

Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (August 2019)

Adjudication Report by Roger Elkin

I trust that readers will forgive me, if I start this report with a few reservations. One of the most immediate and occasionally challenging aspects was the use of diction that was strange and/or “new” (*that is new to me in poetry*), though some of this might be the result of poor proof-reading and typographical errors:

bevore caviled chypre clopin-clopant crucification depakote exoticise fankle
laiden leminscates nano-nymphs necrotic obeli psoriatically samaras scrimmage shtick
skyark tormentil unporcelain unworthyeing weltered

It was difficult to resist thinking that in some cases the authors were driven by a desire to show off their language knowledge, rather than allowing the poem to breathe for itself. There were also some strained conceits, images, similes, metaphors and descriptive passages, which were sometimes over-written.

Other limitations were

- (a) the adoption of a “poetic voice” including the use of archaic diction: “neath”, “morn”; “’til” (for until or till); “tis” (for it is); “quoth”;
- (b) the practice of word-inversion, primarily to satisfy the demands of metre and rhyme.
- (c) occasional over-use of alliteration.

Some positive advice for your writing, and competition entry:

Most importantly, read as much modern poetry as possible, and if entering competitions, it would seem sensible to read the work of the adjudicator, many of whom are prize-winning poets.

Read adjudication reports carefully and apply to the placed poems what the adjudicator outlines; then apply this to your own writing;

Keep the poem direct; write about the concrete/physical world rather than abstract things and/or emotions; allow the poem to grow and move;

use language that is fresh, uncluttered and within general circulation;

coin fresh conceits, but without showiness;

choose an appropriate title – one that catches attention and focuses on the poetic subject;

check for typographical errors and grammatical non-sequiturs.

Now to the **Competition Results**; and despite the reservations at the start of this report, there were some finely-executed poems, emotionally-explorative and intellectually-challenging, as I hope my comments will confirm.

Special Mentions

Do I Love You? Well now ...

The poem’s title predicates a poem that abounds in humour and pointedness, as it seeks to tease its reader, an unnamed dedicatee, to work out whether s/he is loved. This very enjoyable poem – innocent almost to the point of a pleasing naivety - was one of a handful built using full or pure rhyme; and in this instance the rhyming isn’t in any way forced or used to satisfy the poem’s metrical tread and its adopted pattern of couplets, 14 in all. Of these, 12 couplets are constructed on unpunctuated questions that explore well-known cultural events and personages, such as the violinist, Nigel Kennedy, or the guitarist, Eric Clapton. This example with its cheeky humour and wit is typical:

Was Ian Botham well known in cricket
Did Cleopatra stump Antony’s middle wicket

The lack of even the expected question mark indicates an anticipated positive answer. Obviously there can be only one response to each question; subsequently the concluding 2 couplets resolve the “challenge”. As my emphasis indicates, the dedicatee is given a wide scope, as the final couplet suggests:

For if you find any of the above to be true
Then you’ll know how much I love you

Henry Hall’s Lighthouse

This 18 lined poem is an economical and pointed celebration of the first Eddystone Lighthouse (there have been 4), although not identified as such in the poem. What attracts attention is the use of personification, so that the events of the poem are written from the standpoint of the lighthouse. The opening four lines are a superb indicator of the poem’s stylistic approach - clear, direct, factual without being sentimental or sensational:

I was a sender of light, night-born,
hard-bright, single-minded,
focused on the task. I was built for
and stood praised by all.

The use of hyphenated adjectives is a characteristic ploy. Later verses explore the 1703 Great Storm, “When I turned sudden-blind” and two hundred sailors were drowned. The description of the “storm-racked” ship is strikingly effective:

its fluttering sails frantic
like moths for my guttering flame.

There is a similar restrained emotional control in the description of the 1755 fire which destroyed not only the lighthouse, but marked its keeper for perpetuity when

with candled head afire
I drip-sealed the keeper’s guts
with weeping molten lead.

Throughout the poem, the language register is carefully considered and appropriate. Well done!

Jersey Tiger Moth

This is a splendid description of this particular species of moth, “an emblem with the look of something rare”. The poem’s 15 lines ripple with precise images – “soft arrowhead in simple origami”; “glam rock zigzags, like a dazzle ship”; and when it flies

its flashed underskirts are gaudy
the perfect shade of tinned tomato soup.

The visual precision of that delightfully fresh image drawn from most people’s everyday experience and therefore readily understandable adds to the poem’s appeal, a feature which is emphasised in the final lines:

Their shtick is to bear whole wide bright worlds here,
enrich thin lives, exoticise plain air.

Reading this poem has certainly enriched my life – hopefully it will yours!

Commended

Right of Way

This poem links the reader directly with events via the use of the second person pronoun. Apart from some precise description as in “The deep electric greens of the carpet moss” and the image effectively describing tackling a map “inflating from your arms / like a paper accordion”, the poem has an overall negative “feel” as highlighted from the first word in the opening line:

Not a soul saw you park-up

and the description four lines later of the uncertainty implicit throughout the poem as “the trail goes cold”. This level of uncertainty is similarly pinpointed in the emphasis on lack of exactness, so the church clock would be at “Twelve or thereabouts”; and the names of the tree species (*Ash. Beech.*) “not known”; followed by a realisation that “you were lost”. This is amplified by the suggestion that an onlooker (a vaguely

expressed “someone”) would “think they heard some faltering in your heart”; and that the rucksack was being “carried ... like a yoke”. Eventually this elusive element of the event is resolved in the positioning of the poem’s final word, “disappear”. This is carefully-crafted writing.

Red Triangle

Written in three septets, the poem starts with observation of the concrete/physical world of road signs. The description of these in verse 1 is exact and precise and takes the form of a catalogue:

workmen, deer, horse-drawn vehicles, ice ... /
gradients, uneven roads, hump backed bridges.

In the second verse, the signs are more fully described:

A swing-bridge pivots above ruffled waves ...
elderly whom prod across the road with sticks.

Of particular note is the precision of the verbs – consider the juxtaposition between “pivots” and the respective adjective, “ruffled”; and the visual-exactness of that “prod”.

This latter description forges a link with the concerns of the final septet in which the poem opens out to explore the worlds of event and emotion, where “Some things give little warning”. Here the emphasis falls on negative diction: “a longer quietness”; “infrequent visits”; “unanswered texts”; and is resolved in the penetrating diction of the poem’s final lines, the concise distillation of life and pending death intuited in the image of a stopping engine:

We miss pangs, hints, cut corners, hurtle through
shared silences between work and sleep,
topple into stillness as the engine stops.

What nanny knew

Written in unrhymed sestet, the poem’s narrator is a nanny in service to “my lady” and her husband, identified throughout the poem as “Sir”. The lack of names serves to emphasise the notion of class, and the interface between the two separate worlds that the poem explores, that of the “poor” with their world of domestic work; and the “rich” with its deceits and hypocrisies. So the lady’s child is nourished on the nanny’s milk “stored for my stillborn child”. Furthermore the lady is

all the while pretending not to see
how like her lover the poor mite looked.

The nanny’s part in events is handsomely rewarded by the return passage from India, the description of which is economically portrayed via the contrast between the natural and human worlds: “from crimson sunset and human stench”, and “that dappled garden / of wide Indian leaves and sweating backs”. Similar contrasts exist back home in London, where “docked in a tall cold Chelsea house”, the nanny reveals how she “washed, bleached and ironed in / a sweeter pattern to our embroidered lives.” The thrust of the poem is chillingly conveyed in the penultimate verse with its clipped and primarily monosyllabic diction:

I learnt then that though the rich can spend,
they need the poor to make a home.
I stayed on to banish dust and dead flowers,
and warm the nursery for bedtime tales.

The nanny further explains “Sir still needs my silences he bought me this flat, / my well-earned privacy, he said”. This is a disturbing poem, whose distant, cold and matter-of-factual tone speaks volumes about the spaces between folk, and the secret lives they live.

Highly Commended

Tony’s Next

Written in nine quatrains structured by the use of both full rhyme (“add”/“had” etc.) and half rhyme (“years”/“indoors” etc.) on alternate lines, the poem explores Tony’s life, where he “notched up / these privet

streets”. Consider the visual explicitness of this urban setting as “privet streets”, with its intuition of an ordinariness verging on negativity. This negative tone is initiated with the poem’s first word, “Subtract”; developed in the idea of questioning doubt implicit in “what we think we knew”, as opposed to what we knew we knew; explored in the idea of “half a life”; and momentarily resolved in “where Tony died alone / but minus nothing more”. The tone is further compounded by the diction of subsequent lines: “unseen rooms”; “how to chat / remotely”; “the face marked up to leave”; “the hand-me-downs / of habit” as he

wrote his life each day
in walked out clauses, years
pared back to words and weeks
of borrowed space indoors.

But, the poet recalls, Tony’s life was more than this. He possessed a “scribbled wit” with “tips / for lawns and hedging, shrub / or annuals”. And, if I am reading the poem correctly, his death when it came was in fact suicide, an incident sensitively intuited by the poem’s final question “Who could top // the plan he’d drafted”. Any reservations that folk might have about such an act are invalidated by the fact that the police found him “sitting proud”, “his dogs well fed, alive”.

This is a moving tribute, skilfully and sensitively achieved.

mandatory blackbird poem

Written in eight quatrains of pure rhyme following an ABAB rhyme scheme, the poem initially explores the accidental flight of a blackbird through an open kitchen door. The description is rooted in the physicality of events, with emphasis falling on the verbs:

shitting fear, it ricocheted through air
between the skylight and the windowsill,
and thudded hard, and fell.

Loath to scare the blackbird, the poet comes to its aid, and is aware that “its fear / was somehow frightening to me.” So it is with “sheer relief” that the bird is restored to its natural element. However, the poet’s empathy for the bird becomes compromised by the fact that

some lost part
of me felt envy, for persistent hands
which dare to stay and gentle a raw heart.

This prompts the poet to draw a link between the plight of the blackbird, and a dying father “as he fought / his way towards the end”; a situation which was made bearable by the presence, help and care of an unnamed lover, who

came to me, then, and in soft, dark night
your arms encompassed me, hands twined in hair;
you held me while my body shook, and fright
and lostness shuddered through me. You were there.

It is at this instance that the poem becomes bigger than its impetus, as implicit in the poem’s rather disparaging title. Memory transforms events into a moving sharing of a moment in which, though we might recognise and be hurt by loss, and experience fear, there is also love:

though some emptinesses never fill;
though what we treasure most must slip our grasp;
and though our scars persist within us – still,
in love, not just in fear, some days have past.

The Model

This is a fascinating poem, whose four irregular verses straddling over 33 lines contain only six sentences. The poem takes the form of an account to the artist by a painter’s model during the process of a life-drawing. In the first verse emphasis falls on the model’s need to keep still in one position:

immobile save for an occasional blink;
a persistent itch at my brow.

As is to be expected, the detail here and throughout the poem is essentially visual, and the writing so exact that every stage of the drawing can be clearly grasped. At times the writing is mimetic, and the use of punctuation so designed that we can see the necessary precision in the body's positioning:

hands placed so, and so;
feet: there, and there.

While the artist is busy measuring, "observing", "calculating angles", "appraising", the model is similarly alert:

From the corner of my eye
I see your concentration,
your every move, every assessment;
each transfer from eye to representation,
as I'm transformed from living flesh
to only two dimensions.

Once the artist is finished, the model delights in a regained freedom:

I can move again
free to ease stiffened muscles,
and relieve at last my itch

The use of "itch" is key – referring not only to its mention in the first verse, but alerting us to the fact that while the process of the artist has been recorded by the poet/model, the model/poet has also been occupied with the creation of a work of art – this poem! A re-reading of the poem, shows the skilful and careful seeding of this in the use of diction referring to writing, from the first line's "essaying", via "a persistent itch at my brow / as my mind weighs words"; the process of "committing to paper"; and the drawing "captured on paper" till finally both the model and the poem are free to

relieve at last my itch
to picture us in words.

Once again, this is clear evidence of poetic mastery at work.

Third Prize

Scrap

From the initial stages of the adjudication, this poem's presentation (in two 33-lined blocks facing each other but separated the length of the page by a vertical blank space) attracted attention. The content concerns the setting on of students in 18-month-long internships at a business dealing with "Scrap". As the poem's concluding line says

yer'd be as well getting' stuck in cus there's work enough fer eternity.

As the comment indicates, this isn't any ordinary scrap, but "lower case vowels", punctuation marks, "dots and dashes"; and mathematical symbols. Throughout, the poem is written in a northern language register with emphasis on speech rhythms; dropped aitches (ironically conveyed by use of a single-inverted apostrophe); and missing gs. There are loads of "ands" which are reduced to "n", or "N" if used at the start of a sentence. The problem here is that the sentence punctuation is inconsistent, so the use of full-stops and end-stops is random.

The setting-on of the internees we are told is because

It's just we've had us hands full meetin' orders for China –
they'd 'ave lot compacted n shipped in bales for smelting
if wi tell't 'em all what's 'ere - n seh wi can't cope wi' demand

The comment on overseas interest is developed later when the linguist intern is told (s)he will "be startin' ower 'ere / wi' foreign gubbins". There is plenty of room for critical consideration of business practices, in a striking simile which poses the idea

some conglomerate'll come n swaller us up like plankton

and the claim that

Biggest turnover's in currencies (we've even 'ad some Bitcoin in)
but they'll tek care of 'emsems

Occasionally the linguistic and mathematical terms seem out of place in this imagined context. (And here I'm aware of my comments at the start of this report). Are terms like "ellipses n umlauts / n obeli"; not to mention "diacritics" and "leminscates" in general usage? What saves the day, however, is the wit, wide-ranging humour and critical sniping. These lend the poem its humanity and its close understanding of a work environment; the divide between the approach of the experienced practical hands-on boss and the inexperienced student. This is a powerful, well-conceived, and brilliantly-executed poem.

Second Prize

Yew

At the heart of the poem is the intellectual play on the synonym – yew/you. Throughout the ages it has been known that most parts of the yew tree are toxic, and that consumption of the "rust of its leaf, its sap" can cause death. This is asserted in the direct statement of the poem's opening line:

The tree of death is saving my life.

The paradoxical nature of this is explored in the consideration of "its poison in proportion / to how much to kill, how much to save". The fact that in classical times, the yew was sacred to Hecate, the Greek goddess associated with death; and yew branches were used at the entrance to Hades to purify the dead and that the tree was subsequently grown in Christian burial grounds and graveyards is economically conveyed by the reference to

Graveyard tree, roots hollowing passages
in the Underworld I might travel from
to crook a sky in an elbow of branch.

The second verse-paragraph marks a turn of focus as the poet directly addresses the tree, and the modern use of an extract from yew bark in the treatment of cancer:

Taxotere, Agent Chemotherapy, yew and me
wedged together, become each other – wedded
blood to blood.

It is this chemotherapy treatment that causes the soreness and redness of skin, hands and feet that is referenced in the poem's second line, "My skin burns".

The use of a short question, "Remember me?", introduces the idea that in the past, as a child(?)

I climbed you,
maimed you, saved your leaves for *this*

a prophetic suggestion of a known future need and relationship. Moreover, the claim that I "knew you / hated interference, amputation" is an oblique reference, nicely under-stated, to healing surgery. Similarly, the use of two short sentences - "Now you have me." and "I'm hooked on you." - emphasise a determined finality and relationship that is almost symbiotic; and which reinforces the use of the synonym.

The final verse-paragraph's unrhymed couplet is a plea in which the punning on releaf/relief/relieve is pivotal:

Lest I catch my death of you, be my angel
either way, releaf me from this half-life.

So much is contained and referenced in this 17-lined poem: changing emotions, mythology, the author's past, medicine, the purpose of life, the ephemeral hold of life over death. The density of the writing, though not difficult to follow or in any way obscure, and the wide-ranging emotional landscape are enviable. The use of sentence variety, coupled with irregular free-verse-paragraphing indicate a high level of artistic, creative and intellectual understanding, and ability. A masterly work indeed.

First Prize

Mam Tor, January

This is another successful short poem, only 14 lines, and structured in 4 irregular verses. Notice how the poem's argument is pointed by the use of sentence variety – from as little as 2 words to the 6 lines of an entire verse. The opening unrhymed couplet seizes the attention with its use of the second person pronoun, which immediately immerses the reader in the sharing of the poet's experience of climbing as indicated by the use of "up" and what happens to breath in January:

You're high. Breathe in the crystal air;
breathe out clouds of mist. Keep on going up.

If you didn't know what Mam Tor is, the economic description here – “high”, with air that is “crystal”- and throughout (for example “the stone-hard mountain slope”) leaves the reader in no doubt. As the climb proceeds, the language is physical and exact. Consider the visual precision, and the nicely-coined simile in the description of

Ice bristles along the stretched wire mesh
like magnetised iron filings, to make
an ascending filigree sculpture.

What further strengthens the poem is the observed “conflict” between appearances, dependent on physical position:

Seen from the valley you are just one fleck
dotting across a camouflage landscape;

but there on the way “upwards to the peak”, “you thrill”, “feel you belong” and “marvel on your way”. Some of that thrill and marvel is evident in the skilful descriptions, and the overall positivity of the poem – we are lucky to be able to share them.

As well as giving well-earned praise to the writers of these particular poems, I hope that these comments are helpful to **all** competitors and readers. As I trust they demonstrate, this has been a stimulating, interesting and varied entry – both in subject matter and structural approach. I have enjoyed the demands that the entered poems made; and will be interested to see the names of their authors. Many thanks to everyone for letting me into your special poetic worlds. And thanks, too, to Nnorom once again for entrusting them to my scrutiny, and for his impeccable administration.

Roger Elkin

RESULTS

Many thanks to Roger for this detailed report. I have no doubt that all the entrants in this quarter's competition and those who plan to enter our future competitions will benefit from this adjudication report. Now it is time to match the poems with their authors.

Special Mention:

Kevin O'Brien (Watford) - *Do I Love You? Well now ...*
Greta Ross (Canterbury) - *Henry Hall's Lighthouse*
Mark Totterdell (Exeter) - *Jersey Tiger Moth*

Commended:

Michael Brown (Middlesbrough) - *Right of Way*
Philip Williams (Cheshire) - *Red Triangle*
Elizabeth Davies (London) - *What nanny knew*

Highly Commended:

Will Daunt (Ormskirk) - Tony's Next
Lucy Crispin (Kendal) - *mandatory blackbird poem*
Malcolm Fritchley (Shireoaks) - *The Model*

Third Prize:

Jack Faricy (Huddersfield) - *Scrap*

Second Prize:

Ruth Calway (Gwent) - *Yew*

First Prize:

David Duncombe (Matlock) - *Mam Tor, January*

SENTINEL LITERARY QUARTERLY POETRY COMPETITION

(NOVEMBER 2019)

JUDGE: OZ HARDWICK

Now accepting entries