

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2018/19: Commentary on the adult poetry section

Alasdair McEwen, judge

To use one of Neil Gunn's favourite word, it was a delight to read and appreciate the 76 entries to this competition, and I like to imagine him up there at Brae, smiling at you all with encouragement.

I was in Cockermouth recently at a wedding, and visited Wordsworth's birthplace. At the end of the garden there is a small summerhouse, where you can sit and listen to recorded readings of his verse. I didn't think he would have made the first twenty in this competition. Testes change I suppose; judges are fallible, and I am only one of the three who, after much discussion, reached a unanimous decision.

Many of the rejected poems contained beautiful and surprising passages but needed, we felt, some polishing. The word I like in this connection is *Makar*, revived for the Scottish poet laureate: it suggests that a poet with a shoogly line is much like a carpenter with a shoogly chairleg. The six winners all felt complete, the right size and shape for what they hold.

Commended

The So Anyways of Fair Isle Knitting by Jill Munro

This is a poem full of warmth and humour. The couplets recall the circular technique the knitter uses, and the rhythm of the poem echoes the 'metronomic clicks' of her 'two ended pin.' Here is a woman remembered with love – her Montrose burr, her generous character, her industry and her 'so anyway' gift of storytelling. In the final couplet, the poet herself becomes the narrator and is left, in a deft and humorous twist, a bag of double pointed pins.

Highly Commended

Bird by Frances Malaney

This poem describes (to me) a townie stumbling upon nature red in tooth and claw, 'an uninvited guest.' This unfamiliar world is pictured by the intruder in terse and vivid language: 'a gristle of neck' 'polished beads of black rain' and skilful onomatopoeia – 'trod twigs crack the calm apart'. The fallen nestling, its 'tangled life beneath the skin' gawks in primal demand for life, and the whole poem is a forceful expression of Spring.

Highly Commended

When the Time Comes by Heather F. Reid

This is a poem full of charm and invention, an evocation of Spring ranging from the domestic to the elegiac. It is crammed with delightful metaphor: greylags for

lapwings; shouldering away a sledge; exhuming the green carcass of a garden seat; the rattled cutlery of birdsong; the tiresome practicalities of stripping and oiling put aside as the poet is entranced by the skylark 'climbing the ladder of its song.'

Third prize

A Boy by Ian McDonough

A poem about childhood memories, and their power to blur lines between past and present. This fine piece is capable of interpretation in different ways and at different levels, as the imagination of the poet engages with the imagination of the reader.

The BOY is assailed by memories of the people, colours, smells of his childhood, 'strong and vital;' old men smoking pipes over talk of war, 'purple lobsters stacked in creels.' His boyish imagination soars above the quotidian to a wonderful vapour trail of dragons and rescued girls. The repeated 'He's always standing still' is the key to the fusion of past and present to make the whole man.

Second prize

The Tinkers' Heart by Jane Picton Smith

Here we have a celebration of the direct and deeply spiritual connection between the Travellers of Scotland and a place in Argyll overlooking Loch Fyne known as 'Tinkers' Heart'.

The 'white quartz heart of twenty-six bright stones,' becomes an open-air natural cathedral, with drystone dyke for altar, lochan for font and a liturgy of harvests and berry fields.

The poem is a hymn to a place held sacred to generations of a wandering tribe, a focus for their sense of identity. Their natural world – grasses blowing, buzzard calling – is evoked in simple and heartfelt language. We are bidden farewell with 'all is sacred'.

First prize

Seelence by Sheila Templeton

This is a beautifully crafted poem about the 'hard lairnt' treasure to be found in silent observation. The child is led in Granda's warm grip to see the 'sair fack o' death', to hear the voices of pebbles in the burn, and learn not to trample on the early corn. There is wry humour too: 'jinkin' roon the back wye/tae keep oot the road o' the Sabbath folk.'

Here is a voice that speaks with hard won, quiet wisdom, alert to the sensual beauty of Spring. The language of the poem is evocative, expressed with all the rich sonorities, the sheer muscularity of the Scots tongue, and we are invited to savour 'the lang sough and clack o beedie steens shiften and shachlin inner thrang clair watter.' The result is a memorable meditation on quiet joy, with compassion and acceptance of the world and one's place in it, and a very worthy winner.