

Shortlisted Poems- Judges Comments

Warning: contains images that some viewers may find distressing by Freya Bantiff

The reader becomes voyeur again in this excellent poem. Although we aren't seeing the television images of bear-bile extraction that the speaker describes, it is almost worse for not seeing it. The real pain here is reflected in the gaps and the jarring, quasi-prosaic structure of the piece: it sits as uneasily on the page, as the notion of bear-bile extraction does with the speaker. The structure intensifies the sense of sickness we feel – we are denied any regular rhythm – to have that would be to accept the suffering of the animals. The piece is littered with hard alliterative offerings and other plosive explosions of anger. 'Bile Bear. Battery Bear. Production Unit', 'Bent. Bones buckled to take the shape of bars.', 'Packaged up. Made palatable. / Not pictured on the promotionals:...' and the incredible image of clinically depressed bears self-harming in their cages as they: 'chew ragged their bloody teddy footpads.' If anyone was unaware of the horrors of bear-bile extraction used for traditional Chinese medicine, they won't be anymore.

Charlotte Cornell

Side Order by Freya Bantiff

A hugely impactful poem, where couplets sit together, sometimes straining and the rhythms opposing the partner line – much like the subjects themselves in the poem. We see the strong motifs of fish and the violence associated with food preparation being applied to a sexual predator and his victim. The images of colour and gore come relentlessly. Some of the images are stunningly evocative. The chef's apron striped with 'marinara' reminds us of the barbers white and red pole – itself an advertisement for bloodletting and of course echoes Sweeny Todd-style violence. The final elongated simile where 'the disco ball swivels like a giant eye / that blinked shut long ago and cannot bring itself to look,' is stunning and moments of the poem offer a gut punch that the reader can't ignore. We are reduced to voyeurs in this moment; we too are blinking shut – ignoring the cries of a movement and perhaps of women in general that should have long ago been treated with respect and seriousness that generation of women have long deserved when calling out sexual violence, even when the speaker herself offers questions of her own credibility, suggesting in the first line that she has 'overcooked' the memory – a fact which makes her no less guilty of course, than the cannelloni skirt she wears.

Charlotte Cornell

Timepiece by Freya Bantiff

I cannot remember reading a poem on this subject previously and this grabbed my attention but it's the fact that it is such a confident poem that is most striking. The poet knows what they want to achieve and they have followed it through to the end very skilfully.

On the surface the poem is about sex but below, it is about much more than this. The poet paints a grey world of 'vacuous tower blocks' and receptionists that 'didn't meet her eyes'. It is also a hard one- the reference to the watch fastened 'tight as a manacle' and of course, 'weighty' implies that the protagonist is tied down to this world and weighed down by it. But this does not mean that she is not in charge. In fact, the poet shows us she is: she lets him 'unbox her', she tells him the price but there is also a suggestion that she might be actually looking for more, that this is not just for monetary gain-the 'radio crooning love songs to her satnav which crackled wrong turns' hints at this as well as being a superb line. And she researches the men she meets online, not an action associated with someone just in it for the money, so to speak. The use of the verb 'unbox' earlier also implies that her life away from these meetings could be constrained, restrictive, and maybe, though these liaisons are mechanical without real intimacy, she is searching for something else. The ending with the use of 'wind up' as a euphemism, as well as the musicality of 'her gaze trained on the glazed watch face'. Works so well as does the perfect last sentence. The poem is also about control. witness the rather dismissive 'some of them' and 'this one' at the start but is also extremely sad in tone. The sign of a good poem, for me, is one where the readers can take different things from it and each viewpoint is equally valid. *Timepiece* is one such poem.

Luigi Marchini

Ode to my Vocation by Partridge Boswell

This poem, which breaks well away from any formal conception of an ode, is relentless. We have here all the things a poet is, and isn't, at the same time. We have an epoch of toil and trade, of generations and memories, all the things that create a particular time, and a man to live in that time. Internal rhyme is used regularly to increase the speed and almost create a false sense of empathy and understand with the speaker. We can imagine ourselves the aeroplane-seated-neighbour, shocked with repartee from a want-to-be poet, a 'moonlighter' who blasts us with quasi-aggression, not almost taking a breath, so full of smug superiority that the list of genetic and historical ingredients will result in greatness that we are smothered; it is hard to breathe. Fantastic lines wave from the torrent of prose, some are humorous: 'a Cunard line of unlucky breaks', some are almost too painfully aware of the art: 'lexicographers sounding out the sough's soft sibilance.' I'm not sure if we like the speaker at the end of the poem; I think the judges felt pity for that companion, trapped next to someone with so much self-awareness and yet also, so little of it, on that long flight.

Charlotte Cornell

The life of seagulls by Mike Burns-Stark

This poem opens with a quite superb stanza where the narrator with the opening line asking the question 'what do I know of the life of gulls' and by doing so invites the reader to ask themselves the same question. By drawing us in like this, the poet asks us to subconsciously agree with the narrator, to knowingly see the gulls through the same eyes. The poet embraces the life of seagulls, celebrates it, meditates on it, and ultimately uses his poetry to show the terrifying beauty of it. He helps us to see the extraordinary in the

ordinary. For seagulls are ordinary to us, we see them everywhere. He starts with the 'mystery of the fragile egg' and subsequently through lines like 'The plaintive cry of an agile ghost', 'an omniscient eye overhead', and 'yet soars with divine equanimity' the poet skillfully conjures up an otherworldly view of the birds that intrigues as well as frightens. Poetic devices such as the consonance in 'scything salty air in a seaside' or the internal rhyme of 'beak and bleak', the enjambement, show a poet who knows what they are doing in conjuring up a visceral seascape where seagulls rule. The last stanza neatly sums up what the poet-and by extension we-know of the gulls.

In conclusion, whilst reading this poem I was reminded of the work of William Carlos Williams. It is very fine indeed!

Luigi Marchini

On Brighton Beach by Diana Cant

This poem begins with a first line which took me by surprise. 'They said we both looked Swedish' is a line I won't forget in a hurry. From this beginning the reader is drawn into this world of colours, sun, and sea where we meet Haris Khrisnas, triathletes, newlyweds, before that profound last line.

The poet skilfully uses sibilance-listen or read the last stanza especially-as well as internal rhyme - 'the belle of our own small ball' to really bring the poem to life along with the assonance throughout.

A lovely poem which has a picture postcard feel until that dramatic ending which gave me a much needed jolt into reality.

Luigi Marchini

What I Told the Wren by Tina Cole

This poem had my heart in my throat. A beautifully haunting work, its free verse single block form perfectly fits this mysterious narrative of entrapment, yearning for escape, but also deep regret. The narrator tells the bird that 'the past plagues my heart', she tells it her 'secret'. The injured bird is not just that to the narrator but a confidant, some sort of therapist. After all she tells it 'Words that have formed in me over years like coal'.

The writing is skillful with some wonderful lines and similes but always the sense of entrapment is underlined throughout. The excellent syntax shows this, 'weight of sky', 'darkness heavy; and the internal prison 'Innuits have no words for guilt'. And the narrator forever must live in this 'bulky prison of skin'. The ending sums it all up perfectly, the wren, unlike the narrator, 'too soon will fly'.

There is also a musicality to it, underpinned by devices such as the repetition of that' on three consecutive start of lines. Or the boldness of the two I's in the same line. A confidently beautiful poem indeed.

Luigi Marchini

Monochromes by Tina Cole

What a beautiful selection of black and white offerings; verses are strung like the necklace referenced in the final speaker. Throughout, we see the speaker offer stanzas of memory and reflection, showing that unlike the colour motif that runs through the poem, people are very rarely binary and simple. From the father 'brylcreemed' up, yet almost marked from labour with 'fereous tangs' and 'paraffin' to the mournerless funeral under a 'sky the colour of newsprint' – the irony of a death that will make no headlines and stir no stories is not lost on us. Each memory of family or town is separate, yet together (like the beads of the necklace) they have created a new thing – the speaker themselves, a seemingly simple poem that opens up on reading and re-reading to expose the same complexities it records in individual people.

Charlotte Cornell

Quietude by Martin Cordrey

A contemplative and philosophical reflection on the nature of stasis and change. The poem reflects on those nanoseconds of stillness before changes of weather, tide, evolving life, mood, the shifting dial of love to not-in-love. In those most-still-of-moments, those moments of 'quietude', things are - for a 'split-atom' - still; the world's axis almost stops and we can believe time a man-made construction designed for those who know their time on this planet is limited. The poem is vowel-heavy, enjoying and relishing its own softness. It lifts well beyond its own seeming-simplicity. The poem is, like the creature in the final lines, 'a thing with wings'.

Charlotte Cornell

Before by Kathleen Jones

This poem is a sensory tour of old Silk Road culture and perhaps of a time now lost. The speaker is recalling their time in this land, where the words, the sounds the smells and the skills seem almost lost to them too – they can only be recalled in the dark, when the demands of a modern, probably Western life, are shut away. The speaker too, seems to be recalling a lost youth – 'a child on my lap / a slim, shy man in my bed' – and it is this memory, over all the others, which has the greatest weight – it sits last and lingers in our thoughts after the poem's close. The poem doesn't over sentimentalise the memories. The chair condensed milk tin isn't crusted with sugars, but instead with flies. The camels bark. The tips of a craftsman's fingers are scarred into slants from years of labour. That said, this is still a poem of love – for a time and a place and youth that is long gone.

Charlotte Cornell

Growing by Kathleen Jones

This poem starts with a quote from the Canadian artists Emily Carr.

However the first line from that quote is omitted -“There is nothing so strong as growing.’
And that is where, I assume, the title is taken from.

This short poem is a plea for recognition for ‘the things that eyes will never see’ to receive due credit.

For they are’ the roots of everything’.

The poem combines apt creativity of language with real emotional impact. The poet skilfully details the life under the soil ‘the tangle of elastic worms, ‘the two headed bacteria’, etc.

These organisms matter.

In a short poem like this, it could be said that each word should count even more than in a longer poem but I disagree. A short poem is just as likely to have uncertainties and weaknesses as a longer poem. But not this one. The poet knows exactly what they are doing, especially as the poem finishes perfectly and full circle with the ‘lit fuse’.

Luigi Marchini

Lemon Drops in the Pocket of My Father’s Overcoat by Maeve McKenna

This poem is well structured – eloquent and poignant. It paints a picture of the relationship between the narrator and their father and a glimpse of the life he has led. The overcoat of the title is the object correlative of the poem. It features in each stanza; we know it is made of tweed in the first, has its pockets rifled in the second, buttons are missing in the third, and the narrator comments on it in the last.

We learn a lot in this poem. The family was poor when she was younger, ‘sweets we couldn’t afford’, the ‘frayed inlets’ of the coat. WE know that the father was religious, that he was a handyman. Most importantly though is the last two stanzas which brilliantly conveys the love the narrator has for the father.,’ the onset of a coldness we have weathered together’ and the gentle like ‘I lift your head from pillow to window’. They look after him, now he is old and ill.

The poet skillfully foreshadows what might come after the final stanza. There is a reference to ‘ever more funeral processions’ in the first, and ‘freshly dug soil’ in the penultimate. The opening stanza details the ‘ever more frequent funeral processions of men’ who drank ‘whiskey straight from tulip glasses’ and ends with the beautiful but sad observation ‘on the tip of a spoon, a hint of lukewarm spirit’. Not only does this relate to the opening-another foreshadowing-but could also refer to the fathers waning spirit.

The language is simple there are no flourishes, and it is so much better for that. An excellent poem.

Luigi Marchini

Many Doors by Mary Anne Smith Sellen

This poem uses personification perfectly to pull the reader in, to detail a house, or rather the atmosphere of the house. From the very opening line ‘The house peeps from beneath its modest slate-tiled brim’, the poet skillfully guides us through the house, the detailing bringing it very much to life.’ ‘The table waits like is faithful dog’ for example.

The personification, in lesser hands, could feel overdone but it doesn't here. It all feels just right. This skill is complemented by the use of some brilliant lines, 'the fire itself now the cold, dead heart of the house.' and 'shoes hug the memory of feet' just two such examples. But there is sibilance, 'small things smile the most' is beautiful and there is consonance and wonderful imagery.

A lovely poem.

Luigi Marchini

Eleven Days by Gary Studley

This poem is full of mystery and pain. The raindrops here are the tears that the subject is clearly repressing; the use of pathetic fallacy here is so well done that we are in no doubt that whatever is being buried – 'the bundle' - is an item of intense tragedy – a stillborn baby perhaps, echoed in the earlier reference to 'labouring'. The subject herself clearly cannot afford – literally – to think of what it is she is burying – there is no doubt more labour waiting in the house from where the 'ash bucket' came. But there is something perhaps more sinister at work here: nature is against the subject. 'At every push of boot / she hits root and stone' and the 'nettles mock a clearway'. Her knees get grazed and again the blood and subtle violence here leave the reading wondering, just a little, if perhaps the baby wasn't stillborn after all. From a home of poverty and labour, we are reminded of the Hardyian line, 'Done because we are too many'. On reading and re-reading, this poem opens up possibilities that the simple form would seem to at first deny. Hard consonants echo the labour of the woman – 'slack & bubbles' and 'tilter lid' – it is a very well-done poem indeed.

Charlotte Cornell

Rain by Gary Studley

This poem brilliantly combines two poems in one. One set during the second world war is made up of 5 quatrains and the other, set in the present, constitutes 6 couplets. There is probably a name for this form, but I have no idea what it is. It takes a lot of skill to achieve this seamlessly and the poet here has done so.

The present-day part is written in the second person and the historical and this differing of viewpoints works so well. The narrator could be addressing himself when the poem opens with 'you wonder how far the rain falls and the familiar use of 'Mum' confirms this. They are thinking about their family, whether the rain has drenched the broad beans, but it is the protagonist's own immersion that 'ticks off'.

The great art of this poem is the correlation between the two narratives. The bombs of the war aligned to the rain falling. The detail of the little girl with 'feet in utility socks' and 'hand me down striped bottoms' is superb and is very visceral, in fact the poem is so detailed that each scene, especially the historical ones, rings so true. The shock of the girl's hair catching fire from the bomb is followed in the final couplet by the protagonist dowsing the lights, checking the oven. Although they are different eras, it's as if these actions are /after the horse is bolted'. And who is the girl? Did she survive? And if so is she the mother? Like all good poems, it doesn't answer this question but leaves it to the reader.

Luigi Marchini

The Equine Attraction is Closing by Mark Totterdell

A wonderful poem, subtly worked. Here we read about the imminent closure of the mysterious 'equine attraction'. It is a really a coming-of-age poem; the girls will move on from their horses. Their 'skinny' t-shirts and flowing 'manes' will find other things to love; they will find new heartthrobs away from the stable. But it is the subject that remains ignored for the whole first half of the poem that is the true focus of the poet – the boy 'up on the hill' – the sensitive soul – who visited the attraction not for the thoroughbreds, but for the donkeys and now expresses horror that the stress of the closure may 'thicken their blood'. This boy too is a sort of donkey; the girls the thoroughbreds. They will find new homes and be loved by men; whereas he is losing the anchors of his childhood - perhaps the only things that have offered him unconditional love and asked nothing in return. The weather is again used as evocative pathetic fallacy and we feel keenly that the loss of the attraction is as much about the propelling of young people towards the fiction-less world of adulthood, where 'the unicorn's horn [is] / detached and buried...somewhere under the rainbow.'

Charlotte Cornell

orlando/salmacis by Elizabeth Train-Brown

This poem is sensual, mythical and contains some wonderful imagery starting with the very opening line.

'she is the thing rattling dry grass together,' and ending with the equally wonderful 'you can feel my pulse through the scars on my gut.'

In between here are some extraordinary lines- listen to the musicality of 'the song of the serpent still shivering in her ears' for example and in 'with a smile on her face & the smell of my sweat'.

There is rhythm aplenty, and the parts make up a beautiful whole.

Luigi Marchini

Starfish by Christian Ward

This poem opens with the great line, 'Its orange skin hums of summer:' And because of the title we know instantly what the it is.

It portrays the starfish as some sort of magician and it does so with some beautiful language-'its secrets settling like sediment' is great as is 'curtains of frothy sea at your toes' It is almost surreal in its conclusion and when reading it I pictured the final image as a Dali or Ernst painting. Concise but it still cast a dreamlike spell over me. Excellent!

Luigi Marchini

My Shameless Lips by James Knox Whittet

The talent of a female bard or skald here is irrepressible. The subject seems to reflect the will of the landscape, she 'ben[ds] her ears to whispers of wind' and 'catches' tunes out of the 'very air'. She 'beachcombs' for poems and creates beauty from discarded words like the flotsam that washes to shore. The Harris / Highland landscapes here are so beautifully evoked and the littering of dialect is done musically and to much added effect. The speaker's mother 'waulked' wool; there is 'bog cotton' and 'hill lochans'. Even in death the speaker's words cannot be stopped: 'you will see my lips still mouthing words' – she has now become the amplifier for the world of the death; rejected by the world of man, she hopes perhaps for a fairer chance, when gender is finally reduced to ash and dirt.

Charlotte Cornell