

Poetry Judge's Report

BEYOND THE VERNAL EQUINOX

Vernal equinox, two moments in the year when the Sun is exactly above the Equator and day and night are of equal length; also, either of the two points in the sky where the ecliptic (the Sun's annual pathway) and the celestial equator intersect.

Before anything else I must express two important points:

Firstly, such creative opportunities like the Vernal Equinox poetry competition could not happen without the unassuming yet passionate enthusiasm and efficient administration of dedicated people such as Anne Clarke. Put simply you wouldn't have a competition and I would not have had the seamless and gorgeous connection with some many outstanding poems. On behalf of the contributing poets and myself - Anne, thank you.

Secondly, the competition is nothing without the poets plucking up courage to expose their words to the world. Thank you to everyone of you. As a poet myself, I know it's not easy.

Prior to the Competition, Anne asked me for a few words of what I was looking for in the poems. This is what I said -

All poems are good in the sense that anyone who has engaged in the struggle between their inner thoughts and the blank page in front of them deserves my respect. To release your thoughts into that white void, to bridge the gap between pen and page with words in a semblance of order deserves an award but, and there's always that but.

I could mention someone's meat and someone else's poison and waffle on about rhyme and meter, imagery, word choice, economy of language and ask you to sit up straight, don't pass notes under the desk and eat your greens but the most important of Buts are: be true to yourself, draw from your own life experience and be proud of your craft for that is what good poetry will always look and feel like to me - the words of a person who has committed to the white void with honesty, care, pride and respect for the craft. And if you can slap me on my forehead with a beizer of a poem that knocks me off my feet then take the rest of the day off.

And I wasn't to be disappointed – all two hundred and fourteen of them arrived via Anne and everything I had hoped for in my words before the Competition landed on my lap.

Not that I'm looking for sympathy because I've had hours of pleasure reading the poems but two hundred and fourteen poems is a lot for an individual to read whilst at the same time to do two necessary things: ensure an equal measure of critical assessment whilst not forgetting the craft and courage of every one of the contributors and secondly I was still spinning the many plates of my own creative adventures. It was necessary and fair to all involved that I find space to respect both.

To do that and to achieve the spirit of consistency in my judgements, I determined to read all of the poems in my Thinking Shed, a purpose built space at the bottom of the garden where I'm lucky to be able to retreat and work. I strove for consistency and sat in the same chair whilst listening to the same music - Dvorak's Tone Poems if you're interested in the detail and mostly I would read them first thing in the morning between 7 and 9 with a gallon of coffee, and a blackbird on the roof as my sole/soul companion.

I read all of the poems at least three times and reluctantly discarded too many until I had a long list of thirty. This was an incredibly difficult task and indeed I put the whole adventure to one side for a few days to ensure I was not missing their drive and aim before I revisited this long list decision with a coffee reload and the cushions in the Shed freshly plumped.

The Long List was then printed off. Each poem given its own space on its own fresh white page to breathe, to be appreciated anew. I hope you'll forgive me the fact that I hadn't printed off all of the entries but honestly I was doing my bit for the planet and of course selfishly, the long list of thirty gave me a personal one-off collection of anonymous poetry.

I will of course find out the identities of the ones chosen to be further awarded as the top three but in some way the identity of the poet doesn't matter. That said, I will be delighted for each and every one of them, congratulate every one of them but also humbly apologise to all the poets whose work I have discarded.

It also raises that age old question of how much knowing the identity of the poet whose work you're about to read influences your approach, your perception of the piece and not just as a judge of a competition. That's a given but in the normal circumstances of 'pleasure' reading perhaps at times it exposes our guilt edged snobbery of praising the established poet without questioning whether the poem is not so much literally good or bad but fundamentally whether you really like the poem or not. But that's a debate for another day. For now with Dvorak on a never ending loop and Colombia increasingly nervous of coffee shortages, I sat with my Vernal Equinox (Long List) pamphlet and immersed myself in the daunting task of narrowing the list down even further.

The range of subject, style and structure across all of the poems was wonderfully enriching and satisfyingly challenging. It came as no surprise that the extraordinary events and the impact of this never ending bourach that we all continue to endure featured either as the subject of poems or in some way clearly influenced the writing and by and large was delivered successfully.

It was also intriguing to find what I believe was a positive counter reaction to the trials and tribulations of this pandemic on some poet's creative process and choice of subject matter. Perhaps that was to be expected across two hundred and fourteen poems but I found more than a fair share of poems reflecting memories of parents, happy places and the precious bond with our natural surroundings and the responsibility for it which we all share. If that's an emerging approach then long may it continue to be relevant.

The coffee was running low, Dvorak was wearing thin and the deadline was creeping towards me. I wouldn't feel rushed but the need to whittle down the choice to a short list and from that 'winners' was all part of the end game – pleasing a few and disappointing many. Please don't hate me. It's never personal.

So I drew up a short list of sixteen. And that was tough enough. I then took the sixteen around with me. They were read in the open air, in the sand dunes below the machair with only the brutal judgement of gulls assistance, half way up a mountain just above the midge line. They were read sober and with a few drams. They were read out loud and even read to me by an impartial pal with and without drams and in the end I have chosen three because *Them's The Rules*. I have deliberately not included a detailed critique of the winners or indeed any of the poems. I don't think it's necessary. All of them in some way

met the criteria I had set in my introductory remarks to the Competition. All of them are worthy 'winners'.

Congratulations to the poets I have chosen and again I'm genuinely sorry for the poets I haven't chosen. It's not personal. Well, actually it is personal. They are the ones that resonated with me in the early morning still of my Thinking Shed, on the sunset machair or the midge free hillside.

My Top Three

3rd – Kate Young Summits and Spires

2nd – Glen Wilson – Untamed

1st – Niki Brennan – Chimera

The remaining thirteen have all been commended.

If you don't agree with me then blame Dvorak, blame the Colombian coffee producers, blame the blackbird on my Shed roof but most importantly don't blame yourself. Respond to my error of judgement by writing more brilliant poetry. The most important judge of your work is yourself. Nothing else matters.

I'm off to write poetry. Judge me if you will.

All the best,

Jim Mackintosh

Makar of the Federation of Writers Scotland

(Retired Competition Judge)