

Judge's Report, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (May 2019)

Judging the May 2019 Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition has proven to be a very demanding task - a testament to the quality, range and variety of the submissions. A portfolio of 434 poems by 195 poets has called for a careful process of selection and critical discrimination.

I made an initial long list of 150 poems. My intent at this stage was focused on ensuring that any poem, regardless of subject matter or thematic orientation, which displayed what I will refer to here as a persuasive authenticity of engagement as reflected in a freshness of use of language, would receive further reading and reflection.

At the longlist stage, I was focused on 75 poems which, in addition to other qualities, demonstrated a thoughtfulness about structure and an openness to the experiences, emotions and ideas with which they were engaged.

With a shortlist of 25 poems, making the essential discriminations was, becoming painfully difficult, but as you will appreciate, the aim of this and other competitions is to arrive at a very limited number of poems (9 in our case) and this means many successful poems cannot make the final cut.

There are three poems that deserve Special Mention; three that are to be Commended; a further three to be Highly commended; and a final three to win the third, second and first prize. I address each of these below.

Special Mention

Amongst these poems is **Last Words**, a poem representing in often starkly unsentimental language a final encounter between a dead man and his eight children (five sons, three daughters). The man, we are told:

...never mentioned love,
not even to his wife.

But at the last the gathered offspring hear the word never spoken in life

I love
faint as a breeze
but certain.

This is a poem where the language is spare and precise; it produces a direct and compelling engagement with the existential realities of love and death - two of the great themes of poetry.

The next Special Mention goes to **Incarnation**. This comes across as a condensed and complex theological reflection on the meaning spectrum of 'incarnation'. Far from being a simple expression of some specific species of religious belief, the language and imagery is elliptical and shifting, rather like the sea,

but the sea has a mood it does not share

In some respects, the whole poem is a celebration of unknowability, of mystery: some, we are told:

have tried to establish one answer, a window to a window
which probably means the guest room to a house

I think the achievement of the poem is to leave windows open; to demonstrate in language that language itself presents us with infinitely rich semantic space. In well achieved poems, there always are open windows, a sense of the vertiginous. The final image here is '...fruit/ tumbling from an open palm.'

Last (but not least) to receive Special Mention, we have **Care** a second person address to a grieving mother on the death of her child. The evident danger here is sentimentality, but that suspect emotion is not allowed to intrude on the poem as it expresses a deep and touching empathy with a terrible sense of loss and pictures the child

resting with feathers of black hair
a pulsing fledgling on your skin

A beautiful image of fragility, of vulnerability.

Commended

We move now to the Commended poems. Amongst these poems is a short yet intently shaped poem, **The Parrot and the Dove**, the one caged and

clacking the keyless padlock of his beak

The other in apparently free flight

flutters unfettered across an open sky

There is an appealingly self-conscious, auto-reflective mastery of metaphor at work here, and the whole quality of the poem is evident in the deft handling of imagery and soundscape with the final lines intentionally evoking comparison with Ted Hughes' poem *The Jaguar*:

A world unwallled, unroofed and infinite

The next poem in this category is **Non-native**, a tribute poem to a mother and one that is replete with a laconic visuality and tenderness:

Whenever my mother spoke French
green birds flew into the kitchen.

Look how comfortable this poem is with metaphor; nothing is forced; the language is allowed to do its own essential work. In the final line of the second stanza, we are told

They sang my mother lace.

A small part of the poem, but the language is self evidently alive and new and creative; and in a way, it is concerned with the creativity of language.

The final Commended poem is **Mooring** which works an analogy between the complex and careful business of 'Bringing a boat into a jetty...' and a 'floundering attempt' to move a relationship on to its next stage. The speaker of the poem is knowledgeable about boats, and perhaps less knowledgeable about exactly how to handle 'this little gesture at romance.' The whole poem manages a lovely balance between seriousness and a self-effacing wryness, though there is, as it moves to conclude, a sense of impending loss:

And suddenly
I think that I'll never want to go rowing on this lake again...

The language is simple and direct, but there are suggested complexities and depths to it.

Highly Commended

We begin this category with **A Tale of Five Ewes**, and in the first six stanzas of the poem that is what we get: a drama of ewes in relation to their (or not their own) lambs. The appeal of the poem lies in its descriptive precision, but beneath that there is a compelling sense of a wholly authentic experience of this branch of animal husbandry. We find 'The first sheep

penned in stocks
Her head sticking through a hole

We see

Twins nestled ying and yang in a bucket

And a third ewe 'being presented

With a lamb in lambs clothing

In the final two stanzas the poem morphs into a reflection on human motherhood. We are told in the same unfussy, unstrained language that:

It takes time to bond, to grow
Into the sheepskin of motherhood.

The next Highly Commended poem is **The Harp**. Surprisingly, this is one of the very few sonnets submitted to this quarter's competition. And here is a sonnet that is deceptively subtle in its handling of rhyme, in this case of deftly handled internal rhyme that works in concert with a swelling and musical syntax and lexicon. Consider this fragment:

...I rose from my chair
Like a woman in thrall. A song made of water,
Hyperion's daughter could not have conducted
A more ineluctable spell than the swell
Of that heavenly air...

A poem about music that makes its own music and adopts and manipulates some of the formal constraints of a demanding poetic form.

Also to be Highly Commended is **In the line of fire**. This poem is a direct address to an urgent contemporary political matter. The setting is today's multi-cultural Britain, and more specifically the Islamophobic expression of racism that some individuals and communities are confronted with on a daily basis. The subject of the poem is a fearful woman:

She is the different other
She can tell from the sidesteps
of avoidance in the street..

An anonymous man watches her

and waits for her to open a door
to mark which house to torch that night

It is blunt. It is immediate. It is real. And the poem leaves us in no doubt of any of those things.

First, Second and Third Prizes

We come now to the final three poems, those to be placed in First, Second, and Third prize places. I will present these in reverse order.

Third Prize goes to **Bespoke Suit, 1918**. As a finely tailored, precisely stitched creation, the poem becomes the structural metaphor of its own subject matter. The speaker here is the tailor and maker of the bespoke suit, a suit that is never to be worn by the man who has ordered it; rather, the dark destruction of the first world war has claimed him, and multitudes of others as victims:

He never did retrieve it, one of many in coarse khaki
whose bodies fell instead in a churned-up land,

handkerchiefs littered the air with intricate initials...

What is most engaging is the understated, yet utterly persuasive knowledge of the skill set of the suit's maker; he knows:

how tight the cuff, how close the collar...

how the fabric bends in the elbow,
how the knees peak as they stride forward...

He knows the body of the man who might have worn the suit; and he knows too the 'younger brother who is:

...unable to fill all that expectant space

The Second Prize poem is **a mother's goodbye**, a poem that achieves to a musical and evocative re-creation of a land, a landscape (the slieve bloom mountains), and – with impressive economy and eloquence – a way of life and a history. From the opening lines of the poem we are left in no doubt that the poet can imbue language with charm and charge:

the moonscape bows to the mist;
the slieve blooms into a mountain scope
stitched with the scent of lime and ghost blossoms

This is a lovely villanelle; skilful and sensitive in its handling of the tercets and the quatrain and the repeating lines and rhymes, and it is (in good part) this move to engage a demanding form in the service of a serious, richly geological and deeply human imagination that justifies the poems ranking in this competition. In five tercets and a concluding quatrain, operating within the tight constraints of the rhyme scheme, the poems nevertheless succeeds in opening into real historical and topographical space. We learn:

Stories: the woman who pounded almond oil into an antidote,
Tucked garins in jars of flotsam and flax, and left behind
The village with the basalt neckline and belt of ramie rope

The whole imaginative engagement that the poem is sustained and executed with balance and grace.

And finally, First Prize is awarded to **Imagining the Lares**. In clear, expressive language this poem succeeds in rearticulating for a new, secular world, what have been the canonical theological notions of the divine as supra-human, perfect and thus utterly remote from the everyday world and ordinary lives of human beings. The Lares which are imagined, were Roman household gods, domestic gods if you like, guardians of the hearth and the table, of doorways and windows. But this poem is boldly philosophically confident in announcing that even for these previous gods of the little spaces of our existence:

we have no place
for flesh made perfect in polished stone and niched

in the hallway.

That, 'We have little commerce with things/ immaculate, unvarying...' What we have instead (in a masterly phrase of the poem) are:

the touched
of quantum godlings, their dabs found everywhere...

There is a real metaphysical wit at work here: a thought style that achieves to an oxymoronic precision. The combined words, 'quantum godlings' gestures with one hand to the achievements of modern science (the Standard Model of theoretical physics, most obviously), and with balanced ambidexterity points to the continuing meaningfulness of the quotidian and ordinary. What can be seen now to shine forth in our domestic worlds are the actual existents, the being of things in their being:

Theirs is the trefoil sprouting from the back step
theirs the thread-legged spiders in the stairwell corners,

the groove dragged deep in the wood block by the daily
bite of the bread knife...

The poem seeks to show us that the ordinary world is its own diviner miracle, for which we need:

...offer them no hosannas, only
Unvoiced thanks, an obscure pull towards reverence

A very fine poem. One amongst very many submitted to the competition. I would encourage all those who have submitted to do so again.

Terry Jones.
July 2019

The Results

Having judged the competition blind, the judge sent over his report above which I have enjoyed reading. For me, the most fun part of this exercise is matching the poems with their authors. Many thanks to Terry Jones for a job well done.

The winners will be notified by email and or text today (31.07.2019) and their poems will be published online from tonight through the 1st of August.

Congratulations all and many thanks for your continued support of [Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition](#).

Nnorom Azuonye
Administrator

Special Mentions

Last Words - Jenny Mitchell

Incarnation - Claire Gallivan

Care - Claire Williamson

Commended

The Parrot and the Dove - Mark Totterdell

Non-Native - G. E. Stevens

Mooring - Helen Eastman

Highly Commended

A Tale of Five Ewes - Lizzie Smith

The Harp - Zoe McCann

In the line of Fire - Greta Ross

Third Prize

Bespoke Suit, 1918 – Glen Wilson

Second Prize

a mother's goodbye - Shanley McConnell

First Prize

Imagining the Lares - Steve Xerri

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