

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Agenda Poetry Competition: comments by Patricia McCarthy

Results

First Prize: £1,000

Kim Lasky, The Bed that is a Tree

Second Prize: £200

Sharon Black, Palomas

Third Prize: £100

Claudia Jessop, Marionette Dream

Runners-up:

Abegail Morley, Wasps

Judith Taylor, Afterlife

Will Johnson, a devotion

Anna Wigley, Dear John

Jane Lovell, The Prayer of St. Simon

Congratulations to the winners and runners-up. It was a tough competition. A line from a poem by Geoffrey Hill comes to mind: 'I would compose my voice'. Each of the winners and runners-up certainly do 'compose' their own unique voices and this is what makes their poems memorable.

John F Deane, in his enlightening book, *In Dogged Loyalty: The Religion of Poetry: The Poetry of Religion* (the columba press, 2006), states:

If poetry is reduced to serving the needs of amusement, the loss to the human spirit is immense. Poetry pushes experiences that are inaccessible to rational disquisition; it works to lift the rationalist into the shocking position of dealing with things that go bump beyond the thin partition of human reasoning.

The poems chosen here all exert this special 'lift'. They also comply with

John F. Deane's definition of poetry as 'an instrument of disorder, but of a disorder that urges towards a finer, more humanity-serving, order'. Like all real poets, they aim for what Tom Paulin calls the creation of 'unhurried space for the unaccompanied human voice' (*The Secret Life of Poems, A Poetry Primer*, Faber and Faber, 2008).

Over a thousand poems were read carefully. Many were kept for special commendation, and notes written upon them to be sent back to the authors. Some poems were earmarked for future issues of *Agenda*, even though they were not the winners of the competition. It was interesting when all the poems were put back with their owners that the highlighted poems, though anonymous of course when read, nearly all belonged to familiar names that had appeared before in *Agenda*. There were many surprises and new poets to note, and some very accomplished poems, with assured, authentic voices that do deserve to get into print. It was felt, however, that the winning poems, and those of the runners-up (all a very close shave), had the edge over the rest. They seemed to have been pushed out of their writers, as if they had to be written. It was interesting to note, too, that by chance the three winning poets and the five runners-up are all published poets, and all women, with one exception. Also there was a good spread, with Scotland, Wales and England being represented in the prizes (not Ireland for once!).

A clutch of individual poems that were entered in the competition and link to the 'keening' theme of this issue have been chosen to be featured in the online supplement in tandem with this issue (along with paintings): www.agendapoetry.co.uk.

The worst entries were sentimental in a soppy way, used pat rhymes that bossed their authors, and archaisms such as 'thee', 'o'er', 'twixt', trying too hard to be 'poetic'. Others were like mere diary entries, with no interesting use of language and no music.

Kim Lasky's winning poem was picked out as the first prize-winner because of its potent mix of original, musical use of language, its clever distilling of the myth into a moving contemporary piece, with universal application, and because it mesmerised on the page and read like a spell.

Kim has a doctorate in Creative Writing and teaches at Sussex University and in various community settings. With the support of an Arts Council award, she is currently working on a collection of poems inspired by subjects as diverse as the theory of relativity and Glen Miller's *In the Mood*. Her work has appeared in various publications in the UK and US, and the pamphlet *What it Means to Fall* was published by Tall Lighthouse Press. Three sonnets by Kim, 'Kalypso' I, II, III, appeared in the 'Poems on Water' issue of *Agenda*, Vol 42, No 1, in 2006.

She says of her winning poem: ‘I’ve long been fascinated by the *Odyssey*, not least because of the roles in the epic played by women who often act as the driving force behind events. Penelope’s faithfulness to Odysseus and her cunning djin stalling the suitors by appearing to be weaving a shroud, which she unpicks each night, is often talked of by others but she speaks little herself. This poem imagines her perspective – one that might be more complicated than is usually told. The lament is an ancient Greek *threnos*, which would have been sung by mourners, interesting to me for its suggestion of the wire in the loom’s reed and the night-time unravelling of Penelope’s story.’

Sharon Black’s ‘Palomas’ was a very close contender. It was marked out because it is such a successful public poem, and public poems are very hard to pull off. Again, this had an authentic ring, very movingly used Victor Zamora, the Chilean miner-poet for its persona, and conveyed brilliantly and imaginatively the plight of the trapped miners. The use of Spanish words and phrases in places made it all the more real.

Sharon, 42, is originally from Glasgow but now lives in the remote Cévennes mountains of southern France with her husband and their two young children. In her past life she worked as a journalist and as an English teacher in Japan and France. In France she runs a small retreat and organises creative writing holidays (www.abricreativewriting.com). Her poetry has been published in several anthologies and journals including *Msexia*, *Envoi*, *Orbis*, *The Interpreter’s House*. She won The Frogmore Prize, 2011, The New Writer competition 2010 for Best Poetry Collection and Envoi International Poetry Prize 2009. Her first poetry collection, *To Know Bedrock*, will be published by Pindrop Press later this year (www.sharonblack.co.uk).

Claudia Jessop’s ‘Marionette Dream’ is a haunting lament about a loved person who has left. It cleverly uses the extended metaphor of the marionette, in a dream, in the first half. The second half is back in the harsh reality of coping with the loss of the person. As the poem is honed down to two last lines of single words, the emptiness that is emphasised echoes on after the poem’s end.

Claudia has published poems in a number of magazines, and has been shortlisted in several competitions. Her first collection, *This is the Woman Who*, was published by Cinnamon Press in 2009. She lives in Hackney, where she has worked as an oral historian on local projects.

She says of her winning poem: ‘It is a poem I had wrestled with for a long time and had nearly given up on several times, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to abandon it, so it is really gratifying to feel that it had finally come together!’

The runners-up all wrote very moving, well-crafted poems in their own distinct voices that well deserved prizes, and could well have been in the top three. For the final choice, the poems were read aloud and chosen for their oral power as well, of course, for their authority on the page.

Abegail Morley is guest poetry editor at *The New Writer*. Her collection, *How to Pour Madness into a Teacup* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize Best First Collection; the title poem was previously nominated for the Best Single Poem. She was nominated for the London Best New Poet Award 2010 and has won or been placed in a number of competitions. Her work appears in a wide range of journals, including *The Financial Times* and *The Spectator*. Her work has also been widely anthologised, including in *Did I Tell You? 131 Poems for Children in Need* (2010). She lives in Cranbrook, Kent and teaches in Benenden School.

Judith Taylor comes from Perthshire and is now based in Aberdeen, where she works in IT. Her poetry has appeared in a number of magazines. Her first chapbook collection, *Earthlight*, was published by Koo Press (2006), and her second, *Local Colour*, by Calder Wood Press (2010). She has appeared at Shore Poets, StAnza, and at the Durham Book Festival, and is currently Managing Editor of *Pushing Out the Boat* magazine.

Will Johnson lives and works in Cardiff where he teaches Sanskrit and Indian religions at Cardiff University. Among his academic publications is a verse translation of Kalidasa's play, *The Recognition of Sakuntala* for Oxford World Classics. Now in his fifties, he started writing about ten years ago, and has previously published in magazines such as *Poetry Wales*, *Magma*, and *Envoi*.

Anna Wigley lives in Cardiff where she was born in 1962. She studied for a PhD on the novels of Iris Murdoch, then began publishing poetry and stories in the 1990s. She is now a freelance writer, having published four books with Gomer Press – three volumes of poetry and a collection of short stories. *The Bird Hospital* came out in 2002, followed by *Footprints* in 2004, *Dúrer's Hare* in 2005, then *Waking in Winter* in 2009.

Jane Lovell lives in Rugby, Warwickshire and teaches at a nearby independent school. Her poems, which have been published in many journals such as *Poetry Wales*, *The New Welsh Review*, *Envoi* and *Myslexia* focus on man's relationship with nature. Threads of folklore and science run through her work.

Kim Lasky

The Bed that is a Tree

... and as she mourns him the tears run down from her eyes, since this is the right way for a wife when her husband is far and perished.

The Odyssey Book XIV

Naked, I am without a sheet to wind me.

Even vacant sleep won't shroud me tonight;
so exposed, I notice the blood thinning
in my corpse-veins, hear the shrinking of skin,
see bare limbs decompose in the darkness.

Lost, a tragedy without a body.
Scraps of lament *my love I loved you well*
distract me in this bed that is a tree
where we should lie together *my love*

I kept you well (forgive my wanton grief)
like musk in the box and wire in the reed
in this bed that is a tree, where night falls
and things are not as they seem.

When night falls, the sea is a distant death.
Your bones roll in the wash of the breakers
and I hold the living near to me, saved.
My love I kept you well; this bed, this tree.

Easing wanton grief, they come to caress
my dreamless breast, but you come to me too;
the listing hull of a driftwood ship.
My love I loved you well; this tree, this bed.

So much done in darkness, unsaid. Night work
scorns the loom's reed, wires that would keep threads
apart are sidestepped. We come together
barbed in intimacy, secrets well-kept.

I look for you in them, my love, don't know
what they see in me. Aggrieved, perhaps
talons and beaks, the sharp flaunted freedom
of a woman always dreaming an eagle.

Lamenting: *like musk in the box, and wire.*

Sharon Black

Palomas

He ekes words from the colour of the soil,
from the reek of sixty days of urine, shit and sweat,
from his knowledge of each man's breath, the tension
at the earth's heart.

Written by the alchemy of rigged truck batteries
he tucks his letters, gently as eggs,
into the abdomens of white *palomas*:
news to hatch in his family's hands.

He tells how he's forgotten blue –
the wink of *el Salar de Llamara*;
the muscled finch of swordfish;
a lone star, fading;

how he knows morning only from his wrist-watch,
from the 6am sudden stringed fluorescence,
from his daily ration
of half-a-spoon of tuna, one biscuit, a mouthful of milk.

He holds his notebook upside down
and lets the pages fall open like wings:
a pair for every man down here,
he must leave not one sheet empty.

Note: On 5 August 2010, 33 miners were trapped in the San José mine in Northern Chile. They survived for 69 days before being brought to the surface. Victor Zamora, a mechanic, sent up poems for his wife in plastic capsules nicknamed *palomas* ('doves'). The Chilean flag is known as *la Estrella Solitaria* ('the lone star').

Claudia Jessop

Marionette Dream

In a nightmare you appear
in the form of a puppet.

Straining to stand, tremble-tense on strings
held from above, head nodding to the side,
wooden feet and hands extend and twitch.

Someone has drilled holes
in sockets and joints, fed filaments through
to fistfuls of T-crossed slats,
to animate you
from above.

You slump and drape like a drunkard,
quiver to bobbing attention.
Your limbs clink, there's a carved smile
and carved stare, but I know it's you.

Then waking up, I see
your things still on your table.
Your writing things, loose leaves and spiral bindings,
propelling nibs,

and all the little faces
of watches, of lenses
of glasses, the circles you have left
of numbers,
and of light's gradations.

These inanimate things record you, I remember
you were not wooden, or hinged, or strung.
They let you take shape, breathing,
touched and touching,

four-chambered,
two-footed,
pulsing,
leaving.

Abegail Morley

Wasps

You left as I was washing my wounds with vinegar,
skin stinging, stuck full of pheromone –

it attracts violence you know, pheromone,
it yells to others *hit her, hit her, hit her.*

My eyes slip in their own liquid like wasps
skidding on sweetness in a jam jar trap.

By now you're 50 miles away at the Dartford Tunnel
thrumming your way through, while here my skull's stuffed

with wasps bashing their wings, wedged between
bone and skin. Soon their humming stops.

I see them sink in the syrup, their legs struggling,
compound eyes flicking mosaics, ocelli fuzzy,

out of focus. We look at each other for the first time:
my irises saffron, flaxen – sticky with sleep.

They drown as I tell them *he can't come back.*

Judith Taylor

Afterlife

Imagine this:
how Orpheus faked his own death
to be free of words, free of line, free
of the obligation
to have meanings or to dream of them
and came back

as a painter. Imagine
how attentively he grinds the colours, each one
uniquely indescribable.
How he hardly dares to whisper
even their names
for fear these words, too, betray him.

How he primes the ground.
How he loads the brush for the first touch
so tenderly, you imagine;
or with stuttering hands, rapacious
to begin again; and paints

– what?
The dark lights he followed
under ground, and sees in his sleep yet?
The red and purple splatter of
beasts' viscera and old bones
he gave to wall-eyed madness?

Or the white sky
the yellow fields
the grey road in front of him

and the trees
that frame them, stark with angles,
shimmering with their own life.
Silver and brown and gold
and green and free of the obligation
to dance to anyone's song.

Will Johnson

a devotion

when I saw her at Jaipur
while the tyrant was napping
her feet barely shuffled the dust
it was like the end of a brush stroke
lifted in secret or a promise
still poised to go out

it was there that she made
me her scribe of ill omen
take what you need
from each trailed inflection
each knot and black feint
of my vagabond art

I fetched and refashioned
but her heart seemed to harden
from which they inferred
that before it was over
she'd banish my gaze
my licensed devotion
to the scullion end
of this desert house
that she'd die with my name
uncrushed in her mouth

they 'inferred' but were clueless
that rabble of mlecchas
who'd never seen mudras
distempered by moonlight
who were nowhere near Jaipur
when the tyrant was napping
the brush stroke ending
the future still wading out

and who knew nothing at all
of how I survived her
or how I'm survived by her art

Note: mlecchas – a Sanskrit term for 'barbarians' *mudras* – hand gestures

Anna Wigley

Dear John

Like a shipwrecked sailor you arrived that evening –
trembling in a sheen of sweat,
your rank shirt gaping to the waist.

We thought you were glad to be rescued
from the rotting life-raft of your home,
from the pee-soaked mattress and cruel floors
that punished you so hard for falling.

How could we know
that for the next three hundred days a single thought
would shake the shrivelled forest of your mind:
*'I must go now, it's getting late,
and this is not where I belong.'*

We locked you in a luxury cell
with rich food and clean linen,
with Sky TV and the symphonies of Brahms.
We told you it was right, we told you it was kind.

But daily, when you woke,
a stranger in a strange land,
you wanted only to return to that place
where everything was old and much-handled.

'I'm phoning the Police,' you told me once;
and who can blame you. I'd have called them myself
if I'd thought they could have helped –

helped you populate once more
that wrecked woodland in your head,
where only the oldest ashes and oaks remained.

Jane Lovell

The Prayer of St. Simon

I still smell the dust from the straw,
hear the squall of a broken cat hitting the feeder,
feel the crowd-roar slide away
as I thunder to the end of the gallops.

To be desecrated for my fame,
I had not imagined:
hooves severed and removed from below the knuckle,
hide slit with a steel blade, slipped off with bright knives
to be salted, scraped of skin and fat,
and reconstructed.

Here am I, encased upon a wall,
complete with creases, tufts,
the squiggle of a vein upon my lip,
ears angled to suggest high spirits,
blind.

My skeleton displayed for all to see
(arranged mid-gallop)
is now removed from view, dismantled to be stored,
ribs strung like fencing,
vertebrae aligned and numbered.

Without hooves, my legs taper like spines.
If I had my eyes, I would walk away on these spines,
skull soft wrapped like a macabre bride, grinning.

I would canter on my spines.
I would charge!
I would scatter the living like pigeons before a fox and climb the wind
with the sun slanting through my ribs,
striping the pitted turf,
flashing over the upturned faces of spectators,
streaming like silk through my bones.

Note:

St. Simon, the race horse, died from an apparent heart attack on April 2, 1908 shortly after his morning exercise at the age of 27. His hide was preserved and for some time was on display in a vertical wood and glass case in the entrance hall at Welbeck. His skeleton was given to the British Museum of Natural History at South Kensington, London, although it is no longer on display. A gold mounted hoof is on display at the Jockey Club in Newmarket, and another pair is in the Racing Museum at York.