

# **Judges' Reports**

## **2016**

## Poetry Report by Patience Agbabi

I asked for poems with a pulse, eliciting a visceral response; poems with a sense of urgency; poems unfettered by the autobiographical, fired by the imagination; poems taking risks in form, content or idea; multilayered poems echoing long after they were read.

And I got what I wished for: 200 poems, all with some merit. Even poems I quickly discarded felt like gifts. The judging was more pleasurable than I imagined which made me wonder about the overall standard of the entries I didn't see.

As in recent years, most poems were free verse, but there were a surprising number of 14-liners, some of them sonnets; some used regular metre or effective repetition which was very welcome. Others rhymed arbitrarily or had erratic line breaks: I wished they'd been read aloud before submission. There were lots of poems about death or loss, some transcending the personal, using form to focus the grief; equally moving poems about sexism, autism. Nature was popular but no ecopoetry. Too many poems seemed autobiographical, fettered by strict adherence to fact. I wanted more creativity. But there were enough playful or dark imaginative poems to whet my appetite. Quite a few poems about sex, possibly inspired by my call to take risks in content. Far fewer took risks with an idea: the ones that did so successfully stood out.

The judging process coincided fortuitously with the Rio Olympics. On summer holiday at home, I'd read an hour's worth of poems every morning before joining the family. This mental workout was a great way to start the day. Watching a range of sports, from synchronised diving to athletics, heightened my response to the technical side of poetry. It reminded me how much work goes into a great poem for it to appear effortless as a flawless gymnastic routine. More than anything, it confirmed what I felt to be the case for the majority of the longlisted poems: they needed more work. Many began well but dipped in the middle or end, where the language became prosaic or lapsed into cliché. The spell was broken. The poet had not yet honed their technical skills, ran out of time, or lacked stamina. Maybe they didn't understand the fundamentals of punctuation or struggled with line endings and stanza breaks so had erratic control over the pace. Or they weren't obsessive enough about achieving perfection.

I also assessed level of difficulty, whether the poem was playing safe or ambitious. You can only take a risk when you know what you're doing i.e. know the rules before you break them. And ask yourself Why is this a poem? Why is poetry the best form for this material? What can poetry do that prose can't? The best poems were masters of the form. They understood sound and image: how to use white space.

Technicalities aside, there's a gut reaction at play during the judging process. With some poems, it's love at first sight whereas others grow on you. My 'maybe' pile was high. I wanted to give these poems an extra chance to work their magic, rereading them many times. I take the visceral response very seriously indeed. If a poem was still haunting me at the end of that fortnight, it was likely to make the anthology.

I give first prize to Spitting Distance. It has a directness, an understated authority of voice: So this is what it's like to be a gun. There's tension in its couplets, it knows when to use enjambment and when not. It rhymes irregularly so you barely notice yet this punctuates the voice, enhances the pleasure. The images are tangible: the path falling like a braid, a chimney hangs from the sky/on a white string. Finally, the poem takes a bold risk at the end and manages to carry it off. This is poetry at its best.

Second prize goes to CHICKENS, set in a Florida classroom where the teacher gives a lesson on 'conditioned behaviour'. The fluid, filmic couplets are irregularly interrupted by the sound of a yardstick being hit against a lecturn. Each thwack catapults the reader into a different character and timezone with exceptional skill. The poem continues to surprise and astound me with each rereading.

Silk takes the third prize. From its latent feminist opening: For those weeks the houses belonged to/the women to the end, it sustains a single sentence over 24 lines, a narrative thread as finely wrought as the silk itself. All five senses are put on hold in the earlier stanzas as the houses are prepared for the silkworms: the poem builds, layer upon layer of detail; then in the final stanza, smell, taste and touch explode, the syntax ensuring a poetic climax at the very last word.

Congratulations to the winners, the Highly Commended and all those who made the longlist. Your work has reminded me how vital poetry is to our existence, how it shapes our response to the world and has a living, breathing pulse.

### **Short Story Report by Tessa Hadley**

My reading each time begins sceptically. Stepping into a short story, I'm always resisting it until it wins me over. First of all, it wins me over through its sentences, because they're not cliched, because they're musical and they're exact. I can see what they're describing, I can grasp their thought, I know where I am. The best writing is so deliciously plain and clear: as in these beginnings, for example. 'A trellis separates the patio behind Elizabeth's house from the door to the rooms where the servants live' ('Moore's Alley'), or "'Watch this,'" Lateef says and he reaches under the goat and starts pulling and squeezing' ('Lateef's Room'). The detail is precise and vivid, the vocabulary isn't fussy, there's a scrupulous concern to denote exactly what's required for the story to get started and for the reader to be carried inside it, involved and interested, sensuously present.

Of course I'm talking about good style here, and what I'm saying applies as much to writing novels as short stories. Everything in a good sentence should feel original, but not strained or effortful. (I know – so much effort goes into it. Only it mustn't show.) Sometimes a sentence has something extraordinary or miraculous in it: but that too should be exact – the miraculous should feel hard-won, as if a great deal of solidity, of real building-work, has earned the writer their moment of letting go. There's a gorgeous letting go at the end of 'Uncle Frank's Turkeys', when the farmer is feeding his turkeys. 'He bends down to the sack and throws handfuls in big arcs. The grain floats in a shining circle for a moment, and then sinks back down in slow motion to the waiting turkeys.' In 'The Disappeared Girl', in the middle of real country life and hard work, there's a bit of magic. 'There was a slit in the bark of that tree, just big enough for a girl to slip through. It was cool inside, green moss, soft and cushioney. She lay down, just a minute. Nobody's laid eyes on her since.'

Another thing good sentences can do is catch the right idiom of a world, capture its flavour for us. In 'Brylcreem Boy' Jim Waite remembers a girl's petticoat in 1960: 'yards and yards of stiff material that made the lower half of her dress stick out like a ripe lettuce, ballooning over my lap'. In 'The War Against The Monsters' we can vividly hear the voice of awful, haunted Auntie Brenda, with her appetite for horrors. 'Hours he were stuck – that suicide. Up to his neck in clinging mud. And then he came to – and do you know what he saw?' Some good writers just have this gift for mimicry, this 'good ear' – others don't, it's not their thing. But it's a lovely asset if you do have it.

A story shouldn't read like an extract from a novel, or a compressed novel, with just too much crammed into its short space. A good short story has a satisfying single-mindedness, it drives purposefully and economically towards its ending, you can hold it in your mind all at once.

'Avalanche' is so shapely and dramatically effective: four friends are caught up in an avalanche and the terrible drama of their rescue clarifies and simplifies the messy sprawl of the relationships. In 'Bonxie' a woman has retreated to the Orkneys to write her novel, then finds herself in a tragi-comic confrontation with a huge seabird trapped in her bathroom. The single story-element encapsulates a much larger complexity and irony.

Endings are the hardest thing to get right in a short story. At the end of 'Expiating Irene' a daughter with her eyes closed listens to her mother reminiscing and fibbing and singing. And a tender moment in 'Porn Star Names' might have been too sweet, if Jo Holmwood hadn't finished on a different beat, by returning to the boys' funny sex fascination.

My three finalists have all achieved just the right poised, liberating, exhilarating closure to their stories. All these three stories are so completely different! I didn't plan for that, but it makes a nice point. 'Steroid Dreams' is just so beautifully written, every sentence poised and funny and intelligent. The prose has a marvellous rhythm, rich with perceptions. 'Open House' is much stranger. Who knows whether that bear in the garden is real, or some phantom expression of the wildness in this odd family? The crazy party and its aftermath of wreckage are superbly done, so enigmatic and terrifying and exhilarating. And 'Cut Loose'! It seems to be written in a single perfect breath, so apparently artless yet perfectly controlled. There's simply nothing out of place in this hushed, tensed imagining of the twisted history of violence between a man and a woman, all wrapped up as austere as a Greek drama inside one lonely room, in a few short weeks of waiting.

### **Flash Fiction Report by Tim Stevenson**

The difficulty with judging any flash-fiction competition is simply the astonishing variety of the work submitted. Some competitions have themes to narrow the horizon of artistic vision, but when faced with such an accomplished group of stories that vary quite spectacularly from one end of the spectrum to the other, there is nothing for it but to grab your sharpest pencil, brew a really hot cup of tea, and get down to a good read.

This year, as in every year at the Bridport, the quality is high. It is a pleasure to read such accomplished work but, on the other hand, it makes it all the harder to slide a razor between them. There have been car accidents and the subtleties of loss, the loveless moments that come from the premature ownership of false teeth, the horrific choices of hard times, and many others that sprang from the page and ended up, quite rightly, on the shortlist.

Which brings me neatly onto the subject of the final three.

This year, when I was asked what I was looking for in a flash-fiction, I gave the same reply I give anyone who asks what it is, in my opinion, that really makes a flash work? My thoughts are that a reader must have a clear sense of what happened before the story began, a frame into which these new events can be placed. Secondly, a sense of time, a deep feeling that events are unfolding at exactly the right pace for the story being told, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but always measured. Thirdly, the end of the story must lead the reader into the future, giving enough information to extrapolate what comes next, and what that might mean for the characters involved.

Irrespective of the subject this is what I look for, and try my hardest to write for that matter.

The three winners for this year's competition each fulfil these criteria to a tee.

'467 Strathmore Ave.' gives us memory and loss, and the ache of time passing as a distant tragedy fades; people get on with their lives and fall into 'their own private calamities' as the only true guardians of that fateful day are the flinching dogs.

The next, 'Dentures' is a sidelong commentary on the fickle nature of people who cannot see beyond mere physical beauty, who see their own youth reflected in the bodies of others, the outcomes that might have been if only different choices had been made, and, finally, the searing practicality of a mother's love.

The last, 'Drought', is a quiet masterclass in detail and understatement; an observation of time through changes in a landscape that bind together a mother and child. The mother herself becomes a child through memories invoked by new, once familiar landmarks that have been transformed by the flood. 'There are sunken places, so the tales say...' is the herald, the gap between a grandmother's knee and the future for the young girl, unbound from an ancestral home and all the obligations that go with it. She will write new stories, tell new tales from after the flood, and weave a new mythology for her children and all those who come after.

In this story, more than any other this year, I could clearly see the ripples in time, both backwards and forwards, that are framed by a story far smaller than the ripples themselves, but a story that is still able to contain enough truth and meaning to see clearly where the flow of time will take us. It has been a pleasure to read the entries this year, and I predict that those who have not yet achieved publishing success will not have too long to wait before that success becomes a well-deserved reality.

Congratulations to you all, each one was a pleasure. I'm just sorry I had to choose.