

Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (August 2018) Judge's Report & Results

Judge's Report by Roger Elkin

What a demanding and simultaneously richly-rewarding challenge poetry competition adjudication offers. As can be seen from a cross sample of the titles of poems submitted, the subject matter ranged widely:

<i>A grain of Sand</i>	<i>Picking Out the Teds</i>
<i>An Aphid's grip</i>	<i>Primary Skin Concerns</i>
<i>As white swans sink</i>	<i>Proper Gander in St. Petersburg</i>
<i>Atropos Cuts the Thread</i>	<i>Recording Grapefruit</i>
<i>Australia Day barbie</i>	<i>Rugby Rules</i>
<i>Big Susan's Wood</i>	<i>Santa Maria Novella in April</i>
<i>Brother Anselm in the Herb Garden</i>	<i>Shower Thoughts</i>
<i>Caught by the sun</i>	<i>Strangers Rubbernecking At Dad's Menlit</i>
<i>First Sighting of Antarctica</i>	<i>The Dirt in My Dog's Eye</i>
<i>Freddy Mercury, The Invisible Man</i>	<i>The Evangelical channel, one sultry evening</i>
<i>Ganymede Looking Down</i>	<i>The Fatigue of the Male Chameleon</i>
<i>Grand Illusions to Emulsify Time</i>	<i>The struggles of dementia</i>
<i>I Love the Evil Witch</i>	<i>The varieties of sexual experience</i>
<i>It's like a numbing sensation trying to captivate your mind</i>	<i>Thirty seven pounds</i>
<i>Let us rejoice in worms</i>	<i>To a Jellyfish - a complaint</i>
<i>Love Poem</i>	<i>When they called me a slag</i>
<i>Middle Age</i>	<i>Why Lick the Red off Somebody's Candy</i>
<i>My Life on the Far</i>	

As to form, though there were several sonnets and villanelles, and even a couple of pantoums, most folk chose to write in free verse. This often appeared as nothing but prose arbitrarily chopped into lines - it lacked the subtleties of cadential rhythm and the opportunities that the use of assonantal and alliterative patterning, the adoption of anaphora and parallelism, and the application of carefully considered lineation bring collectively to the poem. Similarly, there were shortcomings with many poems that employed regular rhyme patterns, usually in couplets or quatrains - too frequently the need to satisfy the formal rhyme-scheme dictated over the sense, while elsewhere the ideas were swamped via word inversions or trivialised by the subsequent metrical drive. Few considered the subtleties and nuances of tone and mood that the use of half-rhyme brings to the content.

Given this variety of content and stylistic approach, you might be tempted to ask, "How do you begin to make a choice?" My initial trawl is with the use of what I term "A Critical Reading Guide" which involves the application of a list of questions to each poem.

1. What sort of poem is this?
2. What is it about?
3. What is the appropriateness of the title in terms of complimenting, illuminating, extending, focussing the contents of the poem?
4. Is the poet using a particular structure?
5. Are the verses regular?
6. Why are the verse breaks where they are?
7. Do they add anything to the meaning? Or do they work against it?
8. Is there any line-end rhyme?
9. Is it regular?
10. What does this add to meaning?
11. What is gained by using full rhyme? Or half rhyme?
12. If there is no obvious end rhyme, is there any internal rhyme and assonantal patterning? Where? How effective? What used for?

13. What does the lineation (the placing of the line breaks) add to meaning?
14. Look at the language register - familiar, expository, colloquial?
15. Does the choice of diction suit the poem's subject, mood, tone?
16. Is the diction strong, physical, suggestive, imitative?
17. Are there any unusual words, or words used for effect rather than meaning?
18. Are there any superfluous words?
19. If there is repetition, what does it achieve?
20. Consider the use of sense description. How appropriate?
21. Are there any startling images (metaphors/similes) that make interesting revelations about the "nature of things"?
22. Is the imagery full of cliché?
23. Is the diction "poetically twee"?
24. Is this a "good" poem? Does it "work"?

Now it's your opportunity to check whether my choices meet up to my interrogations!

Commended

Stand here to celebrate freedom is a chilling poem which takes a satiric swipe at the "necessary" regulations that underpin democratic choices implicit in the enjoyment of freedom of choice. The register of adopted "officialise" couched primarily in polysyllabic and latinised language, the repeated "This is for your safety", and the listing of negatives including the apparently "inappropriate" comparison with Auschwitz serve to further point the ironic menace of "let our work make you free", a painful reference to the legend blazoned above the gates of Nazi concentration camps - "Arbeit macht frei".

The Space Between Us explores a relationship of desire, longing and being apart. The cumulative feel of the poem is created by the use of short sentences, apart from the central stanzas in which both sense and longing are bridged via line and stanza enjambement over three verses. Throughout emphasis falls on the choice of precise diction that is both factual and human. A touch of wit softens some of the angst as in "Each / mile we inch closer"; and the adopted shock-become-amazement of the bracketed "planets pause for this" in which the overblown romantic pose reads almost as a stage direction. Significantly this does not detract from the device of close observation: indeed, the poem is a veritable visual feast. What is integral is the skilled use of lineation and stanza-breaks to mimic the emotional and physical spaces between lover and loved, all of which are capped by a tasteful and sensuous last tercet.

Golgotha exemplifies one of the distinguishing features of poetry: economy of means. The choice of diction is penetratingly exact: for example, the limited selection of adverbs ("aloft", "away") and adjectives ("elevated", "bleeding", "livelier") underpins the poem's context as indicated by the title and the broken use of the Hebraic text which translates to read some of Christ's last words, "My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me." Rather ironically, this spare writing serves to emphasise the pointed message: Christ's selfless crucifixion - His death - is replaced by the taking of a "selfie", and the pursuit of a "livelier" activity. It is not only God that has forsaken Him.

Highly Commended

Schrödinger's Calculation

The accompanying footnote locates the historical context. Using the centrality of the cat in the experiment, the poem wittily explores the way in which Schrödinger's amatory actions could be considered similar to the cat's "hunt by probabilities". This is extended in a consideration of the academic world's sense of propriety, preferring the cat as symbol of scandal to be "asleep or rigid" than have it "prowl the quads and wake the proctor with its howl". Notice the use of internal rhyme. Consider also how the diction mixes the expository polysyllabic - "probabilities", "maximise", "hypothetical", and "entanglement" - with the preponderance of physical monosyllables in "on the neat circle of a cat, nose on paws". The final verse opens the poem out to

question what chances were there for those political opponents “In a system / where randomness was suspended”, and “probabilities narrowed”. The indentation of the chilling last line emphasises that for them, unlike Schrödinger or indeed his experimental cat, they were “consigned to death, not life”.

Present Mirth

This is an ironic comment on the Shakespearean quotation from *Twelfth Night* that heads the text of the poem. In 5 pure-rhymed quatrains the poem explores the life of the 3 photographed girls taking the character roles of Feste, Viola and Andrew Aguecheek. This photograph of their last school-play presents them seeking their "brave new worlds". However, their hopes have been short-changed. The "downcast" Aguecheek still seeks love; Viola's quest for love and poetry "remains a sham"; while Feste's comic but positive stance "as if she wants to seize life by the throat" has been sadly resolved by her suicide. These outcomes serve to emphasise the last line of the Shakespearean reference: "What's to come is still unsure." This is confident writing, disciplined and controlled by the overriding structure of the poem: the structural constraint of the quatrains works to confine excessive emotion. Every word is essential. Consider the exactness in the metaphor in which the moment of the photograph has been transformed in actuality "with time the only / lens." There is no overwriting or sentimentalism: this is a fine achievement.

Curlew Moon

This poem shares similarity with Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox" in its experience of showing how occasionally poems can arrive as separate beings from their creator. The poet "planned a poem" as "mark of recognition" for her swiftly declining friend. The work was to be an "elegy" praising the energy of her living; and "a hymn" to her physical being. It was to be a poem with "my own images"; and without "clods of tired-out words". However, the writing of the poem is accompanied by the arrival of a curlew, whose call "mournfully musical" is "bound up with death". The poet wants to ignore the referencing of curlews in the literary examples of Yeats and Dylan Thomas - "crying" and "sad women" respectively; "But the curlew declined to leave the poem". This becomes apparent as reading through the work, the skin "prickling" in anticipation, the poet arrives at the final word.

The strategy of not wanting the images of Yeats and Thomas allows the poet to make direct reference to their examples, as does the stated refusal of writing about the curlew's "bubbling / liquid note". Elsewhere the writing is visually exact, and nicely focused. See the final two lines of the fourth stanza in which the use of internal rhyme, and assonantal and alliterative repetitions work collectively to establish scene, memorial and tone:

"the serenading of the fading moon, the telling
of lost pleasures, sea-taste, thistle's touch."

This is also witnessed in the parallel in the last of the 5 quintains between the friend's declining towards death and its celebration in the poem "led through rushes / to estuary currents" and "drift away in the tide-flow". Both friend and poem are linked in memory with that final word: "It was 'curlew'."

Third Prize: *Saint Sebastien*

This is a marvellously controlled poem of 6 quintains structured in a regular rhyme pattern which mixes full and half-rhyme to great effect. This controlling feature helps to underpin the conflict between event and the artistic representation of it, even to the point of noting anachronism in the depiction of a crossbow, "not invented yet". Notice how the use of questions - 7 in all - helps to explore in an increasingly enquiringly and cumulative manner the elaboration of happenings to elevate them to an almost mythical proportion. What is implicit is the questioning not only of the nature of sainthood but also the art of painting and even poetry writing; for

"all transcendence cannot be a trick
Nor can we distort truth by being frivolous

Or downplay a disaster."

Significantly, the poem reminds us, "not all posture is powerless." Martyrdom, artistic skill, and poetry combine to challenge complacency. The finality of the event is captured exquisitely in the poem's closing line of two direct and short sentences:

"Death is the route. The blessed arrows fly."

Second Prize: *Rural Living*

The poem offers a thoughtful journey into the interface of the wild world of Nature and the apparently civilised life of "the new order" of human habitation. The first stanza celebrates the vitality of Hare (the capitalisation is important and confirms the empathetic description of the creature's qualities to the point of suggesting that these are to be short lived for after "a brief glimpse he is gone". The ambiguity of "before he leaves" is key to the poem's theme.) The second stanza describes several individual and exactly-labelled grasses (each of which is capitalised) that lie "adrift / like a piece of fallen dusk" "with its / final breath" that "speaks in a shiver of whispers". Here the implicit negativity is central to the poem's theme. In the third stanza, the Lark (again capitalised) might rise like that of Icarus, but he like Icarus is doomed - notice the connotations of "void", "last", "disappears". The further link with the human world is depicted by the bird's "falling away" flight: here the indentation, spatial isolation and the negative inference in "falling" emphasise the event. There is irony in the last stanza's presentation of this "freshly sprung-up" "new order", and the human compulsion to identify it in "this uniform co-existence", as the adopted "neatly labelled" house signs replicate the association with *Skylark Heights*, *Old Meadow Way*, and *Hare Court*. How nicely dismissive is their italicisation because "This is / after all what they call rural living". The sarcastic slant has been well prepared, not only in the imaginatively-exact and inventive descriptions of Hare, Grasses and Lark, but also in the explanation that the rural dwellers "don't have to / spell it out, but of course they do."

First Prize: *Jointing a rabbit*

This is a masterly piece of writing which describes in four end-stopped sestets the preparation of a dead rabbit for culinary purposes and simultaneously celebrates the fulness of its being as a vital force, "this athlete of the grasslands". The opening lines which intuit parallels with the human condition "colour of a newborn" are balanced by the closing poetic conceit of "the taut flesh" and "a blow to the neck" of "the broken body". Elsewhere, the writing is replete with inventive imagery. Consider the delicate accuracy of the description of the lungs - "strawberry and white look so anaemic" - and the imaginative triumph of depicting the parted limbs as "splayed like the two halves of a Rorschach test".

Above all, the poem's major hallmark is the skilful use of assonantal and alliterative writing in which the clustering of vowels and the chiming consonants add feeling, momentum and rhythm: for example, the hard "k" sounds and the varied vowel patterning of the monosyllables in the opening line of verse 3 - "My care, a clean cut which snaps the bone" - are mimetic of the action that is being described: spoken aloud, the words snap harshly.

What lingers in the memory is the compassionate humanity of the poem's final question:

"could I so coolly toss the broken body
in seasoned flour, sear it in hot oil?"

Here the chiming assonance of "toss", "body", "seasoned", "hot" - and "seasoned", "sear" - are complemented by the verbal play in the comparison between the action - "coolly" - and the cooking process - "hot". The self-doubt of the poet is transmuted and shared by the reader. This is the work of a mature and discriminating poetic mind.

May I thank all competitors for allowing me to enter their minds and the varied and illuminating worlds of their poetry; and thanks, too, to Nnorom for inviting me to adjudicate once again!

RESULTS

Special Mention

A 'Common's Affair - Alex Bickley

Bramble - Frances Knight

Redwing - Mark Totterdell

Commended

Stand here to celebrate freedom - Bruce Marsland

The Space Between Us - Colleen Prendergast

Golgotha – Anthony Watts

Highly Commended

Schrödinger's Calculation - Derek Sellen

Present Mirth – Doreen Hinchcliffe

Curlew Moon - Camilla Lambert

Third Prize: *Saint Sebastian - Rory Brennan*

Second Prize: *Rural Living – Mary Anne Smith*

First Prize: *Jointing a rabbit - A. C. Clarke*

Many thanks to Roger for such a detailed adjudication report as usual. Each time I read one of these reports from Roger, as I hope many other poets do, it feel like I have returned to the classroom to pick up tips to help my own writing better. It is very exciting to take the judge's report and match the titles with the poets. Because the poems have been judged blind, I am always eager to find out who the winners are, and it is particularly heart-warming to find winning or commended winners from our past competitions on the list here; Mark Totterdell, Bruce Marsland, Derek Sellen, Camilla Lambert, Mary Anne Smith and A.C. Clarke. These writers have kept faith with us over the years. We pledge to improve the way our competitions are organised and administered going forward, and to continue to treat our poets and their work with respect and integrity.

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