

Judges' Reports

2013

Michèle Roberts short story report

It would not have been possible for me to carry out the final judging had it not been for the hard work and professional expertise of Frances Everitt and all the team running the Bridport Prize. Thank you. I should also like to thank all the writers whose work I read.

The top three prizewinners were easy to pick. Their stories stood out immediately, characterized first and foremost by energetic, inventive language, and also by a subtle take on subject matter and themes. 'A Man in Three Moments' by Eve Thomson brilliantly telescoped time and dealt with the mysterious meanings of the word 'beauty'. 'TXL' by Kerry Hood embodied pain, difficulty, triumph and humour. 'Oyster Woman' by Sheila Crawford evoked trauma through reticence and understatement.

Twenty other stories shifted between piles labelled yes; yes/perhaps; and perhaps. Narrowing these down to ten highly commended was difficult and intriguing.

No subject is inherently interesting or boring: the writer makes it so. A lot of the stories dealt with death, or loss, or domestic life, or life on the range. The successful ones exhilaratingly made these classic subjects fresh and new, perhaps by looking at them from new or unexpected angles. Tell all the truth, but tell it slant. Emily Dickinson's words apply to fiction as much as to poetry.

I looked for excellent writing, at the level of sentence by sentence; simultaneously for writing that best expressed and invented and shaped its subject. Language is, and makes, form. I looked also for stories whose endings really worked, whether shocking or downbeat.

Nearly all the stories I read were set in the contemporary present, and many of them employed the present tense. How conscious a choice was this? Sometimes the past tense would have been helpful, allowing for narrative hindsight and irony. A lot of the stories sounded the same, employing realism or naturalism manifested through a chatty vernacular aping the speaking voice. This has to be done well, otherwise ends up sounding as loose, dull and flat as speech sometimes does. Writing is not the same as talking. It employs art, often craftily and subtly concealed. Too many of the stories aped memoir, or journalism. Is this a fashion in creative writing classes? I do not know. Perhaps reality TV has become a model. This style of writing meant that experimentation was avoided, risks not taken, the imagination and the unconscious not explored, feeling not translated into image. Many of the writers seemed scared of exploring emotion, and opted instead for sounding cool, keeping a distance. This could feel like simple repression, and be dull for the reader.

I admired and enjoyed many of the stories. The best of them suggested that the writer had got close to her or his subject, lived with it for a bit, let it ferment for a while, been so affected by it that they had necessarily invented a new short story form, new arrangements of language, found the best possible narrative perspective whether close up or further away.

The fact that thousands of writers entered the competition shows how the short story form thrives. This is very encouraging, despite some publishers asserting that short stories do not do well. I am grateful to have had the chance to read the stories I did. Thank you again.

Wendy Cope poetry report

It was helpful to have nearly a month between the arrival of the poems and the deadline for results. I read all of them as soon as possible and re-read them at intervals, gradually reducing the pile of possible winners. During those weeks I found that certain poems came to mind when I was going about my everyday business or just sitting quietly with a cup of tea. They were memorable. I enjoyed thinking about them and looked forward to reading them again.

'The Opposite of Dave' made me laugh out loud the first time I read it and smile every time I thought of it. They say that funny poems don't win competitions. Well, this one did. But it isn't just a funny poem. It is saying something about women and their relationships with men that many readers will find recognisable. It builds up very well to its surprise ending. You start off believing that the author

is praising Dave's successor. You begin to think he doesn't sound all that great. Does she really rate this guy? And then you get the laugh.

'The Sellotape Factory' also worked its way towards the top of the pile because I found myself thinking about it so often, remembering the image of the children with their faces pressed against the wire fence, the 'nice men in overalls', who bowled them rolls of tape. But what I most admire about this poem is its author's control of tone. The anger in the poem is quiet anger, and when the poet turns the tables on the offending parents, that is done quietly too. The poem doesn't shriek and beat its breast. Some of the less successful entrants put me off by being too intense and dramatic.

'The Restaurant' is a very short poem. Like funny poems, very short ones tend not to win competitions, though I don't see any reason why they shouldn't, if they are good enough, and this one certainly is. One thinks, of course, of Larkin: 'Our almost instinct almost true: / What will survive of us is love'. Here, what survives of Christopher's father is something much more specific and mundane. But it seems to me that the poem is saying something that is both interesting and true – and saying it very well.

Although it wasn't too difficult to pick those three winners, I did have trouble getting the list of runners-up down to ten. There were too many good ones – the ten who made it had stiff competition. I can't go into detail about all of them but I would like to mention 'Rimbaud' because there were very few entries that used traditional forms and this is an excellent sonnet. Another strong contender for a top prize was 'I Left My Hair in San Francisco' because the poem, written in the voice of the hairdresser, is memorably amusing. Several of the ten poems are about old age, death or bereavement: 'Vegetable Patch', 'Unravelling', 'On My Grandmother's Bench', 'Vigil'. The last of these is written entirely in lower case letters and I have to confess I find this irritating. It is, none the less, a moving and successful poem and might have done even better if the author hadn't abandoned capitals.

There is always an element of luck in competitions. All judges have quirks and prejudices and their experiences of life will inevitably cause them to warm more to some poems than to others. The author of 'The Veranda' benefitted from the fact that I, too, have worked with children and I found the description of going on an outing – the 'combination of boredom and vigilance' – spot on. Yes, there's an element of luck and a different judge might have made different choices. What matters, I believe, is that good poems win and I hope you'll agree that this has happened here. There will almost always be other good poems that didn't – and there were quite a few in this case. I hope their authors won't give up. I could make a long list of the competitions I didn't win before I gave up entering them. But they are one way for talented poets to gain attention and encouragement. As I write this I still don't know the names of the winners but I soon will – and I'll look out for them in future.

David Swann Flash Fiction Report

Fans of the Marx Brothers will maybe recall the famous scene in which Groucho is allocated a tiny cabin on a transatlantic liner. For the next ten minutes, the cabin is invaded by an army of crew-members and hangers-on, until that cramped little space is teeming with people. Meanwhile, above their heads, Harpo sleeps on peacefully, borne aloft by the swarm.

I often think of that image when sitting down to write flash fiction. Ideally, the reader will float above the throng like Harpo, unaware of the chaos below. But how does the writer achieve that conjuring trick? With only 250 words at his/her disposal, there's no room for clutter. The challenge is to include everything essential, and to kick out the rest. And then to leave a space on the page for the reader.

Choosing six of the best from a shortlist of 50 proved to be a difficult task. As the first reader Jon

Wyatt noted, flash fiction is easily exposed. One wrong word can tilt the whole piece out of balance. But technical deficiencies count for less when a piece achieves the 'accuracy of emotion' that Margaret Atwood once described.

In living with the shortlist for three weeks, I was interested to see how pieces rose and fell (and rose and fell again) in my affections as I read and re-read them. Ultimately, I decided that the stories I chose would be the ones that went on haunting me even after the first hit had worn off.

Like all good literature, flash fiction tends to lose its fizz when reduced to jokes or anecdotes. And it can be cruel towards over-compression and gimmicks. But the 50 writers on this year's shortlist prove what a flexible and fascinating form the micro-story remains. As well as supernatural yarns, contemporary Zen koans, and urban folk tales, I read pieces that used surrealism, magic realism, and comedy. Some of the pieces limited themselves to individual scenes, and others roamed around through time and space. Many of the stories found mystery in commonplace props and places, while others dug into rich and rewarding characters. And in the best experimental pieces, writers opened up a fascinating third space, located somewhere between fiction and poetry.

The six stories that haunted me hardest and longest were 'Polio', 'Fine', 'Locked In', 'Ern Kiley's House', 'Lincolnshire', and 'The Edge of the Woods'. Other writers would have made different choices, but these were pieces that prickled my skin as well as stimulating my admiration and envy. The following stories pushed them very close: 'Consent', 'Repo Day', 'Akira and the Creative Process', 'The Slow Acts', 'Ovid on the Train to Tomis', 'Dad's Cap', and 'Breakdown'.

I hope that all of the writers on this year's shortlist will appreciate how well they did in rising through a record pile of 2,720 entries.