

POET OF THE YEAR 2023: JUDGES' COMMENTS ON THE SHORTLISTED POEMS

***Helen, remembering-* by Sarah Ang**

This poem is vivid in its exploration of what happened when Paris abducted Helen of Troy.

What is unusual is that it is written in the first person as Helen looks back on the events.

Consisting of three stanzas, the first finds Helen 'dancing intoxicating' in the third line, 'but disillusion quickly sets in by the end of the stanza, as she learned in the quite wonderful last line, 'that some fires start fast but die faster'.

There is a confident use of imagery through the poem especially so in the second stanza with its description of the golden apple that Paris gave Aphrodite as 'poison wrapped in gleaming gold' and the exquisite description of her son as 'ice-filled, storm filled' and her daughter as 'edged like a knife'. This second stanza is fluid, consisting of long sentences and are apt for the content as Helen traces her 'memories on marble floors', as she tries to make sense of what has happened.

What the poet has so skilfully done here is use short sentences in the first stanza and last where Helen is sure, certain of the situation. In the last stanza though she is still trapped, she knows this and she imagines she is a bird in flight. But see what the poet does in the last two lines, where Helen is 'wheeling over the city'. Logically there would be a comma after city and continue to the last line 'Flying straight on until morning'. But the poet refuses to do this, and the last line is a sentence on its own, a statement of defiance, even more relevant, I think, in today's climate.

A very skilful poem indeed.

Luigi Marchini

***Dot to Dot* by Linda Burnett**

This visual poem is striking on the page and in conception. It is also about conception and an unusual approach to the circularity of human life, from the "soupy crucible" to where it "begets another life", perhaps also clothed "in magic dust". It's a wry title for a poem that puts the span of an individual's life into perspective. The poem has a diction that begins simply then enriches towards the mid-point, representing a mature life, and regresses to the mono-syllabic "dot" at the end. *Clifford Liles.*

***You Cry to your folks that I forced you to carry your goalposts* by Chris Campbell**

We all have memories of our childhood, many of us playing, jesting, or fighting with friends. This poem brilliantly conveys one such incident in the narrator's childhood where there are 'lamb's footprints beside fence posts' and 'snowmen leftovers' in the opening two lines. Immediately the poet has placed us both in landscape and time.

The poet uses such concrete details throughout to give the poem a filmic quality. We have 'dirty magazines in the bushes and 'a favourite ash' like a dragon'. It all feels real, the tears, the laughter, the making up. The poem has a consistent tone and a voice the reader trusts.

The last two sentences are superb as the friends 'huddle like twigs' imaginary sheep and snowmen melts, bring us full circle from the lambs and snowmen and the ash from the opening two stanzas. The poet knows what they are doing throughout and is in so control of their craft that the reader has sympathy for both the narrator and his friend, you of the title.

Luigi Marchini

***You Can Shove Your 3-for-2 Flyer* by Chris Campbell**

An excellent eco-poem interweaving disparate themes of an approaching storm, heavy traffic, and consumerism (through the metonyms of beer and pizza). These themes are then propelled through tight tercets to its dénouement, with plosives abounding. An unusual theme shot through with good lines, starting with an opening rhetorical flourish, by "empty bottles the weekend drunk", to hills, where only some "climb up those thick crusts". This manages to contain both the small-town vibe and the beer and pizza motif. A propulsive and dazzling poem with an ecological message.

Clifford Liles

***Dorchester Court, Herne Hill* by Sara Davis**

This poem is another childhood memory but this time we are in an art décor block of flats in London which is huge to the child's view of the narrator.

The building is 'brick blocks sliced by windows/in balconied layers' to the child. An exquisite description. We have an island of orange flowers where a 'fountain spilt only dust'.

The poem does not waste a word – each counts, as the child recounts a summer where she and her mother basked on the roof and she skipped between vents and turrets.

Later there are tadpoles, frogs, monkeys as the girl grows up and they move away when 'rain darkened the asphalt' and the 'art deco elegance' is left to crumble on its bones.

In a relatively short poem the poet has managed to capture a sort of rite of passage for the girl- childhood does not last forever, we all have to grow up, even get old, as at the end she often thought of the roof, the flower island and the frogs.

An excellent poem.

Luigi Marchini

***Elephant Era* by Maggie Davison**

A fresh approach to a common theme of illness, but with a whimsy that lifts it from the self-indulgent. The metaphorical "elephant" plods through five cinquains. First, there is the speaker's anger at others' reactions to their illness who: "chew the gristle of gossip". Then a well-placed turn at "starts again" sees the speaker rejecting the physical symptoms for a flight of imagination leading to a possible acceptance. There is music in the vowel sounds of "saying, if only-ing" and "swinging from ringlets of cirrus". Concise and accomplished.

Clifford Liles

Syzygy by Lucy Dixcart

This 7-stanza poem plays the first three couplets against the last three, with the middle (4th) couplet acting as if the fulcrum of a balance. This is emphasised by its words: “the scales equalised by before/ and after. Let’s not pretend”. This is an interesting and carefully crafted poem. The poet uses some wonderfully evocative images: “the trees have laced one more corset/ around their waists”, and “tracing-paper hills”.

The 5th couplet dispels the expectation that there is an automatic righting of the dissolution and fading of life’s colours that we see in the first three couplets. The reader is told: “Instead, wait for dusk ...” The withdrawal of the sun’s life force continues, the night takes over. The poet asks us to “count the futures that dried on the branch”; this again alludes to the theme of the irrecoverable passage of time set out in the first three stanzas; we cannot turn time back. But in the last three stanzas the balance is finally restored; despite the night there is acceptance of reality, of life continuing, through the sounds of crickets, owls, a motorbike. There is hope of regeneration, the return of light to life, the sun’s life-giving force. The final line: “my love, this is where you begin”, is the dramatic counterweight on the other side of the fulcrum, the re-balancing of the two positions of the syzygy of the title. Greta Ross

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness by Josh Ekroy

This prose poem delights with humour and satire in its tongue-in-cheek swipe at how well, or not, society is adhering to the famous American Declaration of Independence which spelled out unalienable Rights, the key ones being Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. The poem examines this through parodying a horse race commentary. The headlong rush of the race is superbly suggested by the unpunctuated torrent of words, the absence of pauses, commas or full stops sweeping the reader along. As expected of prose poems there is no conventional plot or story - it is a vehicle for flight of fancy, a viewpoint, a personal commentary.

The poet identifies and satirises the runners’ professions and social standing, and their chances in life’s race, with much successful and unsuccessful jostling for position.

As the race comes to its climax the dead unexpectedly come from behind in a final winning sprint, but are overruled by the judges, the race only allowing the living to compete. In a dig at our society the poem declares as equal winners the career-criminals and super-rich. As the race commentator says “*there’ll be popping of champagne corks in the streets of mayfair tonight*”. However, the one runner that remains on the track is ‘happiness’ ... “*no one can stop it*”. The poem began with the words: “*and happiness is out of the trap and they’re off*” and ends with the survival and irrepressible presence of ‘happiness’ despite it “*thrashing round the track totally out of control*” ... so the poem, and the race, end on a bitter-sweet yet optimistic note.

An entertaining yet thought-provoking prose poem that uses satire and humour to question modern-day goals and values. Greta Ross

Grain Orientation by Martin Cathcart Froden

A wistful and resonant meditation on a father-son relationship. With each phrase telling, it is powerful and concise. The metaphor is of a small boat passed down from generation to generation. This leaves the reader to imagine much of the back story that is told to a “mouth-open new girlfriend”. The poem is well-crafted and coherent, both through the use of sonorant sounds throughout and the devices used,

such as the mirrored vowel sounds of “inherited skiff”; and the return of an opening line at the end. The good title is revealed, after reading the poem, to reference the multiple senses of ‘grain’, both maritime and alcoholic.

Clifford Liles

The Prospective Density of Snow by Christopher Horton

In this ode to unpredictability, the poet first considers the effort wasted fighting chance, such as in forecasting, knowing “the prospective density of snow”. Looking at the mirrored vowel sounds in this and the alliteration elsewhere, in “waves laving and lapping”, reveals a musical poem. There is good use of metaphor in the juxtaposition of “traffic darting” like meteors in a sky’s “bag of conjuring tricks”. All these images lead to a heartfelt conclusion for an interesting and successful poem.

Clifford Liles

The Tailor by Derek Sellen

This poem is an ekphrastic sonnet inspired by Moroni’s famous portrait ‘The Tailor’.

It is a modern sonnet in that there is no rhyme but what it has got is rhythm to spare. In the first stanza alone with ‘measuring, calculating, revolving’ and ‘mind, chest, waist, hips, spine.’

The poet portrays the tailor as some sort of surgeon as ‘he sizes you up’ and ‘he pierces to the naked form’ but he solves the ‘fleshy problem’ not with a surgeon’s scalpel but with ‘shears to cut’.

The poet’s command of pace and rhythm is admirable-everything here is as measured as the subject of the painting who ‘feeds on paradox’ and is ‘licensed to look with respectful insolence’.

The last stanza is a wonderful summation where the Tailor – ‘Like lover or mortician, ‘tends the body’. Leaving a tingling oxymoron on your skin’

Luigi Marchini

The oxymoron by Maxine Sinclair

This is a one stanza prose poem which tries to answer a survey question -are there any positives to epilepsy. it describes vividly what happens during a seizure with some shrewd phrasing ‘her jagged shape forms a lightning bolt’.

The voice used seems just right observing and concluding without sentimentality. Given the subject matter this is very hard to do and the poet has succeeded in communicating experience truthfully through some apt imagery.

A rare skill indeed.

Luigi Marchini.

***And for all the world* by Mara Adamitz Scrupe**

This poem has an epigraph taken from Charles Darwin

"It may be doubted if there are any other animals which have played such an important part in the history of the world as these lowly organized creatures."

And it skilfully starts by naming angleworms immediately, the very first word in fact. They 'inch up *up* in black soil beneath/ brand new white suburban sidewalks'. So in the first line there is action straight away but we leave the worms now as, on the sidewalks is 'that kid' who is the protagonist of the piece.

We are in her world as she dreams of what she will be, *where* she will be when she grows up. The poem uses some wonderful syntax.

For example, the consonance of 'skips the crack', the sibilance of 'sensuous stuffs', and more. But as well as the poetic device used in the poem there are some wonderful phrases- 'streetlamps shine a bridge over a river vanishing in dawns fugged breath' by way of example, but also some telling phrases; 'by now she knows her woman's worth' – perfect.

At the end the girl returns to reality, to 'that kid with nothing in fields sheaves' and the narrator informs us that the girl will later learn that earthworms are 'tiny creatures that move the world with their meanderings' bringing us full circle from the start and beautifully end this fine poem. *Luigi Marchini*

***Iron Wood Reverie & Other Reminiscences* by Mara Adamitz Scrupe**

This is a powerful, angry and unsettling poem, written in a modern contemporary style. It avoids formal line endings, and is numbered in four parts. It is a *tour de force* that takes the reader through the mistreatment of indigenous peoples and their land in North America, as white colonisers rolled across and appropriated tribal territories, often brutally. The poem's initial epigraph is a quotation from Longfellow's 'Song of Hiawatha', an idealistic and anglicised poetic fiction based on a Native American myth. However, 'Iron Wood Reverie & Other Reminiscences' opens up the true background to this romanticised portrayal. Waterfalls and land features are Disneyfied into theme parks lauding touristic Minnehaha Falls and the Longfellow Glen.

The poem uses the device of wood as both narrator and observer, relating how rich natural woodland and its hardwood was refashioned for fencing settlers' ranches, pegging out Indian reservations, sold in commerce, but also carved for gallows. The repurposing of wood – the "iron wood" of the title – also serves as a metaphor for the treatment and fate of American Indian tribes.

The spirits of the dead pervade each of the four parts of the poem, with an epigraph to the 4th part of the poem, quoting an American Indian's reminiscence about his kin, Little Crow's coffin being accompanied by a flight of blackbirds. A counterweight of reality to the Hiawatha epigraph.

And the story continues, the poet implies, using the device of the ampersand to progress us through each time period and section of the poem, the “and” symbol that we, as readers, can grab as a handle to travel America’s troubling and shameful past.

Greta Ross

& incidentally by Mara Adamitz Scrupe

This is a well-crafted poem set out in contemporary free verse format, showing deft and decisive use of white space and indents to enhance the story within the poem. The title suggests this poem is a continuation of a much larger examination by the poet on the cultural and colonial history of North America. The poet uses small case for the lines, and in this way the capitalised names of places and tribes stand out to indicate their primacy.

The ampersand acts like a hook linking and advancing time through the stanzas. The poem invites the reader to ponder the effects of centuries of gradual change, not only from the advent of white settlers but also tribal settlements and the intermittent warring between Native American tribes over thousands of years. The poet asks us to imagine how the land probably looked, thousands of years ago, with the humans that made use of the land but also animals like the buffalo. But all things change, and outside influences affect the land and its peoples. This is suggested by the lines about migratory birds: “Night Herons ... perhaps only recently flown in from South American tidal flats or a distant Eurasian rice field”.

At the poem’s end we are in modern-day USA, where the poet laments “watersheds now sullied from sediments & nitrates”, but where nothing is totally lost, even road-kill can be salvaged for supper. This is a poem that merited re-reading and reflection.

Greta Ross

April 20th 1986 midnight, rain & a fifty minute wait by Gary Studley

This poem bounces along like the “frantic” rain over the “birthday-drunk” girl dancing under the drain pipe on the railway platform. The pipe hangs “scalp-height and vivid” – an active player in the rain-soaked scene that explodes jubilantly in the 3rd stanza. The detailed title tells us that the event is special and memorable. The “birthday-drunk” girl is brought alive in the mind’s eye with very precise descriptions and her name.

The second stanza hints something is about to happen with the line: “the ticking yellow flicker” of the train sign, as if it’s the ticking of an explosive device. The poem then bursts with action, sounds and description, centring on the girl singing and dancing with the “frantic” rain exploding from the pipe, the poet using the repeated “b” sound in *blouse, bra, breasts, belly, belt*, and picked up again in *bouncing and upbeat* suggesting the drumming of the water which drenches the girl, just as the train screams past the platform. Here, assonance and the hard consonant “k” electrify the moment: “track ... crackling and sparking”. The passengers flash by like apparitions, “no more present than Cochrane, Holly, Vincent – and nowhere near as real.” Because the title tells us this happened in 1986 we are also being transported – not by train – but by memory’s time machine to the days of legendary pop stars who come alive again through the girl singing Straycat Strut in a “snare-drum upbeat”. This is a vivid and sensual ‘in the moment’ poem, and the reader happily shares the joyous abandon and memory of that moment with the poet.

Greta Ross

Akin by Gary Studley

As the title, and the first stanza, implies, this poem is about something “*more akin to near miss*”, as if the speaker recognises a personal difficulty or tension in facing something, the thing that “*surfaces*”. Perhaps the difficulty is broaching an emotional or desired relationship. The title and first line carry the hidden word ‘kin’ in “*akin*”, as does the word “*skinning*” in the 5th line, which can suggest kinship of family, a sibling relationship, or simply acknowledging the kinship of mutually recognised feelings between strangers.

The poem opens with the speaker questioning their courage for action. The lines “*honing itself in what passes for ease, as if rolling inside*” suggest an encounter whose outcome is risky and unclear. The context is deliberately not spelled out, but the gamble of opening oneself up to risk and failure is suggested by the line: “*wind between branch & blade*”, where one’s aim can be thwarted and so becomes that “*near miss*”.

The poet writes in free verse, using internal rhyme, assonance and alliteration to hold the poem together, and rejecting formal styles or end-line rhymes. The sensual and visceral quality of sounds in the poem is exemplified in the lines “*almost as if rolling inside/ the strop, strop, strop’s/ hoof-clopping quality ...*” This emphasis on sound in the poem tells us the speaker follows feelings rather than plans, in order to find the result or closeness they desire. The last two lines of the second stanza hint at the speaker teetering on the point of taking action, but not quite daring to try, with that deliberate white space between “*drunk*” and “*enough to ask*”, and then the rush of four words clumped together: “*toomuchtotry*”. These last two lines lead the reader immediately into the third stanza which opens with that one word “*suddenly*”. It is as if the situation resolves itself unexpectedly, taking the speaker and the other person by surprise. This 3rd stanza is now a headlong rush of short truncated lines: the “*rush and flurry*”, “*an ill-advised bite*”, creating a confused rush of sensations and sounds, “*custard hitting bucket*”, “*a squeal*”.

Here, the overt reading of the 3rd stanza can be of a sexual encounter, perhaps at a pub or party, “*where we fall into grace/disgrace*” and “*press fast together/ despite no franked permission*”. However, the poem’s title, ‘*akin*’, points us also to that covert reading, perhaps of difficult kin relationship unravelling at a family gathering, where tensions rise and transgressions might take place. Either reading is valid, as at the end of the encounter the speaker finds themselves “*once again having held on/ for truth/ yet bumping up against/ just as many/ knots*”. This last word, *knots*, suggests blocks but also plays on its homonym, the “*nots*” – actions not allowed, overstepped or transgressed “*despite no franked permission*”. But the need to hold on to “*truth*” overrides all else. A complex poem with depths, that deserves more than a casual reading.

Greta Ross