

Judges' Comments

***This isn't a poem* by Veronica Aaronson**

This poem is wonderfully constructed with a carefully considered choice of syntax. It starts with *the holy hush of the passengers* but then we have the '*pneumatic rush*' of doors opening, the *cacophony* of the 4 children, *feet stampeding* and so forth. Verbs that leave the reader with such a sense of action, almost a buzz that it almost comes as shock when the *soundtrack stopped dead*. This is almost a false ending because the movement picks up again as the protagonist *ran up and down*. There is assonance aplenty-the afore mentioned 'holy hush' and 'soundtrack stopped dead' as well as the 'scamper of squirrels', 'quiet splatter', etc.

There is rhythm a plenty with these and more alliterative word choices.

The skill of the poem is in the way it subtly leads the reader on the same journey as the protagonist. There is no first person at all until the fourth line with the introduction of *our four children*. That is when the reader suspects that something is going to happen, but we are kept holding on, wondering, pondering until the startling line much further on *I turned back, saw only three children*. An excellent poem

Luigi Marchini

***A Brief History of Modern Music* by Partridge Boswell**

This is a poem which plays with myth, riffing on both the Orpheus and Eurydice story and on the punishment of Sisyphus. It is very sure in tone and imagery, highly intelligent but conversational and comedic. There is absolute command of rhythm and form. I love the idea that Sisyphus who has to roll a rock up a mountain each day, hums a song under his breath, and that this is part of the 'history of modern music'.

Derek Sellen

***Aubade of a Blended Eschatology* by Partridge Boswell**

This is a scintillating account of the morning relationship of a contemporary couple. There is sustained form, dazzling imagery from 'a hairball of terror' to the 'blind melon of imagination', and a brilliantly engaging voice. The poet revels in mixed metaphor and cultural references for their own sake, displaying the fertility of his writerly imagination. At the same time there are layers of serious meaning and the evocation of a loving relationship.

Derek Sellen

***Book Ends* by Linda Burnett**

This poem is so adventurous and challenging, I was immediately pulled in by the courage of its risk-taking in terms of form and content. As is so often the case with writing that makes its own rules, it took me several readings to grasp and fully appreciate the way in which the poet has utilized the structure of the page to create a rhythmic dissonance, in blocks of language, that is at once off-kilter, highly engaging, and accomplished. One particular passage

*Scouring for fissures in the ice, cracks
radiating out from jolts of life-force
deep inside, I hope. Nothing thaws*

the permafrost: no smile, no arch, no yell.

draws the reader into a palpable world of wintery affect, creating a mediating ligature between past and present, child and adult, life and death. An artist friend once asked me “Why are poets so obsessed with death?”. In many respects, and indeed with technical brilliance and wonderful open-heartedness, *Book Ends* answers this question by its life affirming resonance in the presence of the inevitable.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

***Glose for the Girls* by Charlotte Cornell**

In this poem, Charlotte Cornell has taken an inscription that commemorates the murder of a young woman in 1782 near Sandwich and used it as the basis of a form known as a glose. The work is technically accomplished and, at the same time, very moving as she considers attacks on women across time, up to the present day. It is a timely and important poem. The listing of the names of so *many* victims has a chilling effect and the poetry itself is memorable in phrases such as ‘you too had struggled to tell reed rasp from stranger’s breath’.

Derek Sellen

***In Memoriam: Billy Gunn* by Philip Dunn**

Everyone knows the adage about poetry ‘every word counts’ and it is true. Writers who command language with energy and precision understand the power of a single well-chosen word. It’s a question of orientation toward language, and to write concisely is a skill.

In Memoriam: Billy Gunn is a superb example of this. At only 4 lines in length, not a word is wasted; there are no redundant modifiers or word pairs.

The poem starts with startling two opening lines –

‘Crushed in his forklift truck
when the floor gave way’

So, we have a concrete detail that hooks the reader immediately

We know what has happened already which is slightly shocking as we start with the denouement. The last two lines of the quatrain are different. They are meditative with arresting imagery and the poet has purposefully structured the poem this way to demonstrate the fragility of life. The poem is an elegy but not a sentimental one – it is written in a matter of fact way which makes it all the more remarkable

Luigi Marchini

***Yesterday at the Car Wash I Cried for my Dead Brother* by Linda Ford**

The first thing that strikes me is the title. Straight to the point. It sets the scene so there is no ambiguity, no confusion.

The first line of the poem-*I can't name this apparatus* is something that probably runs through all our minds in a car wash but here it can also equally mean that the narrator knows the name but is too unfocused in her thoughts to remember. What follows is a fluid insight into the narrator’s mind

as they grapple with grief. The poet skilfully moves from the first person of the opening line to the second person for the rest of the poem with the implication that the narrator is looking in at themselves, how they are coping. Thus, it is both an introspective poem and an extrospective one. Witness the action-*brushes scour – water splits*, etc. This movement is expertly contained in adroit similes with the *apparatus passing overhead like a full grey cloud* and the afore mentioned water splitting *into tiny constellations*

As a poem it is subtly powerful with some wonderful imagery - *glass becomes a sky of silver* as another example, with the carefully chosen syntax acting as a metaphor for the grieving process. The movement within the car wash mirroring the movement of the mind as it grapples with the event. Of course, the ending perfectly sums up the narrator's state with the *arrows flashing intermittently - pointing skywards!*

Luigi Marchini

Visigoths by Nigel King

Visigoths is a remarkable reminder of the connectedness of all art forms, and the means by which, in this case, a painting can prompt the revelations of ekphrasis in the composition of verse that is quiet and contemplative, yet likewise suggesting the distressing truth that whilst the painter sits considering options at the easel, the endless cavalcade of *people grey with rubble dust/ stumble through the streets*. There is a soto-voce quality to this piece that attests to the writer's experiences and skills as both a visual artist and a poet that is, in my experience, quite unusual in an ekphrastic poem. *Visigoths* is remarkably visual, whilst communicating in tight almost terse language a breadth of painterly knowledge that is muscular and palpable, alongside brilliantly poetic shifts of emotional impact and intensity. This is, despite its seeming quietude, a highly political poem. In eight brief stanzas, Nigel King reminds us that the world is not only composed of who we are, or what we are, as individuals in the moment.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

Skinning by Stephanie Powell

Skinning speaks of loss in that tangential way that most of us have of dreamily lighting on what is missing, strayed or irretrievably departed. Employing the language of the farmyard, the poet ruminates on similarities and divergence between the abattoir and domesticity, leading the reader from the first italicized query, *Am I the livestock or the boning knife?* to *And we wait...wash clothes and wait* in an extended dreamscape of yearning, sacrifice, and death. There is a kaleidoscopic quality to this poem that challenges us to consider the process of longing and grieving. And in its visuality, again and again the poet brings us back to that tender territory where loss resides in us in a corporeal way, as a locus of feeling *Nearby the empty bassinet, my flesh kicked on/ like drum skin*. This is a poem that requires us to experience the words, lines and stanzas beyond imagination and instead as physical sensations, as we grope for a place to hold on in the midst of *An abundance of dreaming/ and bloodshed*.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

In the Eastern Townships, Québec by Kerry Rawlinson

This is a poem like a beautiful woven carpet or a symphonic piece of music with repeated motifs. It is set out on the page so that there is a rift winding down the centre like a path, the path which the family in the poem take though the countryside. They find an abandoned house which haunts the

imagination of the poet – ‘broken doors streaked and squeaking with mysteries.’ I love the assonance and alliteration in the poem and the evocation of a magical day’s hike.

Derek Sellen

***Prairie* by Gary Michael Studley**

I am especially pleased to say a few words about the poem entitled *Prairie*. Upon first reading these verses, I was almost convinced that the poet must come from the same place I was born and raised – in the middle plains and prairies of the American continent – such is the resonance and authenticity of descriptive passages like *in the aftermath of the bleak – / when attempting to hunt across the plains or against winds, against the last great push/ went budless, leaf-bald and finally/ cut off, down and out to the roots*. This is a poem that speaks for the land with great emotional intensity yet does so without preaching or lecturing. It is both haptic and visual in its sense of the landscape and environment, whilst charging the reader to contemplate the degradation wrought by our human presence, actions and choices. In these times of climate change and incumbent natural disasters, it is crucial that we laud art that advocates for the future of nature from a compassionate and impassioned perspective, and a sense of place born of insight and grace.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

***For Chiara Vigo, The Master of Sea Silk* by Susan Taylor**

This is beautiful to read aloud, with its subtle rhythms, alliteration and assonance, and the chiming repetitions of the pantoum form, ideal for a poem about weaving. The poem has the quality of a chant as it literally *sings* the praises of the ‘last known weaver of byssus – sea silk’. Sea silk comes from a Mediterranean clam and phrases such ‘byssus is made from the soul of the sea’, which might otherwise seem overblown, become intensely meaningful and evocative in the context of Chiara Vigo’s art.

Derek Sellen

***salt lick* by Royston Tester**

In this poem, the writer pares down language to its essentials. Testing the affective possibilities of twenty-six succinct, almost brusque words, the poem relates the terrifyingly cruel experience of a young mother forced, shortly after she has given birth, to give up her child. Upon first reading *salt lick*, I could not but admire its tandem brevity and intensity – such a rare accomplishment, and one that I envy because it requires honesty and discipline in the handling of afflictive but tender content.

Among the most difficult challenges facing any writer is the question of how to address emotionally delicate and physically unsettling subject matter that could quite easily become morose and pontifical – in the hands of a less sensitive and disciplined poet, this might have happened. But Royston Tester has rewarded the reader of this concise but moving poem with the incentive to reread it again and again, each time discovering new and deep understandings and resonance.

Mara Adamitz Scrupe

***Waxwing in a Tesco Car Park* by Mark Totterdell**

This poem is about the act of seeing and comprehension or miscomprehension. What is real and what is not. There is a playful tone to it, with the opening line – ‘there’s something odd, a tad AI’ - suggesting that the narrator is witnessing a real bird that could pass for an artificial one.

The repetition of *it’s* at the start of three consecutive lines lends a rhythm to the poem which is maintained throughout. But what really stands out is the subtle imagery that bring the bird, ironically, to life. Although the clues are there, the reader could easily gloss over them as I did on first reading

‘crest merging with air like cotton candy’, ‘silk tail yellow with synthetic dye’ etc. So, the reader is presented with *AI*, synthetic dye, and, further on, *artificial eyes*. But for the reader, and the narrator, it’s a shame is that the waxwing on the screen is merely *pixeled* and not a ‘revelation’. Or as in this this wonderful line: ‘a vision to a pilgrim at a shrine’

A skilful poem indeed!

Luigi Marchini