

Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition May 2014

An Adjudication Report

by Dominic James

Poets, in the collection 209 poems before me there is a great deal of careful, heart-felt and effective writing and I regret many of the entries were not in the top fifteen, but I am not going to apologise. It was a good competition. Of the last not on the final list; I listened to Chopin's Nocturne in F sharp minor, by a stretch of the imagination I did try to "...form my grubby bulb into a thorax" and I was unsettled by the haunted, Mary Rose. If a Weizen glass would do for schnapps I would have included that Viennese bar in 1913 with its historical giants. Of the others, where this commentary has bearing on your work, my criticisms are not meant as less than encouragement and I hope you accept the following rationale. I was unprepared for the high quality of poems received and, for the work as it stands, my congratulations to all concerned.

On the first reading I gauged impressions of content, rhythm and rhyme. Poems should be heard but we take from the page with our eyes and on the first pass good work was inevitably missed. All the same, dividing the pile into two as I went – preferred and not – the calibre of the entry and its common themes soon emerged. Love, loss, regret in various guises, the nature of isolation. I was not looking for the unexpected here, only those poems that matched most closely the words to the thought. Many passages were admirably accomplished with the laudable appearance of an easy skilfulness. But in their entirety many of these same poems failed to run as smoothly as they should: rhythm hit obstacles, language was bent for measure and rhyme to bad effect. Discarding none, I stacked the poems and read them all again.

No more than shuffled in the first pass, here poems were subjected to the universal, three pile method. My "keep" and "maybe" heaps were to make up about half the total entry. As I went I made notes, corrected typos, weighed the sound of each piece, read and re-read. I hefted the dictionary and googled stuff - the Wiezen glass, String theory (again) the amnion. It was a sometimes difficult list-of-words but I was happy to make the necessary research. English is our pleasure and everyone explored it. I was pleased to see the language stretched, with studied and sometimes the simplest expression found for every subject, from the sweetest declarations to the most bitter anguish. It flowed. Even

recklessly, the content of much of this poetry provided the complete – which is as much to say as – the contented thought.

A few words here on form. In its organisation any poem can be assessed on its own terms. Those built on regular stanzas (from couplets and loose ballad types to one sestina) clearly gained from set measure and, where they worked, rhymes shored up their sense. On the other hand, a phrase against the drift of the poem, which stepped away from the established delivery, perhaps a rhyme used to bang out an echo, failed the piece more drastically than an extra skip or a jump might upset the reader of the wider-ranging forms, such as paragraph or *vers libre*. However presented a poem must read well. A quirk of mannerism, an archaic word out of the blue: scuttles the ship. A regional phrase is out of place if the way hasn't been prepared for it. In short, we must keep guard on sense and sound.

That said, most of the poems achieved their vital tone to good effect. 'Tyrian purple', had an urbane, educated air to match the subject, 'Rubber Hammer' stamped out an indiscriminate frustration, 'Buying a Bicycle in Bosnia', dropped convincingly into the limited English of an indomitable shopkeeper. At this stage I discarded poems because I felt elements were missing – the sensation of smell, for instance, in the raising of a stink – there were errors in syntax, a passage that shone might have been dimmed by the comparative twilight of the overall journey. These faults might have been apparent if the writer had given the poem some distance, that is, put it aside for a time and returned to it. I recommend as a rule no poem less than a month old should be sent for prizes, it shouldn't be despatched on a moment of enthusiasm: the competition is too hot.

Sorting through I found I was at the same time carrying, as it were, the burden of the whole argument before me: an old man (not so old) and his weekly visit to the newsagent, a jackaroo under the night sky, the photo of a friend as a child, an irksome flute, a stab at Kiplingese. All valid, often familiar, all unique: even set aside all of the poems continued to exert their demands to be heard. But I digress.

Of the last 25 poems by now a dozen had risen to the top. At this point a nod to the experienced poets who entered the competition: several good poems, some from the same hand, were not included among the last. This was not for errors in typography, spelling, syntax, metre, the phrasing was not at odds with the poem. They had been properly revised and read well. Those in this category not among my favourites are

omitted for the sake of some quality in others I preferred over them. In someone else's judgement these might have placed first and with good reason. In the final analysis, poetry involves personal choice and, not to detract from the list below, to me there were no clear winners.

A few notes on the commended poems. 'Things You Have Slaughtered', a 14 liner emphatically measured, is included for its startling images and mounting tension of associations. This brought to mind the unlisted 'Blackbird', which I would like to mention in passing for a rare focus: "his ringed eye daring / me to disagree / that prophets should be fed." 'Belly Sea' is akin to the memorable 'School Trip', and takes a place for its verve. 'Chalk lines', set in the lecture room, although one of the least verse-like entries is nonetheless, highly observant, and holds its situation to the light to be examined by all present. 'The Night My Brother Died': "Busy chambers paused / their beating rhythm. // Ventilation shafts tightened, / cutting off the air supply." telegraphs its ending, and does not. 'Glutton' is included for a carnivorous grin:

"He pulls my teeth away from his belly, both hands at my shoulders, implores *Tell me you want me...*"

Commended Poems

Things You Have Slaughtered

Arabesque

Glutton

Belly Sea

Resident Ghosts

Heirs

In the Attic

Chalk Lines

The Night My Brother Died

Highly Commended

Care Home

Life Drawing

Stretching a Spare Day

'Care home' belongs to the common themes. It announces the grave doubts of our leaving behind the older generation with a few, well-chosen scenes.

"We politely ignore her screams... /until the sounds fall apart / In the rusty lock of her throat"

'Stretching a Spare Day' has its shop store moment for the senior citizen, "a tinge of dodder in her voice" returning a purchase: "The queue fall silent – all ogling oil..." I relished that: "all ogling oil."

'Life Drawing', delineates the ancient impulse to capture the world in acts of creation. Sparely written, it enjoys the contrast of its material:

"Charcoal smuts darken paper:
cave-dweller daubs. Burnt twigs
squeak, shiver."

Winners

'Arrival in Leh', Third Place. This is a difficult, breathing episode as altitude dictates the pace of the poem which is sensible, uncomfortable and complete. A 14 liner, if not exactly a sonnet, it is expertly constructed. Take this pattern for instance: "... tsampa noodles / ... but polite / ... like a noose drawn tight." The sequence finishes: "High living has its price."

'Keen', Second Place. I needed two readings to accept a lack of punctuation and a few objections might be raised if the poem was workshopped. But that would be unlikely. I have not included an excerpt as the poem is all of a piece.

'Trap', First Place. It took several readings to be sure of its coherence, though from the first the poem's blamefulness is clear enough. Quick, short rhyming stanzas were accurate and complicated. The ending is neatly sprung, too clever for its prey, for whom it opens:

"Your false moon
has baffled their systems
and angled them in..."

Me too. With my best wishes and gratitude to all the entrants to what has been, for me, an engaging collection of poems.

Dominic James. 09 July 2014.

The Results

Commended Poems

Things You Have Slaughtered by Virginia Astley (Dorset, UK)

Arabesque by Jeanine Stevens (Sacramento, USA)

Glutton by Jasmine Ann Cooray (London, UK)

Belly Sea by Sophie Fenella Robinski (London, UK)

Resident Ghosts by Eileen Carney Hulme (Forres, UK)

Heirs by Angela Arnold (Oswestry, UK)

In the Attic by Martin Parker (Dorset, UK)

Chalk Lines by Sophie Fenella Robinski (London, UK)

The Night My Brother Died by Tracy Davidson (Stratford-On-Avon, UK)

Highly Commended

Care Home by RME Thornhill (Bristol, UK)

Life Drawing by David Butler (Co Wicklow, Eire)

Stretching a Spare Day by Angela Arnold (Oswestry, UK)

3rd Prize

Arrival in Leh by Hugh Sullivan

2nd Prize

Keen by Daniel Roy Connelly (Rome, Italy)

1st Prize

Trap by Mark Totterdell (Exeter, UK)