

# **Judges' Reports 2017**

## Poetry Report by Lemn Sissay

For a judge there is nothing quite like being amongst the unpublished land. It's like being an explorer on the edge of The Amazon (a forest of poems) in search of clearings and ravines and uncharted worlds as yet unseen. And so I go in. And I find the River Climber, I find the Siren, I find the graveyard, (I find the girl asleep on the bench..... I find the BBC worker racing home.. and so many, many more. But I'll stop beating round the bush ...

Painting a sun-room an off white' reminded me of Sun in an Empty Room by Edward Hopper. I love its minimal touch. Stone' drew me down to earth and up into the connection between child and parent. In this, I enjoyed how something so innocuous can mean so much. The Ghazal is a poetic form from Persia similar to the sonnet. In 'Ghazal of Mourning' the refrain *this morning* lulled me into a sense of occasion: gentle, unsentimental and confident. 'Rough': I absolutely loved this poem. It is one of the greatest poems about childhood abuse that I've ever read. She paints the picture with an assured hand and delivers a devastating last line, which would flounder if the lines before it were weak.

The free verse madness of 'Unthinkably I Leave You' set off at a pace and didn't stop. I am unsure of what the event is in this poem that draws the protagonist home. But I love the contrast between the person writing the news and then becoming the news. I don't know what the emergency is. The poem 'Ectopic Pregnancy' opened my mouth and poured the sadness in. It was the domesticity alongside this life-altering event. Most of all it was the way a poem can hold memory. I loved the confidence of 'I am Pig'. I am Pig should be on T Shirts with a glorious picture of a PIG. It's an anarchic poem. It is the punk rocker of this selection of highly commended.

In 'Niece comes out of the attic', I was gripped by the gothic in this poem. And by what was not said. It's beautiful. Powerful. Evocative. 'Advice for Girls' is defiant and playful: It should be in every school and staff room and home across the country. 'Night walking'. Poems can be like short films. The evocative shots in this one put me right in the picture. I enjoyed how the writer captured the morning light inside two people walking home in the elation of a night out and early blossoming caution of love.

So, to my top three. In third place 'Ressurrection' I enjoyed the gothic. There's a resurgence of The Gothic Tale. So says Alan Moore. The evidence is clear in Neil Gaiman and the like. Harry Potter even. I liked how this poet painted the awakening of zombies. So it was a pleasure to find myself in an awakening graveyard without the shock or horror.

In second placer is 'River Climber'. I came across a river with a man in it. He invites me in. He tells me the river was not for crossing or sailing nor something to drink or swim but to climb! His love of nature reminds me of the Welsh writer Jay Griffiths or Robert McFarlane or the brilliant book *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd. It was a living river. He tells me we are made mostly of water. Water meets water. He awakens me inside the river. When I was a child I was told I had five senses. This is simply not true. This poem introduced me to another. The writer calls it "fluid intuition".

The winning poem is 'Siren Call'. I am drawn to a bleak coastal town. I am drawn by sound. It is like a short film. Unsentimental. Brutal even. The writer draws us to sound from the outset. I am lured into listening. Through aural sensation the picture unfolds. It has all the detail of *La Cite Des Enfants Perdus*. Listen as the writer instructs "no not the familiar sounds". The writer shakes the reader from complacency and into a Sirens Call. There's a confidence of line. I am hypnotized by The Siren Call.

We write alone not by committee. Our poems don't come with evaluation forms or boxes to mark out of ten. They don't come with a "like" button or a "retweet" button. They are defiant. They are extroverts even if the writer is an introvert. Then they fly out to the world: to books, to competitions, to music, to radio, to TV, to architecture, to Christmas carols, to family members, to lovers, to colleagues, to our selves. All poems are precious: the public ones and the private ones.

It's an honour to judge the Bridport Poetry Prize and one I accepted with a real sense of responsibility to *all* who have entered and to *each* word of *each* poem. It is a responsibility which requires honesty: Another judge may likely have chosen other poems. There. I said it. So if you are not one of the winners, or the highly commended, don't give up. *As if you would!*

### Short Story Report by Peter Hobbs

You look for signs of life, for language that has a texture, sentences that have rhythm. For writers who have thought about how each sentence will be read and felt. Usually it's obvious from the opening lines: a good beginning, the tone and flow established from the start. 'We skip along Robinson Road, out of school, light as air, Graham and Siya and me.' So begins *To Be*, and the story is already skipping. Or, from *Cooking a Wolf*: 'So I was in the park with my son, Mitchell, who's a little deaf, and these other boys – friends of his he says – are creeping up on him.' The rest of the story continues the same way, the sentences sharp and precise, perhaps even a little sinister.

Literary style operates in the sentences – it's here the work of voice is done, and where a story fails or succeeds. *Old Harbour* is dense, almost claustrophobic; the whole tale feels weather beaten, the sky low over the sea. *Girvan Blues* is contrastingly brisk and informal, though tightly-written: rich in dialect, with a wry lightness to match its easy humour.

Good writers get the weight and precision of descriptions exactly right – they shy away from vagueness. *The Best Thing* summons the world of its eight-year-old protagonist in concrete details – Tayto bags, Slush Puppies, and the 'great red pagan tongue' of the slide at Funworld – and feels all the more real and universal for it. But they avoid overwriting too, or indulging in descriptions that don't serve the story. One of the strongest commended pieces, *Grunion Running*, is so lean, all character and dialogue and events, and yet its world is always present, alive.

Stories were too often let down by dialogue, which tended to the perfunctory, or even expository. When done well – *Must Be True* is full of good dialogue – it brings pace and life and pleasure, it does the work of tone and character and narrative effortlessly. You can almost feel the pleasure of writing it. From *The Cockerel*:

'Loretta honey,' the man behind her says. 'They've been doing drugs.'

'Nothing to do with me, man,' Carrie says.

'No. No. I am not high,' I say. 'I am very, very low.'

One of the odd trends this year was the number of entries with child narrators. Perhaps there's a simplicity and clarity in a child's construction of the world that's easier to summon, or find language for. The best of them allowed the reader to feel again what it's like to be a child, gave a sense of the phenomenology of it, how their worlds are ordered and layered in meaning. And two of the most successful deal with forces that threaten to disrupt that order, such as the arrival of a group of Russian exchange students in the beautifully-judged *Subjunctive Moods*. In *Verichrome* it's the

narrator's father – his volatile anger and his actions – that cause ripples in the fabric of the world, and we feel the confusion and fear he generates.

Congratulations to all the commended stories – hopefully it's encouragement for future work. And congratulations especially to the three finalists, who were in a class of their own; any one of them would have been a worthy winner. And because they were so different from each other, and so successful on their own terms, it was hard, and inevitably unfair, to put them in any kind of order.

*Queen of the Forest* is a gem. The language is so light and clear, and the sadness and humour of it are woven into the texture of every sentence. But the author wears their great skill lightly. Everything is so well balanced. There's no showiness, only story, and it feels true; it feels like life.

*Ends*, written in the second person, was an exciting find. It buzzes with energy and ideas, combining stand-up comedy with reverse timelines and quantum physics. And more than any of the entries it has the messiness of lived life about it; it seems to rail against the neatness of the short story form even as it succeeds in it. The reader can feel both the narrator and the story searching for the language to ask – how do we live, and how does it feel when we try?

And finally there is *Esther*, technically so accomplished, but playful too in its form and its long sentences. It plays with plot more than most stories, but the work of plotting is done so slyly it is almost invisible. There are many details, but none is extraneous. It has real humanity to it, and a tremendous cumulative power, conjuring the lives of its protagonists in a handful of pages, allowing us to live beside them for years, and ensuring that the final emotional pay off – again played out over a single long sentence – is utterly devastating.

### **Flash Fiction Report by Kit de Waal**

There's nowhere to hide with flash fiction. No getting lost in excessive description, no room for indulgence, no fat. The best flash stories are like sitting down with two people midway through a conversation and having to catch up on the hoof; the longer the conversation goes on the more you learn the history, realise what went before, that she lost a child, that he a fortune, that she likes to shoplift, that he killed his wife. More often than not the real story is not in the words nor on the page but scratched underneath in invisible ink or like tears, dripped and dried on paper, leaving a faint stain. Flash fiction condenses a lifetime into a moment and some of the stories I read this year demonstrate the best of the craft.

The three Highly Commended stories, 'On the Seventy Third Day', 'Absence' and 'Sea Bite' are all great examples of how flash fiction can transport you to another world in so little space. In the spare 'Absence', about grieving parents, the bereaved mother watches the father's 'naïve' pain from a terrible distance, her own grief certain and absolute. It's a brave story with an unusual take on a recurring theme. The flash 'On the Seventy Third Day' again has an unusual setting, captives recreating meals to pass the time. The turn at the end with the jailer pulling off his hood and joining in is a wonderful moment. It's brave and original work. 'Sea Bite' is technically very accomplished, much of the story churning beneath the surface and ultimately turning on the sentence 'They played without him for a while.' I was impressed with the writer's confidence in the telling of this tale.

In third place, 'Runaway', about a hairdresser that 'doesn't do words' deals wonderfully with silence and the unsaid. There are echoes of slavery and longing and of going home. As she does her customers' hair, Pam sees, 'a one way ticket, their partings carve coastlines in the Caribbean sand.' Beautiful writing on a unique theme, beautifully realised.

Second place goes to 'Confirmation Class'. Such voice. 'They say me mam's a slack knitter.' How's that for an insult? The humour in this story is offset by the darkness, by the suspicion of child abuse all overlaid with 'God's approval.' The child's point of view is the perfect one for this type of story, well crafted and well told.

The winning flash fiction 'Buttercups' is simply told and heart breaking. It's opening sentence, 'People come' is a masterpiece of understatement. Again a grieving mother but in this flash she is in denial, waiting for solitude and silence to be again with her hidden child. I loved the deceptively light tone of this story and its assured construction. Despite bereavement being a recurring theme in many of the flash fiction stories this year, this felt original, fresh and very moving.

Congratulations to all the writers, to the winners and the Highly Commended writers, to the shortlisters and longlisters. There were many stories that so nearly made the cut, some that made me laugh out loud and others that had little flashes of brilliance.

To everyone who paid up and entered the competition but haven't seen their name on this list, thank you for sending your story in and letting me read it. There was so much good stuff, so much skill and talent. It was apparent how much time and effort had gone into these submissions and, I know from experience, how much hope we pin on our chances. It's a privilege to be allowed to read your work. Keep going. Good luck next time.