

Judges' Reports 2012

Short Story and Flash Fiction Report

I was delighted that there were so many entrants for these prizes this year – over six thousand for the short story category and nearly two and a half thousand flash fictions. Most writers write what they like to read and the breadth and depth of the entries gave the lie to the myth – surely kept alive by publishers, for whom the form rarely makes a profit – that the short story is as defunct as antimacassars.

I was faintly aghast at the numbers too, knowing more dedicated souls than I had read through quite so many stories in order to select the ones that arrived on my doormat in Cornwall. Judgements are always subjective on these occasions and I found I had to be quite brutal. Of the entries, I set aside whatever bored or failed to surprise me and whatever I felt I had already written several times before. The stories that weren't set aside, I placed into a definite and a maybe pile, only to find that I ended with double the permitted definites. So then I had to become tougher still and discard the stories which had won through on originality but which, on a closer reading I had to admit ended limply or contained stylistic infelicities an editor would have scalped out.

Lizzy Welby's 'Jugged Hare' wasn't the only story to touch on abortion but by framing an abortion a mother is keeping secret from her family with an almost forensically detailed account of that same mother skinning, gutting and jointing a hare with which to feed her loved ones, she refreshed an all-too familiar narrative trope in a profoundly disturbing way which deftly expanded our understanding of her central character.

In 'The Armadillo', Ruth Figgess similarly demonstrates how to make a story about more than one thing at once. Her astute young heroine faces the prospect of plastic surgery to render her looks more pleasing to her lovingly fault-finding mother but simultaneously arrives at a new understanding of the state of her parents' marriage and the ambivalent purpose she has to serve within it.

In the winning story, 'Being David', Helen Barton does something ostensibly very simple yet actually extremely difficult to pull off. She leads us through an uneventful day in the life of a young man I assumed to be autistic (although, wisely, she never spells out the details of his condition). David lives with his loving but fairly hopeless mother and spends several hours in day care with other young people living with a range of syndromes and afflictions. What makes Barton's account of his day extraordinary, and funny, is her dizzyingly tight-focus evocation of his understanding of it. His obsessive counting and rearranging of letters and the tyranny of private rituals which hem in his every action and decision stayed with me for days. Fiction at its best takes the reader into other minds in a way that will transform their own and Barton does that here, resisting sentimentality or political correctness.

This year's flash fiction entries were a revelation to me, perhaps because this is a form I have never knowingly practised. I could never have predicted that their overall standard of writing, wit and originality would be higher than the short stories, but this was undoubtedly the case. The envious professional in me was left longing to know how many of the writers were indeed writing for a living, or attempting to, and how many were merely cruelly gifted dabblers... The three winners, Gregory Jackson ('Nearly New'), Arthur Wang ('Girls') and Jacky Taylor ('Number Forty Three') demonstrate that making a narrative extremely short need not involve sacrificing style, wit or emotional wallop!

Patrick Gale

Poetry Report

I like very much the Bridport Prize's way of allowing the judges to read entries anonymously. I was sent the shortlist to judge and because my assessment was entirely unclouded by the issue of who wrote what, the experience was of hearing several hundred iterations of poetry as a voice: a sound that's wider, richer and more exciting than the personality of any one writer. I'd like to thank Candy Neubert for her hard work winnowing these finalists from the complete pool of submissions, a task she performed with enthusiasm, logic and discrimination. She mentions one poem which made her laugh out loud with joy. I hope it's the one I chose as overall winner for the same reason.

There was huge variety of strategies, style, tone and voice in the poems I read. As ever, the No pile was usually easy to add to, as was the Yes. The real difficulty and anxiety for me came in the Maybe pile and its more subtle gradations: Yes/Maybe, Maybe/No, though I didn't indulge myself in a Maybe/Maybe. I came away from reading the poems, taken together, with a positive impression of the human ability to respond thoughtfully to life in all its aspects. However, feeling warm and cuddly in response to a particular insight was not enough to save a poem from the No pile if that sentiment came from a source outside of its realization in the poem itself. There was much evidence of loveliness in perception, a close attention to the world even through sorrow, but this is not the only requirement of poetry. Similarly, I enjoyed the anecdotes which formed the backbone of many of the poems but, in the end, I had to decide if they had been used in ways which made them of general, rather than personal interest. I asked myself: Is this a story that sheds light on the human condition, or is it interesting to the poet mainly because it happened to him or her?

I tested the Maybe pile for accuracy of observation. Call me a pedant, but I lose interest in poems that use lazy logic and slack details. It's hard enough to keep a reader – even a highly motivated one like me – that you don't want to give her an excuse to part company with your page. There were many more poems in the Maybe pile than in Yes and some migration between them as I re-read and digested. If I had to name one quality that separated the poems in the one from the other it was how fully bedded the experience described was in the poem itself. Was the poem itself an occasion?

'Mortality' was a deceptively simple poem – straightforwardness is, after all, one of the most cunning of styles and very tricky to pull off. The poem describes keeping terror at bay in language which isn't the least bit 'poetic', always a good sign, in my book (unless you're deploying that kind of language with intent and control). The words fill the shell of the form beautifully, with no bagginess and ends with a tightening of the metaphorical screws: 'the quarter moon swings like a scythe.' Yes it does.

In second place, I chose 'La Peregrina', the name of a pearl. This intelligent and rewarding poem tells of the jewel's formation and travels through the glamorous but dangerous worlds of royalty, empire and Hollywood. This trajectory, which ends with 'galaxies boiled dry like unwatched pans' sheds light on human vanity, greed and lust for beauty. The poem is original, memorable and, again, fits its form snugly.

'Alakazam' stood out as a winner from my first reading. Here is a poet who is confident enough to pull off a conjuring trick, with the necessary delight for the reader. The poem is a description of love but, if that sounds mushy, you're in for a series of surprises. It's like the sea and 'the white froth of Normandy lace' but it's also 'the dirty slick/ -black, thick – that clogs feathers, air; bug-eyed creatures gag on it.' We then move into the depths to 'the boom of the deep' and hideous deep-sea fish. To love is to feel ice and 'dull stones/ each one heavy as a curse.' I recognize this as the dark side of regard, it's the rabbit 'that won't be pulled out of a hat by its ears.' And then, at the end, the poet shows his or her subject escape the poem: 'Love jumps out and darts under the table.' Bravo!

Here's a poem that has the relish, technique and poem-ness that deserves the first prize this year.
Ta-da!

Gwyneth Lewis