

Judges' Reports 2018

Poetry Report by Daljit Nagra

Being invited to hear someone's revelations or considered reflections is always a moment of great privilege and responsibility. Suddenly the world feels so sensitive and serious, because the listener will be keeping that moment to themselves, or taking away an admission that might well revive them in some way. Poetry too is that frank conversation with an assumed other who cares to hear us out. Judging a poetry competition feels a communal, a social and a moral act, where we are at our best and ready to receive. I love this aspect of judging a poetry prize, that it will bring out the best in me for the way I attend to each poem, for the way I will leave the room of the poems enriched, and above all, that I will be able to share those riches with the audience of the prize.

I have hugely enjoyed judging the Bridport Prize. So many moments of revelation and insight came my way, and from all the conversations I listened to, I have selected my winners. Many good poems missed out and several of the winning poems could have been more successful; as a judge, it's difficult to know what unconscious forces have guided your selection. I have tried my best to be objective and merit the best crafted, the moments of greatest insight or artful play, that the poems felt they matched form to content with effective tension, that the poems felt the right length, while surprising me with the journey they had taken from beginning to end, and that there has been an imaginative and intellectual ambition which has carried the poem across its distance. Perhaps most of all, memorability is the key guide, that strange combination of acoustic, symbolic, phrase making and other elements that go into creating a fresh world of rumination, and that has stayed vividly me for days after first reading that poem. I hope many of the winning poems will stay vividly with me much longer than the duration of the judging period. My only sadness, that some poems could have done better but for the occasional typo which hampered my reading experience; I had to judge what was in front me. I had to assume that the poem, as it lay before me, was in the exact form as the poet had wished it.

The Highly Commended poems are 'Atonement' - a stunning poem of convinced displacement. The blanket is not really a blanket but an unborn child. Superb exploration of trauma and re-enactment. 'Burial Chambers' - the pub scene is apt for a poem about the passing of cultures, where closeness and distance vie, and where the past, though sunk under, remains alive. An exciting and hopeful poem. 'Cliff Top Trail' has superb lineation, vivid images and an ideal setting to dramatise potential hope in a poem where the speaker is in utter abandonment. The form and the sensuality cleverly offer hope against the despair. 'Curations' - the second person pronoun helps distance the shocking news as each moment of the revelation is minutely recalled. A heart-breaking and vividly sustained poem. 'In Japan' is a vivid exploration of loneliness that pushes the prose poem to exciting new possibilities. The dense form builds up the feeling of being elsewhere and not wanted. An unforgettable poem. In 'Memory (Potacari)' - the past is revisited in a testament to the dead of Srebrenica. The powerful rhetoric makes for a poignant and wise poem about loss and ritual. 'Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall' is a rhythmically propelled and powerful drama about the female body in its individual and traditional states. Politically complex and compact. 'Now and Then' is beautifully gentle in style, capturing the sensual world and how it exists and is denied through its glorious paradoxes. This is a delicate and exciting poem. 'Reversal' - the disarming simplicity and ordinary setting suit the compact yet psychologically complex memory. The pronoun 'you' is well-achieved in tight quatrains about healing and ultimately redemption. 'Trading Armadillos' is a wonderfully surprising and transformative poem that reaches from cynicism to an improbable and original image of joy. The form is a joy.

My third place poem is centred around three generations who are seated around a dinner table. The scene is familiar enough yet the poem ends up exploring East/West politics, attrition during wartime and its ongoing effects, cultural coding and their potentially destructive ramifications as presented through food. The nature imagery is precise in its melodrama yet succinct at revisiting war and how trauma is alert to the smallest indelicacies. Dinner is not simply dinner, it is an 'Act', a representation of grand narratives; the granddaughter's frustration with chillies in every dish seems to draw the grandmother back to a former conflict as she must try to defend her culture.

My second prize, 'what we learn from movies about surviving a nuclear blast', dramatizes the terrifying consequences of a nuclear explosion. The witty parallel of an old film with an actual situation that occurred earlier in the year shows desperate nurture and human incapability. The form of the poem, with its teeming line endings and line openings, enacts its own anxiety and locks us into the chamber of the language. The poem makes us feel breathless and miasmatic as it gathers momentum and brings us into a series of vivid and appalling images. We are reminded that the role of poetry is to provoke, to shock, to warn, and this poem achieves all these terms with deft authority. We are left 'crouched in the cellar or bathroom', as was the case earlier in the year, when Hawaiians were told for 38 minutes, that they were under nuclear attack.

My winning poem, 'Exhibition', is a powerful and subtle meditation on sexual dawning and flirtation between the sexes. The speaker is witnessing a scene which reminds them of their own youth and the games of bodily performance and apparent evasion. The speaker is witness to a game of witnessing. The poem increases in complexity as the screw on the syntax is turned and the final sequence is an elongated sentence that offers playfulness yet hints at darker possibilities. Words such as 'pained me' and 'shamelessness' seem to hint at some transgression, but the speaker keeps this narrative out of the poem. A highly accomplished and beautiful poem that's edged between joy and perhaps something foreboding about this watching and being watched.

Short Story Report by Monica Ali

Reading through this year's entries I thought a lot about what makes a great short story truly great. The best ones make the back of your neck tingle. They make you feel newly alive to the world. They suck you in fast, and they do it by weaving character, setting, story, voice, dialogue and whatever other elements of the craft, into a scene that makes you wonder what will happen next, what has happened before. Many of the less successful stories, though fluently written, relied too heavily on narrative summary, so that the reader was kept at a distance, relying on second hand information instead of watching the story unfold.

The opening of 'Ouroboros' succeeds in raising questions instantly in the reader's mind, creating an immediacy and urgency and desire to delve deeper into the narrator's life. *I was standing in line at a bus stop when I noticed someone had scratched, all journeys are lies, on to the lamppost I was leaning on.* In the brilliant 'Beckett in the Woods' the narrator's grandfather claims to have met Samuel Beckett crawling through the brambles. *When I asked her later why she was so angry about it, my mother refused to say much to me. 'It's all lies,' she said, filling the kettle with a bluster of water. 'It's always been the same with him.'* Appropriately enough for a story about Beckett, many of the questions raised remain unanswered, but we learn a great deal about families.

Families, relationships and marriages formed, not surprisingly, the meat of many of the entries. The best of them, like 'Four Corners', managed to make this well-trodden territory fresh. *There were three of us, all girls, all squash players, all undiscovered.* There was a trend too for use of the present tense. Too often this choice seemed random, adding nothing. Sometimes, as in 'Digging', it was skilfully deployed to build suspense and tension. Or it helped to build character, such as the drug-dealing narrator in 'Near Llandaff,' who seems effectively trapped in the present tense. The stories that stand out are diverse in almost every way but one. They favour the particular over the general. They make the reader see, and therefore *feel*, through the judicious use of precise detail. 'Black Boys' is crammed with such gorgeous particularity. In 'Crossing', when the police enter Gloria's shack, *Their eyes were out for the one-horned goat, the blood-red candles, the black needle cut from a sliver of slave bone.*

Surprisingly few stories touched on the world of social media. One that does so with brio and humour is 'Likes'. Another, written in the form of diary entries, is 'Variation of Molly', which captures so many contemporary anxieties, both cosmically large and comically small. 'Karolina' is a lesson in economy. At only 1,146 words it packs a punch and a twist, and has pathos too. 'Sadness', as with all the best sad stories, is as funny as it is dark. *King said nothing should have that look of sadness in its eyes, not a person nor an animal or even knots in a pine board, but Billgo had it.*

The winning entries are all so fully realized, such true achievements, it seems a shame to rank them in order. 'Wet Bloody Country' is the quietly magnificent tale of a young boy's weekend away with his estranged father in a caravan in Donegal. Told from the child's perspective, it is a lesson in understatement and reading between the lines. The father is brilliantly delineated without judgement ever being directly passed.

On my birthday there was a phone call from Manchester. 'I'm helping them rebuild a football stadium,' he'd said, like the job depended on him alone.

'The Heartsick Diaspora' is innovative in format and original in content. Structured as a play in three acts, along with an opening section titled *Production History/Characters* it is largely written as prose fiction although *Act Two, Scene Two* melds into a script with stage directions. The subject is the

tensions within and surrounding an 'ethnic writers group'. It's clever, multi-layered, challenging and political. It's also full of verve and wit. *'Don't use Singlish,' Phoebe says. 'It's pidgin, it makes Western readers laugh at us.'*

'The Fore Caddie' is a heartbreaking and beautiful story set in Chennai in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The style is deceptively simple, but the mastery of voice and tone and character is anything but simple to achieve. There is a wonderful, delicate balance between humour and poignancy. The author pulls off a stunning feat in this story by imbuing the narrative with both a gorgeous sense of possibility and a deep and disturbing sense of inevitability. The ending is simply another beginning that nevertheless completes the story and makes it achingly whole.

Flash Fiction Report by Monica Ali

I am in awe of anyone who can write can write decent flash fiction. It's a really tough business to create an entire story, build a world, bring a character to life in so few words. The best of the entries this year left a lingering presence, an impression on the imagination that filled far more space in the mind than on the page. They resonated long after the final line.

In 'Partial', a sweep of family history is encompassed in one single page, five generations linked by a single word. The narrator's grandmother had a partial dental bridge. A partial bridge can crack, did crack, my mother said. Easily replaced, she said, all you need is money. These final lines of the opening paragraph, so seemingly innocuous, ring in your ears when you get to the end of the story. Partial remission can't be fixed by money or anything else. Many of the entries touched on death and loss and packed some emotional heft. Others were touching and also funny. 'Courtship' is a witty, clever and elegant story that weighs in at a mere 98 words. A little miracle of brevity, it conjures a cerebral romance of correspondence, chiefly through the vehicle of a semi-colon. 'Lucky Underpants' describes a romantic encounter that goes awry because the narrator becomes distracted by his own thoughts. One thing definitely leads to another but not to the kind of climax he was originally hoping for. In the space of less than a page we get a sense of character, a sense of the way his mind works. 'Nothing happened,' says his might have-been lover, but for the reader plenty has happened, in fact.

Now for the winners, all of them terrific, all perfectly formed. 'What Real Men Wish They Dreamed' makes real use of the title, so important when words are at such a premium. We are dropped into the world of The Miner, driving his buddy to hospital after his hand has been blown off. This guy is tough. But back home, trying to sleep, trying to tug it to him like a fish on a line, he wishes to dream of his dead mother, darning a sock that's still on his foot. It's a story about masculinity, what it means to be a 'real man', what's expected, what's hidden and what is yearned for beneath the surface. The story reveals itself sparsely, guardedly, the form, character and subject matter in perfect synchronicity. In 'Nan' a granny sits with prayer beads round her knuckles, her cup cold between her fingers, killing time. The reader is at once in a fever of suspense. Rightly so, because we soon learn that her grandson is about to be kneecapped and she is to deliver him to the men who will do the deed. It's an agonising situation. She knows there's no escape and she's taken the condemned boy his favourite meal, and remembered the feathery weight and the smell of him as a small child. It's perfectly weighted and freighted, the terse lines of dialogue judged perfectly too.

'The Grand Finale' is about the wife of a magician, The Great Fantoni, unpacking his bags when he returns from a world tour. It's a comic tale that is also a kind of magic trick, a perfect marriage of form and content. There is always a danger with flash fiction of everything resting on a final 'punch line', but here that manoeuvre pays off because the ending is built up perfectly, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

Congratulations to all the winners and the highly commended entries. I take my hat off also to everyone who entered. The standard was high and making the selections was difficult, but not as difficult as crafting a brilliant piece of fiction in only 250 words.