

Results of the August 2016 Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition judged by Terry Jones

As an indication of what a judge of a poetry competition is likely to be taking into consideration as he or she begins the slow and deliberate process of selection and de-selection, it might be useful here to consider this listing of features that can mar and undermine a potentially successful poem. The list is not definitive, but it is very likely to be shared by most if not all experienced readers and writers of poetry. It is quite a long one, so please bear with me. It goes as follows - aim to avoid the use of:

repetitive use of the first person singular; over reliance on easy to achieve alliteration; archaic syntax and diction; easy full rhymes for the sake of rhyme, especially on monosyllables; tears, that is the word 'tears'; clichés or familiar phrasings which are pieces of language well on their way to ossifying into clichés; retinues of adjectives; jaded 'poetic' diction; inchoate howls of pain; didactic moralising remonstrances; the prosaic chopped into lines; poems about the poem being written (though this may have exceptions); claims of artistic suffering for the art (this never has exceptions); sentimentality and greeting card banality; inattention to the symbiotic relationship between sound and meaning in an achieved poem.

The most effective way of avoiding features like those above (they will, almost always, switch of the light of poetry in any potential poem), is to read reputedly published contemporary poetry. Again, and as a tentative, non-definitive list of current UK poets) I would suggest: Vahni Capildeo, Alice Oswald, Ian Duhig, Denise Riley, Ruth Padel, Julia Copus, Alan Gillis, Jo Morgan, Rachel Boast, Bernard O'Doghue, Katharine Towers, Jacob Polley, Ruby Robinson...

In these poets, and of course in many others, we can find poems where the language is alive and surprising without being over-wrought for sensational effect, poems that possess and express an integrity charged with thought and a sense of considered form, along with a sense that, however tentatively, a window has opened, or has begun to open, on a new prospect, that an un-hackneyed, individual way of seeing, feeling and thinking has been brought to language. To borrow from and adapt a profound thinker about poetry and thought, a relationship so close we should call it poetry-thought, it might be said that the task of poetry is to bring language to language as language (see Martin Heidegger's essay on Language).

Now to the details of the competition itself.

Many of the poems entered for this competition were successful, in part or in whole, in avoiding the pitfalls outlined above, and many of them achieved an expressive appeal in individual lines and stanzas and announced themselves as being poems, or poems in the process of being made. In that respect, they sought, often successfully, to become those shaped and sometimes shape-shifting artefacts of language, thought and sound that we can recognise as poems well worth the reading.

The range and variety of the 186 poems submitted would most certainly present a challenge to any judge, and it is possible that many of them could be successful on other occasion if submitted to this or other competitions. Some address themselves to topical issues of concern: drug-compromised athletes; political cupidity; love achieved or unachieved; renditions of religious encounters with the world in its manifold presences. Others address what are often regarded as perennials of poetry: ageing, death, childhood, dark nights of the soul. And many expend themselves in depictions of nature, of effects of light, of changes of seasons, of rainfall, snowfall, wind and calm.

As ever, choosing and positioning the poems was difficult and demanding, but I present them here in reverse order.

Commended Poems

***Amma* – Sam Burns**

Amma, an engaging poem set as it apparently is in rural India, works by counter posing the earthly and the spiritual in the well realised figures of the physical, fleshly, material Amma herself, the grandmother, who rolls dung balls and squats in the dust, and her grandchild, the remote and silent child with the 'thousand-yard stare' who 'stands/ between the horns of the bull/ until it runs.' The symbolism of the encounter opens a doorway and that seems to flood the poem with interpretive possibilities in such a way that the quotidian, down-to-earth ordinariness of the depicted scene is irradiated and draws the reader back to it again and again.

***Desire in the Cheap Seats* – Robin Lindsay Wilson**

This is a poem with a forensic focus on lust, male voyeurism, and perhaps emotional inadequacy. Set in a smoke filled music hall or performance hall where 'half naked starlets' and 'chorus girls' dance, it conveys real atmosphere in a sequence of fresh images and phrases, but it is the emotional psychology of the male gazer that is the real point of focus.

At the undemonstrative conclusion of the poem, 'he stands inside the fug/ to shout out his demons.'

***Foetal Cues* - Andy Eycott**

Foetal Cues expends itself in a riff on the comma, on that single punctuation mark. It is a slight poem in that respect, but it has a visual and imaginative force behind it and embodies an alertness to the materiality of the grapheme represented in a sequence of apt metaphors that redirect, refocus, and sharpen our attention.

The comma 'hangs with/ the patience of light' and in a series of metaphorical transformations it becomes - 'an ash heavy cigarette', 'a bent nail', 'a fish hook.' There is a careful, poetic thinking at work here.

Highly Commended

***Fighting the Biography of John Clare* - John Gallas**

The appeal of this poem lies largely in its linguistically rich and aptly echoic deployment of the diction of Clare's poetry: who could resist a line like 'the rawky pages blopped', or the dialectal 'I dropped/ my core into a furrow' and the 'flibbling trees?'.

There would be many poems where such a reliance on the use of diction from a previous poet would come across as jaded, as something of a cop out, but that is not the case here.

It is a melancholic tribute to the 'peasant' poet, marginalised into madness in his lifetime. Its best effects are the small, restrained ones: 'It rained: I stayed.' But overall it is shaped and knowledgeable.

***Moon Egg* - Camilla Lambert**

In *Moon Egg* we are presented with a meditative encounter with an insignificant fragment of the material world, with a mere thing, with a pebble on a beach, but in the crucible of this poet's imagination the pebble on the undergoes a sequence of transmutations becoming respectively 'a pale moon', 'a hungry star', 'a sandpiper's egg', 'a moon egg'.

At one and the same moment, the poem is both laconic and intensely focused, and the precise choices of diction combine to give it a quiet music of its own; consider, for example, this line: 'Its pocked skin smelled of cold space.' The arrangement of vowels and consonants here testify to a poet who has, in their own words, 'sifted thoughts.'

In Your Hands – Ross Cogan

In Your Hands - There is here a real precision of imagery, and a surprising conjunction of delicacy (the small bones) with architectural geological, and topological imagery.

The poem's real strengths lie in its control of the unfolding of ideas, and in the deft uses of para-rhyme in middle three couplets. There is also a carefully judged sense of lineation as it steps lightly from line to line and couplet to couplet.

It also demonstrates valuably that metaphors are always more potent than similes, and if the full rhyme at the end, and the too neat conclusion it embodies are perhaps less successful, it nevertheless stands as a poem that lends itself to pleasurable re-reading.

3rd Prize: Two Cups - Math Jones

This poem has about it a quiet mystery that is part religious, part phenomenological; it is structured and quiet at the same moment, like the altar it evokes.

The two cups, 'at once naked and dressed in white,' are sacred vessels standing silently in a world in which they hover between appearance and disappearance, and one has a sense that the rich etymological and philosophical meanings of those two modes of being/ not being are at issue here.

As shaped vessels they function as catalysts for the shaping imagination, and there is behind the poem an appreciation of the significances of ritual. The choices of diction are aptly simple, as simple gestures, but the whole poem as it unfolds in eight balanced stanzas speak persuasively of the craft and care of a poet.

Second Prize: Loki as Falcon – Ross Cogan

Loki as Falcon - and as first person narrator of this poem - might recall Hughes' *Hawk Roosting*, but it is also its own poem: confident in structure, quite fully realised in the rapidity of metaphoric thought as the mythical Loki slips into the skin and plumage of a falcon which is 'cratered where quills/ stand in their inkwells,' and visually specific as it provides that almost microscopic close-up of the falcons plumage.

Behind the poem lies a knowledge of myth, and an interest in entering the otherness that myths function to communicate. We listen with full engagement as the Loki-Falcon relishes its abilities in flight 'while this raiment of sails/ sets and trims itself again and again.'

The coldly instrumental conclusion of the poem is also effective as the creature tells us 'When I return/ youth lies in my talons, cold as a nut.'

First Prize: The Greens - Lesley Burt

The Greens, couples brevity with density and announces itself, perhaps, as a species of feminist protest poem, juxtaposing, as it does the self indulgent actions of the male figure with the selfless, productive work of the female figure.

That said, there is nothing didactic about it, and all the meanings of the poem are completely inhabited by the poet.

There is a real muscularity of vowels here, a real control of sound, and an ear fine-tuned for controlled alliteration, assonance, consonance. Consider the opening stanza:

She deserves more, the woman,
than heaving his autumn leavings
while he rides Northerlies South -

That middle line performs the meaning in the work it requires for its enunciation.

Similarly, in the line 'blanket corms in warm loam', there is here a developed phonological awareness and an alertness to the musical potential of the tensions in and between words.

There is an object lesson for practising and emerging poets here, a direction to what Eliot called the 'auditory imagination.'

Terry Jones

November 9, 2016

Administrator's comments:

Please note, these poems were judged blind and the names of the poets have been inserted by me prior to posting this report online. Many thanks to Terry for a job well done.

Congratulations to all the winning and commended poets, and thank you to the many poets who have continued to support the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition.

Nnorom Azuonye

November 9, 2016