

## **Judge's report for 2011 Karen W Treanor Poetry Awards**

**From Marcella Polain**

**27 October 2011**

### **Results:**

**Open – 1<sup>st</sup>: no. 5303 'On language';**

**2<sup>nd</sup> no. 5287 'Paper teeth';**

**3<sup>rd</sup> no. 5344 'Plot';**

**Commended: no. 5367 'Planet kitchen'**

**Youth – 1<sup>st</sup> no. 5289 'Storm winds'**

**Encouragement Award for under 13 – no. 5286 'Out in the wild'**

It is small field this year: 13 in the Open section and four in the Youth Section. So it is tempting to state that what separated the above poems – winning, placed and commended – from the others is simple – but it is not at all simple. That does not mean it was difficult to separate them – it was not that, either. It was both immediately obvious, and quite difficult and subtle to explain.

In each case, the listed poems stood out because they achieved the following:

Freshness of expression – that is, they did not rely on cliché, those predictable co-locations of words which, unless the poet is doing something interesting/unexpected with them, signal the demise of a poem.

Self-awareness – that is, the poems demonstrate an acute awareness of themselves as constructions, as works of art, and of the possibilities and limitations of the form. This awareness is evident through the chosen voice, rhythms, choice and tone of diction, and decisions about line and stanza breaks.

Understatement – even when discussing big ideas (as poetry does), these poets resisted the temptation of hyperbole and excess, and the pull to explain everything. Instead, they exercised restraint of expression and rhythm and other technique, remembering that often less is more, allowing the images to carry the meaning, trusting the reader to work hard enough to understand.

Destination – because of the smallness of the form, it is essential to develop a poetic radar to assist in decisions about where a poem really begins and ends (rather than where we think it begins and ends). To me, where and how poems conclude is hugely important. They need to finish strongly – preferably, in a way that surprises or moves. A way that takes away my breath.

Sound – poems are written to be read aloud, (or read so that we hear them in our heads). This is one of the primary differences between them and prose, which (I am told) can truly be read silently – but not by me nor, I suspect, by other poets, as we always demand the

embodiment of language, the 'mouth and breath' (as John Leonard says in his essay, 'Ars Poetica').

The Commended Open section poem is deceptively simple, taking an otherwise unremarkable domestic moment and making art of it. This reminds me of Marion May Campbell's advice that 'there are worlds in the texture of bread alone', something many emerging poets overlook but which is rich material indeed, as this poet demonstrates. The poem is slight, only 23 very short lines, but not one word is wrong, so it conveys vividly and with wit the narrator's god-like power in the kitchen and makes subtle comment on the wider world.

The three place winners in the Open section all investigate (directly or indirectly, primarily or secondarily) issues of language. I asked myself about this: could this tell us more about the judge than the poems? But I don't think so, as I returned to the field to be sure, and found that these were clear place-winners for reasons aside to their subject. There is, after all, nothing new under the sun – or, at least, nothing much new. It is not what one has to say but how one says it that is key. But I will mention that these winning poems all explore other subjects, too: displacement, alienation; love, loneliness; connections between humans and the land.

There were other poems that deeply moved me because I could clearly feel the poet's grief and longing. But I couldn't allow my emotional response alone to colour my decision. Many poems are written from despair, loneliness, desire, loss. Indeed, isn't poetry what we turn to at those moments? However, in order to be successful, a poem must convey its emotion with graceful skill, formal and self-awareness, thoughtfulness, poetic surprise and freshness, insight and highly developed technique. The place-winners do all that.

The third-placed poem is a delicate and tender free verse poem that makes excellent use of the page in that it breaks its lines and stanzas against sense and draws the reader's eye and ear down to the next and the next. It is about both working the land and writing, and the play on its title is confident yet lightly wrought, opening within the poem plural meanings strongly connected through the central metaphor. There is not a word out of place nor one extraneous, and its diction forms and shifts rhythms that represent the poem's action. Its opening and conclusion are perfectly judged.

The second-placed poem is also a poem without an unnecessary or misplaced word. It also uses the page well, in this case allowing space for the visual (as well as the aural) presence of its diction on the page. It is not visual poetry yet it demonstrates a subtle understanding of the look as well as the sound of words, and it is full sound play and of astonishing images and moving images about longing and loneliness, and about the potential for words to connect or separate us. Again, it finds its entry and exit points perfectly.

The winning poem declares itself immediately through its title. It is about language, is written in three languages and yet begins with the poet's declaration that s/he has none. It moves between languages – sometimes translating, sometimes not – so that we (readers) experience the destabilising of the world similar to that which is all the time experienced by those who live outside their first (or second) language(s). Only two of these languages are accessible to me but such is the poet's skill that my exclusion from the third enhanced, rather than diminished, my understanding of the poet's intention. Similarly, English misspellings worked as (intentional or unintentional) visual evidence of the impossibility of seamlessness or direct translation, that languages (like humans) can't be easily understood or transplanted, that living, speaking, thinking, belonging is never straightforward nor

complete. This is an intensely moving poem, deeply philosophical, political, personal and universal. I have rarely read a poem like it.

Youth section – There is so much daylight between the winning poem and the rest of the field that I have awarded only first place. Not only does this young person demonstrate extraordinary emotional maturity, s/he also demonstrates astonishingly well-developed technical ability – particularly, subtle and assured sound play (including interior rhymes and assonance), and confident and effective rhythm and rhyme patterns and shifts. This poem is also, on one level, about reading (writing's flipside, that too often disregarded pursuit upon which the development of good writing so depends). But, once again, the poem is not only about that.

The Encouragement Award goes to a 12 year-old whose narrative poem is contained and direct, yet manages to convey with a pleasing understatement the life of the night world, pointing to the shadow-side, the other half of the existence that we night-blind, diurnal humans miss and around which we build much myth and fear.

I thank KSP for this opportunity. I thank all the entrants for the privilege of reading their work. I congratulate all place-winners. I also encourage all of you to read, to read (and write) poetry aloud, and to enter poetry competitions.