

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult Poetry section

First prize: Pennyroyal by Jacqueline Thompson

Pennyroyal

The girl holds out her cup and sinks onto the hearthside stool, gulps again the bitter tea beneath the midwife's gaze. Those eyes, buried in skin crinkled as raisins, will have seen a thousand like her: those who chose the wrong time to give in, or didn't choose at all. The walls gather close as gossips, windows weeping steam, flames tonguing the grate. Then comes the quickening in her core, the poker-heat, the rush of liquid, brown and slippery as cooking-oil. A vision ensues: a shrivelled underwater foot emerging; a boiled potato torso; four tuberous limbs...The midwife shovels the mulch into the fire, hands glistening like ham, as the girl inches towards the couch, packing a wad of cloth between her thighs, inhaling the stench of burnt meat, sweltering in the fug.