

Judges' Comment on the Shortlisted Poems

The Festival Friends wish to thank all who entered the 2020 Poet of the Year Competition, the Judges, Luigi Marchini, Mara Adamtiz Scrupe and Gary Studley, anthology designer Jeremy Dunhill, sponsors Adams Printers and, especially, Prof GERALYN PINTO for generously donating the prize money.

We send our congratulations to the winners, Charlotte Cornell, David Simpson and Ojo Taiye, who may be seen performing their winning poems at canterburyfestival.co.uk

As we were unable to hold an Awards Evening this year the Judges comments on all the shortlisted poems are below:

An Unknown Female Hare Goddess by Penny Blackburn

This poem has a distinct voice which is assured, and the language is appropriate to the setting and time. The details in the poem are important: the new coulter; the sheered wool 'skeined and stacked'; 'the furrowed fingers make a grass net'. Though the narrator acknowledges the rituals and realizes that this is the way of her world, she needs something else, the 'older deity' of the title.

The final stanza is superb and leaves the reader wondering -is the 'coming child' of the opening stanza the hare goddess? The 'unbutchered and unmarked body' of the final line asks questions of the reader. The indication is that when the narrator 'prays for grace' she is protecting it from the rituals of the second stanza. A beguiling poem which asks many questions and lets the reader answer them as they see fit.

Luigi Marchini

Accent by Freya Carter

Most of us wish we could honor our parents whilst also determining entirely for ourselves our own trajectory in the world. What is so striking about this poem is that it explores the terrain of familial affection and respect at the same time that it reveals the complexity of relationships based on parlance – the very way we speak – to reflect our time and place, and perhaps even our own individual extra-familial ambitions.

An overarching sense of regret is pervasive, describing the writer's relationship with "mother", yet we glean from it great admiration in lines like: *I have watched her, polished and quick,/ slip a joke between the ribs, leave grown men crippled.*

There is little in the human experience that is more important than how we express ourselves, in the timbre of the voice and the choice of language and how it's delivered, alongside the poet's phrasing. This poem wonderfully explores and encompasses the entanglements of our linguistic expressions in the way we use our mouths, hearts and experiences – and perhaps at least as importantly our accents – to articulate them.

Mara Adamtiz Scrupe

The Yellow Room by Tina Cole

This poem consists of four stanzas, each equating to a stage of a girl's life. The first stanza appears to describe a nursery room and immediately we know that it is in the Midlands (Bilston) and that the family is perhaps not affluent-the cheap wallpaper purchased at the market. In doing so this stanza expertly places the action and hints at the family's financial situation. As the poem progresses, we see the baby as a little girl who plays with teddy bears; then she is older when she is more aware , knows her bed is not to be jumped upon; and finally, she is older still, perhaps a teenager who wants a lock on the door. The poem does not *tell* us that the girl is getting older it *shows* us which is what all good poems should do.

The fact that she waits years for a sibling hints at her loneliness, unhappiness maybe. The wishing for a lock, the fact that she will not look underneath the bed, is 'told to be silent/while too many words bang about' add to this feeling of unease

All this is achieved through subtle syntax and it might well be that what is important here is what is unsaid. Why is all the action in her room? Is something untoward going on? The last line 'waits for an audience to shout', brilliantly sums this up for this reader. All her life she wants approval from her toys at the start to whom she 'tells wild mushrooming fantasies'. to an unseen audience, all substitutes for her family. The poem will mean different things to different people, the hallmark of a poem doing its job very well!

Luigi Marchini

Mount Nyiragongo by Michaela Coplen

At first reading there is a straightforward feel of traveller's tale about this poem - the geographic detailing of a journey, attention paid to step, description and task. Throughout who is present exists alongside the actualities of view, mud, stone, tree, boulder - all populate the page. Yet sliding in over & over like the mist itself rises discomfort: ... *breathing hard ... vivisect the loss ... burnt, unblunted trace* Something else is going on here & it is not all vague or distant - sometimes it is up close & lightly observed ... *I watch you peel your orange first, in one unworried gesture, the way you bring yourself to love ...* And sometimes it is quiet, yet vivid ...*like grief grows in the open heart, like love grows out of grief...* A poem worth re-reading.

Gary Studley

The Gift of Mrs Ann Thwaytes, 1839 by Charlotte Cornell

From the first read-through, *The Gift of Mrs Ann Thwaytes, 1839* impresses with its remarkable social courage, back-handed humor, and appealing turns of phrase.

This is an engaging poem in that the reader is never quite sure who is speaking throughout, as though the words of Mrs Ann Thwaytes are emerging from the mouths of those she helped or might have done. This sort of shapeshifting is a very tricky strategy for any writer to pull off and to achieve seemingly effortlessly and in the very tight quarters of a relatively brief poem.

The poem is intelligent, complex and rewarding as it questions the nature of philanthropy and giving in ways that are both reassuring and troubling. It introduces the reader to a people, place and time, begging us to further explore and understand them.

The Gift of Mrs Ann Thwaytes, 1839 leaves the reader with so much to chew on concerning the human condition and does so with a combination of subtle innuendo and cruel forthrightness that is terribly compelling.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

How My Sister Escaped the Man O'War by Charlotte Cornell

A visceral poem with an apt title that, coupled with the opening line, gives the reader the thrust of the theme. Phrases like 'quivering blue against the sand, like an umbilical cord, starved of blood' illustrate the poem vividly. The subtle comparison of the sister suspended mid-air with the brilliant line 'anticipating the cost of the fall' to the half woman of the next stanza is excellent and for me the entire poem works both as a metaphor of the sister's own relationship, and also a commentary on a society in which men are predatory. The poem consists of four short stanzas but each word counts, nothing is superfluous and therefore feels a lot longer. There is a lot packed in here. It ends with the superb contradictory line. 'away from peril, into the hands of men.' An excellent poem. *Luigi Marchini*

Azahár and the Orange by Miguel Cullen

This poem excites with its love of language, with the joy of words both on the page and spoken. Because this poem is a delight to read out loud, to revel in the richness of the sounds.

Poetic devices abound such as the alliterative consonance of 'the zorzales are at their morning-time zarzuela', alliteration in 'spark of spring', internal rhyme, 'star from the parterre', etc. All these and the invigorating use of foreign words make the poem feel fresh and alive. The poet has taken risks because at first glance the profusion of italics would seem too much, but for me it works and is a joy to read.

Luigi Marchini

The Queens of Tuam by Rory Duffy

This reader was entirely taken aback by, yet absorbed in, this poem of loss and dark sorrow. A stoic quality is pervasive, aided by the two chunky blocks of text that almost physically deny us access to the internal dialogue and meaning of its language.

At the start, certain phrases that auger catastrophe: *wrap the dry creaks of newsprint around the blue wings*, and *the groan of the night-basket* are particularly powerful and inventive, grounding this writing in performative moments that speak of quiet and unavoidable tragedy.

In the end, we're left with *ivory grins and radio smiles*, and an emptiness belied by the quiet emotional buffeting of the poem.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

In Case It Comes Back by Tessa Foley

There are poems without titles and that irritates some folk. And there are poems where the title is so obvious there's almost no point in reading on. Then there are poems like this - where the title leaves you guessing and is itself only one small part of a bigger puzzle. We start with a corkscrew without a bottle ... *and a panic ten pounds asleep in my copy of Eyre ...* and from this sense of preparation, idiosyncrasy & threat it's full steam ahead. There are many odd, clashing, dark & enjoyable images and lines in this piece and it is difficult to narrow it down to a few to fit into this paragraph but ... *you could find the spare parts in my yard, pieces reserved should the fear become need ... for me flying is crashing, that stairs mean to fall ... the book of calm has been chewed into spit ... murder our time in a crude and watched pot...* are well worth a mention and repeat. Despite the You that's addressed herein being uncertain, I felt like I was being sent a personal 50% instruction/50% warning, but the consistent tone, energy & eccentricity throughout made it a fun, rhythmic & invigorating read. I still don't know or even care what the IT is, but this is poetry - and I want more.

Gary Studley

'I was young when I left. She still says' by Alina Imykshenova

There is a balance that itself is an interesting challenge in all forms of writing, wherein possibly uncommon terms, technological or historical references & non-English vocabulary are used throughout. In this piece this balance is maintained and the peppering of all creates an exciting mix of reference points & an almost privacy that is nevertheless being shared. Likewise, as the action moves from verse to verse, so does the atmosphere. The reader is being invited to look upon the narrator's questioning, decisions & yearning, whilst at the same time offered a plethora of plump, dark phrasing: ... *Don't forget ... in the crackling earth... And what if the answer is no? And what if life is a carcass after all? ... England was a temporary constituent in a three act play ... The clattering and fluttering of your first r...* This is a poem that clearly has closely held importance to its writer & yet also holds its own in more than one playground.

Gary Studley

Cold tea's spring shadow by David Simpson

Clean out the gents' toilets ... is a catchy way to start any poem & it works well here. Mixing recollection, activity & reflection, this filmic titled piece has writing offering a gentle yet powerful insight into habits, a much loved man, a family, a child. With time shown from more than one position, the narrative allows for both poignancy and practicality, for the intimate & the general. You don't need to love or even know cricket to enjoy this poem but phrases such as ... *Arm through mine. Hup. A foot in the year you cover thirty thousand miles on business no longer there in one lap of the bedroom's bugged bugged talcum powder footprints. That's enough...* are honest enough to make any son or daughter pale. Similarly ... *hears you on the prowl for a single at the bowler's end ...* is a bails-off-victory piece of writing and this poem brings life to a life.

Gary Studley

Moonlight in Venice by Mary Anne Smith

The personification of the moon in this poem works beautifully, from the checking of her reflection to the tugging of the waters. The poet achieves this through a precise language and imagery which gives life to a subject that is not uncommon but feels so original here. The use of *cope*, Shelly-like, as a noun; the verb *parkour*; the adjective *votive*, the language feels so right and refreshing.

The opening line; ‘The fullest moon performs the greatest alchemy’ perfectly spells out what the poem is about and there is something mysterious about the moon throughout, but also one has the impression that she is some sort of playful mischief maker who is forgiven for her shenanigans.

Phrases such as *fine-veined face* and *she slips her long fingers* are further evidence of the personification alluded to at the beginning, and evidence of an expertly crafted poem.

Luigi Marchini

The Long Crack in My Body Braids into A Net by Ojo Taiye

A mosaic quality pervades this writing, perhaps in part because we understand the poem to be *found* and inspired by language in another literary work. Thus, reading through it we encounter a group of italicized words that both fix the content while also suggesting a deeper context for it; words like *trans lover, sister, empties*.

A strong sense of the physical is palpable throughout, supported by spacing – sometimes unexpected – that asks the reader to pause and effect a kind of cadenced rhythm in the internal voice of the reading. It would be a pleasure to hear the poet deliver this piece simply to experience its flow and patterning.

The overall impression of this poem is one of searching and sadness but not in a way that is self-involved or -referential. Instead, we’re taken along a broken path of images and words, requiring us to piece together a meaning for ourselves and from our own experience.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

How Tall Is Truth by Ojo Taiye

Many poems in the competition addressed the mother-child relationship, and from a number of differing perspectives. In this poem, the reader is taken – almost by the scruff of the neck – on a rugged journey, driven by a dialogue between a grown child and a “mother”; the latter perhaps a metaphor for a lost home or an abandoned mother country.

Inventive and very tough language grounds this piece; there is never a point at which the reader understands the poet’s meaning literally, but instead through rich inference in phrases like “i drink my warnings and ask my mother if she feels defeated like floating bodies: *Palestine, Syria, Somalia, Texas Concentration Camps.*” The reader encounters in this and subsequent stanzas a *mélange* of phrase and tone suggesting both extant and pending doom.

While the structural arrangement of stanzas – with their various indents and spacings – is somewhat, and perhaps intentionally, rough, the poem ultimately coalesces, carving an emotional/ spiritual path to connect the reader with a longed-for, well-remembered past and present-day experience: “there is a small house in a brown field where my childhood still sibilate. I dream of a specific set of

colors; green, fuchsia, amber and navy blue. & these colors take the place of memories—a particular border which showed up in my life as a twenty-first century image: cardinals and navy beans.”

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

That Whole Year, I Spent Lunch on a Bench in a Public Train by Ojo Taiye

Commencing with a flourish, this poem continues with energy & fluidity. Whilst the subject matter is at times personal & emotive, there is also an openness that enables the reader to bring their selves into the action, to draw parallels. Phrases like *the crinoline of unspent adjectives ...throttle down an entire lifetime supply of love...that's how the living speak: a gurgle here, a liltling...* have a freshness & vitality that made this an interesting read.

Gary Studley