

2020 JUDGES' REPORTS



POETRY REPORT

2020

MIMI KHALVATI



It has been a real pleasure to be the judge this year for the Bridport Poetry Competition. Despite the pandemic, there was a high number of entries and I am full of admiration for those of you who have managed to continue writing, keeping poetry alive at a time when it is sorely needed.

During lockdown, while I was shielding, the shortlisted poems I read kept me company with their living presences.

I am deeply grateful to the authors for bringing the richness of their experiences into my orbit and sharing them with me. I am grateful too to the discerning shortlisting panel who sent me the poems, all of which were worthy, none of which I could pass over, though of course this made my job more difficult. So many of the poems fulfilled my expectations. But they subverted them too. There were few poems about coronavirus, but a surprising number of formal poems and a wealth of character studies, as though lockdown had invited a host of players into an empty arena to fill it with their voices.

The hardest part of the judging process was choosing the Highly Commended poems but here they are, retaining their shine after many shufflings, in no particular order. The Highly Commended poems are:

'Vee Oit': I was immediately drawn to this poem by the charm of the title and the play on languages, spellings and pronunciations. I loved it for its candour, modesty, and the smooth shifts in register from the anecdotal to the lyrical.

'The Chinese Typewriter': The conceit of this sestina, drawing from the epigraph its six repetends, each imbued with the necessary emotional freight, is inspired and results in a bold and fresh take on familiar themes.

'Jimmy' is full of empathy without sentimentality and evokes convincingly the reality of a psychiatric ward. The intricate form enacts the protagonist's stance, like a boxer on his toes – close-fisted, balled up, warding off attack.

'In the Museum of Childhood' is unusual in moving fearlessly between concrete images and abstractions, weaving its meditative power. The final statement moves me every time I read it, leaving me with a helpless silence.

'Fags and Work': Upon the modulated syntax of this poem hangs a slowly revolving series of images, marvellously detailed, of the speaker's father. The sense of gratitude is profound in this elegy and paean for him and his labours.

'Naked': Despite its difficult subject matter, this poem is written in a very relaxed vernacular, convincing in its familiarity with FND and the explosive daily life in the centre. A poem that poignantly enhances our understanding.

'Waty Watson, Railroad Engineer' is an energetic and triumphal portrait, filmic in the way scenes reel past. There is no main verb in the whole poem – as if its absence stands for Waty Watson himself, so desperately active in life. 'Travelling for the Hell of it' is a wonderfully quirky take on ageing, whose ghastly details are here observed almost lovingly with forensic exactitude. I love the deadpan tone, the mordant, mischievous wit, the mock horror ending.

'Kurt Cobain Receives a Fax from Courtney Love, Royal Hotel, Amsterdam, November 1991': At first I felt daunted by so much 'data', but then seduced by the expert handling of the narrative with its retro aura that led unexpectedly to such an endearing conclusion.

'Unfinished Knitting': I was delighted to come upon a poem that takes the aesthetic risks commonly associated with 'femininity' and overcomes them by sheer musicality, technical facility, knitting vocabulary, and pure lyric pleasure.

Finally, here are my three prize winners. 3rd prize is won by 'Dunnock in the Bird Bath'. This poem positively leaps off the page in a flurry of bird-language and activity. More experimental than the others, but not arbitrarily so, this is a delicious poem to love, celebrate and spontaneously applaud.

My 2nd prize winner is 'After Blue'. I was immediately drawn to this poem by the playfulness of the opening, its confident repetitions, then drawn in further by the voice confiding its intimacies, then still further down to its aching tenderness for a beloved. This is a mysteriously beautiful poem which spirals, as if in a vortex, down to the core and alights there.

1st Prize goes to 'Low Tide', a gorgeous lyric which comes in sixes: six-line verses covering six days of a six-year-old. Its formal aspects, finely judged rhymes, heterometric lines, graceful syntax, convey the multiplicity of sealife washed up onshore, which in turn reflects the life-cycle of childhood itself, now here, now gone forever. A poem of great sensitivity and strength.

My warmest congratulations to the prize winners, to all those highly commended and on the shortlist, and many thanks to the organisers for inviting me to judge this year's competition. It has been a hugely rewarding experience.

SHORT STORY REPORT

2020

NELL LEYSHON



To write a successful short story is a real challenge and harder than people think. There are no rules, but some things help: a clear point of view, a tight focus, an idea of how time passes within the narrative. It is like juggling as you throw a certain number of elements up into the air then you have to land them carefully and in order.

The quality of the work I read was extraordinarily high and judging them felt like a huge responsibility. I was looking for, a voice, a writer who had something to say. I found so many voices. There is nothing quite like the thrill of finding fresh phrasing and imagery. There are ten highly commended stories.

The Box is completely original. It withholds information brilliantly and forces you to read on to find out what it is in the box and what it means. The story explores gender in a unique way and the ending was a real surprise. Sandals takes the well-told theme of arranged marriage and subverts it, finding an original voice which is dark and full of humour. The way the character's real self is revealed shows a strong and defensive interior world. Okay, so yeah I had a breakdown, which is why I'm here. I was really gripped reading Milk; the texts within the story really work (not that easy to pull off) and it has real confidence. It made me think about why we continue to read a story, why we need to get to the end.

The Note is about writing and feedback, truth and delusion. It's a witty, very well-crafted story which never reveals the contents of the note (I loved that), yet creates a whole believable world with fully drawn characters. Loving Sam is also well-crafted and beautifully written, full of detail and great dialogue. She winnowed our wardrobe to the essentials, two pairs of good shoes for me - one brown, one black, five for her - which was one more than she had allowed before. The story of the two Sams - the car and the stepdad - is very moving.

The Graduation is also full of great dialogue which adds to its huge energy. It's short yet says so much and is full of wisdom and confidence. She wonders what all the striving is about, when everyone is on a collision course with death. I'd love to read a novel by this writer – the characters and settings are so vivid and have real depth.

Writing in the second person is hard to do well and can be jarring, yet there were two stories I admired which did exactly that. The writing of *The Judgment of Paris* is confident and assured, right from the first paragraph. There is a strong voice here and some fantastic imagery: Your politesse has grown over your mouth like tree bark and you're trapped inside. *Call* is a very different story. A deep emotional story of two sisters, it uses original phrasing and language. The narrator fantasises about bludgeoning her sister with the old tennis racquet and says, She bangs things up and down on the surfaces, drags storms behind her.

She Came to Stay is a wonderful story of a recently arrived immigrant family from Kolkata and their lodger who has an effect on the family. It is a great piece of story-telling and is both gripping and elegantly written with a clarity and simplicity of sentence: The pavements on Maple Drive were scattered with the first fall of yellow leaves. The final highly commended story, *That Kind of Girl*, is an experimental piece told in one sentence and begins and ends with the phrase that kind of girl. It is beautifully written and emotionally disturbing to read. An exploration of consent and early sexual experiences, it's a great marriage of content and form.

The story I chose for third prize, *What The Deal Is*, is a highly musical piece with a truly original voice. Each paragraph is one sentence and the layout and punctuation are original and add to the musicality. It tells us how human beings are treated, how human society is ordered. It felt like a microcosm of the world, especially when you realise at the end of the story that the owner never once took no black guy there. It is at once a horrible mirror on the world and a brilliant piece of writing which contains all kinds of cruel imaginings.

The second prize, *Fight, Flight, Freeze, Comply, Film (FFFCF)*, is also a wholly original piece. A story of how all the birds flew straight up and disappeared, it felt right for this time of pandemic and climate crisis. It tells of a dystopian world with no birds, yet it is written with such incredible confidence, imagery and humour. It is completely vital. At times you laugh: Cat on cat crime went up. At other times you want to cry at the thought of a world without birds, particularly after we heard them sing so loudly during quarantine.

Oh, *Hululu* is the winning story. It is both an original voice and a perfect piece of writing. It tells of a woman who has a crush for six months and is an anti-love love story. It has acerbic wit and every line feels crafted and necessary. It is written in the second person, yet its distancing feels true to the story: the coldness with which the narrator views herself is glorious and is often explained further in italics within brackets: 'I'm a terrible mother.' (You're not, you're fierce. Coarse-tongued as a pirate but every inch is love.) There are so many passages of superb writing: Your longing leaves a snail trail, an invisible viscid liquid on the bedding, the steering wheel, the rim of your wine glass. Superb work, all. What a privilege to read your words. Thank you.

FLASH FICTION REPORT

2020

NELL LEYSHON



It's a great lesson to see how much can be expressed in 250 words or less, and reminds us economy can be a wonderful thing as it allows a story to blossom in the reader's mind. I read stories where whole worlds were created, stories which illuminated part of history, stories which made serious points, and stories which were light and fun.

There are three highly commended stories: *The One About the Hole in the Front Garden* filled me with warmth and wonder and sent me back into my own childhood memories.

The colours are beautiful and the last image of the children circling the hole sucking on orange ice pops is so vivid and real.

*Bring and Buy is confident and draws you in to a chain of events which fill you with horror. The stakes get higher and higher and we are left devastated, questioning the everyday exchange of money for goods. *On a Supermarket Toilet Floor* plays with one rule of short fiction extremely well, proving that rules are there to be broken. It breaks the point of view and switches from the girl who has harmed herself to the man who saves her. It is brave and bold and incredibly successful.*

*The worst thing about reading these stories was having to decide on a top three. It becomes about what works, but also what touches you as a reader, what you respond to. The third prize is for *Fabulous at Fifty* which gets better the more you read it. It is about an outsider, about the assumptions people make when they meet you, and about the massive backstory some people carry. The loaded line, *I left what I knew behind* reveals so little and yet so much. The story is full of controlled anger.*

The second prize, *Tamed*, grows in importance as you re-read it. The first part is a young woman in control; as the story enters the second half, we see that her story about her wild thing has been stolen from her. She has moved from being the subject of the story to the object. In the telling of the story, it feels as though the narrator takes the power back: it is hers to tell again.

I never doubted which story would get the first prize. *Mum Died* is odd, original, and you can't quite pin it down. What does it mean to die over and over? She died several times in Dad's Ford Anglia when he was teaching her to drive. And again: She died in those shoes which were the wrong colour on my wedding day. And again: She died with the arrival of each grandchild.

There is a whole life in here and we see the highs and lows as the list grows of the times her mum died. And then the story transitions at the end from past tense to present tense and concludes with extraordinary elegance. But more recently she has used it all up, her skill in dying. I have read it so many times and it keeps on growing and blossoming in my mind.

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS AWARD FOR A FIRST NOVEL

2020

EMMA HEALEY



What a year to judge a writing competition! A deadly virus, a global pandemic, world-wide protests, economic meltdown and wildfires. And I haven't even mentioned Brexit yet.

Maybe this accounts for the dark themes in the shortlisted entries. They featured characters whose lives were being turned upside down, characters who were losing their homes, friends, or sense of self, and who were looking for purpose, and struggling with loneliness.

The last theme is especially fitting considering that this year the judges couldn't meet in person, and that our conversation took place on Zoom (of course). I was wearing pyjama bottoms, we all got a good look at one of the judge's cartoon-animal-patterned curtains, and our soundtrack was a curious dog.

That didn't hold up proceedings, though. We had a lively discussion and talked about where we thought the novels would go after the thirty-thousand word mark, what was at stake in the stories, how true the characters' situations felt and whether the books delivered on the emotional promise and the bigger themes they were attempting to address.

Three of the entries were Highly Commended.

Mengo Baby has an intriguing premise. Isabel's search for meaning after her mother's death and the revelation that she has family she's never met and a past she knew nothing about promised a real adventure. We were all eager to explore the history and significance of the Indian population of Uganda, and the extract was full of lovely characterisation—we particularly enjoyed meeting Isabel's aunties.

Dog won the judges hearts with its touching depiction of a boy trying to pick his way through a bewildering and dangerous world. When he finds a greyhound on a local beach, and decides to keep it, he inadvertently makes a powerful enemy—his only ally a takeaway delivery driver with an anarchist streak. The dialogue was especially funny and clever, and the relationship between the two central characters uneasy and interesting. All the judges said we were keen to see what the author would write next.

The Silence Project was the most overtly political entry, grappling with mass protest movements and environmental activism as well as the rocky relationship between a mother and daughter. Emilia's mother has led twenty-one thousand women in a mass suicide pact, and has left her daughter with a collection of notebooks and a legacy of silence. Now Emilia must sift through the private records and to find out who her mother really was. The extract juxtaposes an archivist structure with a coming of age story and the first shocking scene sets up a book that simmers with violence.

Our Runner Up was *The Cocklers*. A polished and well-composed entry about two very different protagonists. Harold and Su Lyn are both living in a northern English town but they'd hardly recognise it as the same place. One is angry at the way the world and his status has changed, the other is desperately trying to survive. It's a beautifully crafted story, not tricky or showy, but really absorbing. All the judges loved Harold and felt he was someone we might meet on the street, and his conversations with his neighbour, Angela, created some great moments of humour and humanity. Resourceful and brave Su Lyn is someone you can't help rooting for. We wanted to know what would happen to these characters, and where the following chapters would take them.

Ultimately, we chose *Helen and the Fires* as our winner. The entry was ambitious in its scope, but sharp in its detail, full of surprises, beautiful observation and insights into the nature of storytelling. The writing is extremely stylish and was very much admired by all the judges. The protagonist, Helen, has decided to quit her job to write, but finds herself in the middle of an uncanny investigation into the self-immolation of three seemingly unconnected people. There is a sinister operator, an army of followers, lost relationships and strange clues, and our protagonist moves through the world unsure of what she's seeing, unsure even of herself. It felt like a book for our time.

WINNERS 2020

POETRY WINNERS JUDGE | MIMI KHALVATI

First

Low Tide

Michael Lavers, Provo, Utah, USA

Second

After Blue

Luke Allan, Ashbourne, Derbyshire

Third

Dunnock in the Bird Bath

Rowland Molony, Beer, Devon



Highly Commended (alphabetical by title)

Fags and Work

In the Museum of Childhood

Jimmy

Kurt Cobain receives a fax from
Courtney Love, Royal Hotel,
Amsterdam, November 1991

Naked

The Chinese Typewriter

Travelling for the Hell of it

Unfinished Knitting

Veet Oit

Waty Watson, railroad engineer

Mario Petrucci, Enfield Town, London

Maya Popa, New York, USA

Beverley Nadin, Sheffield

Jonathan Edwards, Crosskeys, Gwent

Julie-ann Rowell, Totnes, Devon

John O'Donoghue, Brighton

Karen Green, London

Di Slaney, Bilsthorpe, Nottinghamshire

John Freeman, Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan

Justin Hunt, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

SHORT STORY WINNERS

JUDGE | NELL LEYSHON

First

Oh, Hululu

Debra Waters, London

Second

Fight, Flight, Freeze, Comply, Film (FFFCF)

Cara George, London

Third

What The Deal Is

Dafydd Mills Daniel, Huddersfield



Highly Commended (alphabetical by title)

Call

Rachael Fulton, Castle Douglas

Loving Sam

David Alexander McFarland, Rock Island, IL, USA

Milk

Laurane Marchive, London

Sandals

Nida Manzoor, London

She Came to Stay

Erika Banerji, London

That Kind of Girl

Elizabeth Fremantle, London

The Box

Alistair Daniel, Liverpool

The Graduation

Sarah Harte, Dublin, Ireland

The Judgment of Paris

Rachel Sloan, Dunton Green, Kent

The Note

Alexander Dawes, Wellingborough, Northants

FLASH FICTION WINNERS

JUDGE I NELL LEYSHON

First

Mum died

Rowena Warwick, Thame, Oxon

Second

Tamed

Gaynor Jones, Manchester

Third

Fabulous at fifty

Olga Moroni, Newtonhill, Aberdeenshire



Highly Commended (alphabetical by title)

Bring and buy

Lydia Clark, Ferndown, Dorset

On a supermarket toilet floor

Richard Smith, Newcastle-under-Lyme

The one about the hole in the front garden

Nicola Shilcock, London

THE DORSET PRIZE

Presented to the highest placed writer from Dorset in the competition each year.

Sponsored by The Book Shop, South Street, Bridport, Dorset DT6 3NQ

Bring and Buy (flash fiction)

Lydia Clark, Ferndown, Dorset

YOUNG WRITER AWARD

The Young Writer Award is given to the highest placed writer aged 16 to 25.

Bring and Buy (flash fiction)

Lydia Clark, Ferndown, Dorset
Age 23

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS AWARD FOR A FIRST NOVEL

JUDGE | EMMA HEALEY

First

Helen and the Fires

Jospeh Pierson, London

Runner-up

The Cocklers

Julia Rampen, Liverpool

Highly Commended

Dog

Rob Perry, Bakewell, Derbyshire

Mengo baby

Tatum Anderson, London

The Silence Project

Carole Hailey, Newport

Longlisted (alphabetical by title)

Beyond Bounds

Alan MacGlas, Glasgow

Burned

Peter Lewenstein, London

Fifty Minutes

Carla Jenkins, Exeter, Devon

Gaslighters

Mel Fraser, Poole, Dorset

Lilies of the Valley

Jeff Adams, Freshbrook, Swindon

Mediaworld

Michael Gallacher, Glasgow

Pegwell Bay

Spencer Butler, Bridport, Dorset

Sins of the Fathers

Gordon Scott, Belfast, Down

Six Days in Kashgar

Maurice McBride, Newbury, Berkshire

The Girl with the Green Eyes

Jenny Wonnacott, Wokingham, Berkshire

The Green Indian Problem

Jack Leaf Willetts, Bedwas, Caerphilly

The Improbable Case of the Being in the Robot

Jessica Harneyford, Bristol

The Long Gestation of Madame Foo Foo

Tracy Maylath, London

The Recollective

Michelle Shinn, Sale, Manchester

The Worry List

Margaret Jennings, Waterlooville, Hants