

Judges' Reports

2014

LIZ LOCHHEAD

Poetry Report

You'd have been able to spot me all over the place in parks and gardens in the sunshine or in the afternoon cafés of Festival Edinburgh over the last month reading with my lips moving, then shuffling loose leaves of A4 paper into a new order. See, I find it almost impossible to read poems without hearing them out loud, certainly impossible to judge a new one as among either the quick or the dead without tasting and testing for its voice.

There are these twenty seven poems in my rucksack most of August, in this slim folder that goes everywhere with me now, a selection to be dipped into and relished, taken slow and mulled over and enjoyed. Because there is something to be said, I've decided, for each of them. Not that I've found it easy to get to this stage.

At the end of July I had received the parcel of poems pre-selected by the excellent Candy Neubert (I owe her my grateful thanks for a job I certainly don't envy, and without her I know I'd have found this task literally impossible). Even when this lavish and very varied pre-selection arrived I was still, frankly, overwhelmed and rather daunted. I suspect other judges have hoped, as I did, that the winning poem would hit me like a revelation on the first reading, announce itself as the one and only? This didn't happen. Not for me. Not this time.

I decided that for now, in this first sift, I'd simply weed out the definitely-nots, the ones I could get nowhere with at all, the ones that baffled, the ones that didn't seem to me to be poems as I knew them, and, if they were inventing new tricks with language or form, failed to clue me in on what these could possibly be. Everything else, even if I suspected that there were actually too many startling images too close together killing each other off, even if they irritatingly omitted punctuation and were written in compulsory lowercase in an attempt to be poetic that (to me) merely confused, or were inconsistent in pronouns and/or tenses of verbs in a way that I couldn't but think unintended – nevertheless, if I was able to convince myself it just might have some possible merit or life about it, any at all – then it would go through to the next round. For now.

At the end of this process I had culled roughly a quarter of what I'd read. They worried me, this pile. What if there was a hard but brilliant diamond among them? I thought of a couple of my now favourite poets I just didn't get on first reading. What if I was throwing away what should really be the eventual winner? I took a day off, reading nothing more challenging than the newspaper. Then spent a slow afternoon giving those I'd rejected, and them alone, one last chance. In the event I didn't change my mind about any of them.

And the funny thing was then those that were left I now re-read with a pleasure and delight which had been absent first time round. Can it be that those I was deaf to somehow spread around them, beyond their own borders, an infection of dullness and imprecision, or a miasma of artiness and archness that made the whole game, this poetry business, seem just not worth the candle?

Very, very few poems were in anything other than free verse. There were hardly any poets, perhaps two or three at most, using so much as (say) a vestigial rhyme in a closing couplet. In fact there was very little formal form at all, though many organised their work into stanzas that seemed mere arbitrary arrangements for the page and to be at odds with the rhythm or sense of what was being said. Most poems were about image rather than sound. And I was looking for a voice.

Two or three rounds later, more siftings and culls, and eventually I had these twenty-seven poems, all of which I really positively liked. (I hadn't thought initially there would be so many.) Now it got

really difficult. I'd put them in order of preference, change my mind on another read, then do so again, and I have to admit today that some that were in my first versions of my prize-winner list aren't now even in the final ten highly commended poems published here. Similarly, some of the top three poems were originally far further down the list. I found that I just had to live with them all and see which had the power to keep surprising me when I re-read them, and to keep themselves alive and memorable in my imagination when I was away from them. I am well aware that a different judge – or this judge on a different day having to finally plump for her final choice – would almost certainly have come up with a different one.

'Clear Recent History', the poem to which I've eventually awarded the First Prize, I like for what it doesn't say as well as for what it does. I like it because of its structure and the aplomb it demonstrates within it; the chorus-like repetition of what the protagonist was able to do, what not, at each stage of recovery; because of the documenting of how, increasingly confidently, she recorded or shared her progress towards it; because of the cataloguing of very precise details – and for its dynamic moving-on narrative.

Next prize winner: there's the precision of the telling detail, there's the obsessive and driven perfectionism and there are these strong hints of family drama – all skilfully held back till the doubly shocking end (what's really happening here? and what harsh, even unacceptable, feelings are here being bravely owned up to). It's all this that makes 'Sister' my second choice.

And as for the Third Prize, the imperative in the title 'Begin' and the 'you' of the second person singular make one complicit in the irresistible intimacy of its all-too vivid evocation of the intuition, the aura, of the start of a love affair – the 'giddy spin/ like fish in millions flicking into silver at a sound only they can hear'. It is written with real verve and a nerve which its author brings off brilliantly. It made me want to sneeze. Or laugh.

There are ten more poems, all highly commended (as well as that further thirteen – my famous twenty-seven, remember? – that I'd really like to be naming and quoting here). Of the ten I've finally chosen as highly commended, though, 'Being a Beautiful Woman' is very playful, sharp and funny, as is 'On Reclaiming My Life From Social Media' – though it's sad too, but not a patch as poignant or painful as 'Touch' or 'Difficulties' or 'Bedtime Ritual' with its devastating last lines...

I might mention the acute sensuousness of 'Apprehension' with its old fur coat with the 'whiff of mothballs, damp dog and *Soir de Paris*'. Or of 'Punting from Camden Lock' in which the shimmer and delight of the beginning, via sardonic observation of the fellow-passengers, takes quite a dark and surprising turn by the end. 'The Maker' took me enjoyably step-by-step through the process of churning butter (who knew that those big wooden butter-pats are called 'Scotch hands'? Not me). Ah, butter-making: a process that might be metaphorically analogous to the miraculous, mysterious and all-of-a-sudden coming-into-being of the poem itself? 'Repeat After Me' is a delicious variation on the list poem. Those abrupt juxtapositions of detail and shifts of scale are both bold and tantalising. And I confess the poem 'to travel hopefully' with its slow train 'shoogling across the breich braes/ dreich and dotted with scraggy lone horses' (despite the to-me annoying and unhelpful lower-case) is speaking my language and naming the names of the landscape of my childhood so vividly that I might be unduly biased towards it – but then any judge, any year, is always going to be partial to anything which so powerfully and personally chimes with him or her. I gave up feeling guilty or tentative about my own purely subjective choices way back at the first cull stage.

All I can hope is that you can enjoy, as I can now I've finally made it, my selection.

ANDREW MILLER

Short Story Report

I feared it would be very difficult to choose a winner from among the box of stories I was sent, that I would hover over a dozen like an indecisive shopper, but in the end it was simple enough. All three of the winning stories stood out, each of them, at first reading, a cut above. Not that the general standard was low – it wasn't. There were funny stories, macabre ones, stories with a twist in the tail. Many of them seemed the work of people who already had built up some expertise in this form. Well-organized, nicely balanced stories with a beginning, a middle and an end.

The best of these are collected in the Highly Commended category, and the authors of those stories will, I hope, feel strongly encouraged. To those who are not on that list, well, you may only have missed it by a whisker, and not being on prize lists is something all writers in for the long haul must get used to. I have not appeared on countless lists (long lists and shortlists) and expect not to appear on many more before my race is run. The only sensible response is a growl of something fantastically rude followed by twenty minutes of shuffling moodily around the kitchen, then back up to the writing room with a look on your face like Beowulf on his way to the lair of the Grendel.

So what of the three that I chose? They recommended themselves in different ways but each displayed in its opening lines a sensitivity to language and a confident sense of storytelling that put me on the alert. I paid attention because *they* had paid attention, had leaned in to their subjects, had done the hard work involved in the close imagining of other lives. There was risk-taking, there was ambition. They were – these writers cloaked in anonymity – serious about this, their art, their craft.

This year's winning entry, *scenes of a long-term nature* was, I think, only the ninth or tenth story I read off the pile but I set it aside at once as a story likely to be among the medals. It's a tender examination of a marriage and a fine display of the difficult art of selecting the telling moment, the detail that speaks. The language is heightened but always (or almost always) at the service of the story, always working to bring the reader closer, to give us the most intimate view. Admirable attention to the physical, to the fleeting moment. In the hands of someone less able, less alert, this could have been wincingly sentimental, or simply dull (the one fault that can never be excused). It moved me with its determination to find what is luminous in what is plain, and impressed me with its clear desire to make language *work*. Language is our medium. Why would we not want to do something exciting with it?

Reimbursement, taking second place, was fairly obviously the work of someone who has reached the stage in his or her writing when competence shades into something stronger and a piece of work can start to have genuine heft. I loved the exciting, ominous opening of the story – the night, the road, the stranger. It's a story with good momentum and makes particularly effective use of dialogue. It felt less parochial than many of its fellow submissions, and not simply because of its dual-nation setting. Could it have been shorter and the better for it? Perhaps. But this is clearly a writer capable of exciting work.

Third prize went to *Hearing Aid*. The first few pages, their rhythm, the clever dialogue, the really convincing sense of a child's point of view (so easy to get wrong), made this story stand out on a first pass. I wasn't sure these qualities survived to the end but it was a piece with impressive energy and a kind of liveliness that marks this writer out, along with his or her fellow laureates, as someone who can make things happen on the page.

So – huge congratulations to the winners and to those Highly Commended. To the rest, a hearty handshake in thought for having the gumption and courage to put work out in to the world. Such initiative, I believe, is never wasted. If nothing else it shows intent, and without that we're just whistling.

TANIA HERSHMAN

Flash Fiction Report

What I ask for first with any piece of writing of any length is that it doesn't let me stop reading – from the first few words it is absolutely imperative that I continue. I look for signs that the writer is confident in her or his story, confident enough not to write tentatively, not to apologise for the story in any way, or circle around it, or plunge me in then lead me away, or confuse me – unless that confusion is the effect the writer is going for. And then what I want is to read it with my breath almost held, the reading being a full-body sensation, culminating in the feeling of being punched in the gut combined with hints of pure joy. So, you might say I'm hard to please! The stories that made it through to my final six from this wonderful shortlist all did that on first read. The ones I have chosen as the prize-winners were still doing it to me on third and fourth reads.

To backtrack a little, and talk more specifically about flash fiction, the essence here is that this is a form that balances on the flimsy boundary between short story and poem. For me, a flash story must feel like it is on the side of story, even if only just. A poem might describe a moment, an object, a sensation; it has no obligation towards narrative. Story does. It has different needs. Which doesn't mean it can't be poetic, of course. My favourite stories use rhythm, beats; they have a musicality to them. Another thing that is vital when we are talking about anything brief is that every word must count. Every word. And since I was charged with finding winners, I was looking for reasons to discard stories, and just the hint of a few words out of the 250 (or less) that didn't have a claim on that space gave me my reasons where, in another context, I would have enjoyed the story immensely. I have no doubt another judge would have picked a different selection – it is such an honour to be asked to choose just those that gave me the punch-in-the-gut-joyousness I mentioned above.

Making it to the shortlist is the enormous achievement, rising above over 2500 other stories, huge congratulations to all of you! The six stories that rose up for me are: 'Romans Chapter 1 Verse 29: The Sins of The Heart', a story I felt and heard each time I read it, the story sings but also illuminates something about human nature; 'George Mallory', which delighted me with its all-one-sentence structure, but this was no gimmick, it was used to excellent effect and I found it very moving; 'Anatidaephobia', a story that lures you in with humour but does so much more; 'The Truth Untold' which takes a fresh look at an old story humanity keeps replaying; 'In Lieu of Small Talk', which paints an entire relationship so beautifully in less than 250 words; and 'Where to Find Lise Meitner', which takes inspiration movingly from science to create a very human story.

I am delighted with the winning stories, which are not longer stories compressed into this small space but which were created for this, taking full advantage of the word count to do something that can only be done here, in flash fiction. The writers of the winning stories knew which words to keep in but, more importantly, knew exactly how much to leave out so that we have just enough. Flash fiction is the art of the just-enough. These stories are perfect illustrations of that art.