

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Comments on Adult Poetry Section

Michel Faber, Lead Judge

My co-judges for the poetry section were Anita Murray and Rhoda Dunbar, and I thank them both for their help.

We begin with the two Commended poems.

'A Son Of Saint Eligius' is inspired by the genealogical search for ancestors.

It begins:

*I found you 'ploughman' –
four steps back in the family tree.*

St Eligius is the patron saint of goldsmiths and other metalworkers. But he is also the patron saint of horses and those who work with them. The poem delicately touches on the goldsmith angle when it refers to "*leaves metalled to the trees*" but mainly it celebrates the toil of tending horses and the land.

Having found her ploughman ancestor, the poet recognises how mythically exotic he seems to us now. Often, finding out who we're descended from allows us to feel a sense of connection and continuity, as if we ourselves can travel back in time and see ourselves in different clothes. But the poet here respectfully acknowledges how alien the world of her ploughman forefather is, a world whose rhythms arise from seasons and ancient wheat-harvesting festivals like Lammas and Martinmas. We commend 'A Son Of Saint Eligius' by Lynn Valentine.

Our other Commended poem, 'The Dead Mole', tenderly and deftly illuminates the moment of being challenged, for the first time, to understand what death is.

*The small child studies
the mousie back feet, not-mouse tail and
stumpy front feet tipped by little claws,
its face asleep.*

The child just can't grasp what's happened to this inexplicably immobile fellow animal. And the well-meaning wisecrack by the farmer, "*Enough of these and the molecatcher would have a waistcoat*", doesn't help: "*explaining, but not answering.*" We commend 'The Dead Mole' by A.F. Paterson, who can't be with us today.

If the Neil Gunn award structure could've stretched to a fourth prize or an equal third, we would have given it to this next poem, which impressed us all equally. 'Still' is about a woman getting on a train, "*crossing the dark widowed plains*", travelling away from her relationship with a man who ran a distillery. It's an accomplished poem technically. Disturbing impressions of the husband's cruelty are mixed in with the rhythm of the train and the processes of making brandy.

And then there's this stanza:

*Leaning her head on the glass,
in the white of the sky she unwinds them:
silences coiled up and folded away.
Her lips never move, the scars on her throat keep her quiet,*

*but she murmurs it deep in her chest,
the speech which will come from the distance,
the croak of the swallows, somewhere still alive.*

See how hard the word 'swallow' works here – the woman's scarred throat, inhibiting her ability to swallow or speak without croaking; the birds desperate for release. All this imagery – clever but never show-offy – ferments into that well-matured moment when the woman finally allows herself to admit that the man who abused her for so many years was wrong, wrong, wrong.

Highly Commended: 'Still' by Lucy Duggan, who's come all the way from Germany to be with us this afternoon.

Now for the three winners.

Third prize goes to a mysterious, allusive poem about the end of war and the return of peace. Or is it? There are no human actors here, only "*moonlight splashing/on the washing*", shadows on the hills, air hovering over grass.

*Silence claims the river
No one is at home tonight
but the kettle is singing.
In a cupboard drawer
three mice are dancing.*

In theory, this vision of an empty home infested with mice should be an eerie, sad one, and the fireflies signalling tree to tree could be just inviting nature to reclaim a place whose inhabitants will never return – hence the expectation that by next year, the grass will be "*higher than houses*".

But what a poem appears to say and what it conveys on a deeper level can be two different things, and this poem's luminous language and enchanting sensibility make it a strangely uplifting and life-affirming experience. Congratulations to third prize winner: 'Back Door' by Ian McDonough.

Our second prize winner, Claire Williamson, couldn't be here with us today, but she sent us a lovely letter.

"When I read the Neil Gunn quotation, 'Knowledge is high in the head, but the salmon of wisdom swims deep', my poem 'My Mother and Brother Sit with Me as Horses' immediately came to mind.

This poem is about what 'swims deep' rather than that which is 'known'. I asked myself how it would be if my mother and brother (who both committed suicide) came back to visit me – to fulfil the longing that I will live with all my life.

I've been writing poems since I was eight when a teacher praised a poem, encouraging me. Reading and writing poetry has continued to act as a compass – guiding me to my innermost thoughts.

Three days a week, I am Programme Leader for an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes. Our students learn how to hold other people's stories safely, encourage people to write, and if appropriate, to share their stories. So many stories are left untold. It is a long-standing course commitment that keeps me from being here today.

I appreciate the affirmation of this prize – thank you.”

And now... the winner of the poetry section.

Those of you who've taken an interest in the scandals and controversies surrounding other literary prizes, like the Booker, may be aware that there are sometimes huge struggles between judges who can't agree, fights-to-the-death between the champions of safe, cosy, traditional pieces and the champions of extreme, close-to-the-bone pieces that cause a stir. Those of you who know that I'm the author of the gruesome *Under The Skin*, and that one of my other novels contains a highly graphic miscarriage scene, may imagine that I horrified my fellow judges by choosing a dark, physically explicit poem about induced abortion as the winner. Nothing could be further from the truth. My fellow judges Anita Murray and Rhoda Dunbar were as thrilled by 'Pennyroyal' as I was.

Although there was no doubt in our minds that this was the most powerful of the entries, I did fret for a while that maybe there might be people who'd complain that it isn't a poem at all, since it's laid out as prose. I experimented with dividing it into twenty-four lines:

*“The walls gather close as gossips,
Windows weeping steam,
Flames tonguing the grate.
Then comes the quickening...”*

And so on. Yes, it worked. But this was not the choice the author had made, and we were not at liberty to impose it. So, 'Pennyroyal' looks like a paragraph of prose. But all three of us agreed that it *is* poetry, and vividly potent poetry at that, and one of my fellow judges said that if some people are upset by it, well, literature *should* be shocking sometimes. So, it is our unanimous pleasure to award first prize to the sizzingly evocative 'Pennyroyal' by Jacqueline Thompson.

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Finally, before we finish here today, I want to tell you why I came. I travelled 635 miles to Dingwall, by plane and train, from where I currently live. Less than a year ago, I was living just 25 miles up the road, in Fearn, and could've nipped down here in half an hour. So why now? Well, again, there's a tale to that.

The Neil Gunn prize has been quite significant in my personal history. My wife Eva won it in 1995, not long after we emigrated to Scotland, with her short story 'Family Business'. I won it in 1997 with 'Half A Million Pounds And A Miracle'. The Neil Gunn award, along with several other awards I won around that same time, helped to launch my subsequent career as an internationally published writer. My wife had no such ambitions for a literary career; she was happy being a secondary school teacher. She could get around to writing more stories when she had more time, maybe after she retired.

But let's fast-forward to twenty years later. My wife got sick. In 2014, she died. And she left behind lots of unfinished short stories. Some of them almost complete, some

of them half-way there, some of them just sketches or scribbled notes. In the years to come, I hope to finish those stories for her, so that they'll be in a state where people can read them. Obviously, it would have been better if Eva could have finished them herself, while she was alive. Her voice was unique.

What I want to say to those of you who didn't enter the Prize this year, or who entered and got discouraged not winning, is this: your voice is unique, too. If you have a story to tell, or a deep feeling to express in poetry, then tell that story and express that feeling. There weren't as many entries this year as there should have been, given that the Neil Gunn awards are open to anyone anywhere. Neil Gunn himself believed in encouraging unpublished and upcoming writers. Some of you have the potential to embark on a career as writers; others may simply have one thing which is trapped in your brain, which is waiting for you to find the right words to give it an existence outside of you. So, in the days and months and years to come, I hope you will find those words.