of all I appreciate the sure hand that has crafted line lengths and endings and the perfect use of pause.

### **Special Mention Benches on the Prom**

Each stanza takes an inscription on a bench as its starting point. A beautiful poem that with delicate, precise imagery and an economy of words highlights the space between earth and air, life and death, what was and is.

## **The Results**

### **First Prize**

Karen Morash - *Things I Have Advertently and Inadvertently Taught My Daughters This Past Year*

### **Second prize**

John Freeman - *Opus 131*

### **Third Prize**

Margaret Wilmot- *Game in a Dutch Castle*

**Highly Commended**

Andy Dean - *Into the Wood*

Laura Potts - *The Wise Child*

Pamela Scobie – *Anorexic*

**Commended**

Lesley Burt - *Parish without postcode*

Marion Hobday - *Bird in Me*

Sandra Galton - *Unrequited*

**Special Mentions**

Scott Elder - *Past Midnight*

Gabriel Griffin - *Noosing the Dead*

Audrey Ardern-Jones - *Benches on the Prom*