

## **Chair of Judges Tim Smit**

‘Our winning entries are both fine pieces of work. The first prizes are rightly awarded to an essay and a poem that are both lean and sensuous.’

### **Poetry – Judges Comments – John Wedgewood Clarke**

#### **Commended: Rose Proudfoot ‘Trails’**

This begins with some intriguing opening lines: why is the voice of the poem running? and what kind of house is this that no one owns? The opening is decisive and contains the DNA for the rest of the poem as it becomes clearer that he/ she may be running from a disaster of our impact on our environment, and that the house may be the world. Once in the heart of the poem there are some visionary moments (web-like phone wires), and a resonant choice of objects (alien plastic shoes), that all adds up to a poem that seeks to dislocate the human subject from the centre of the world.

#### **Commended: George Richards ‘Boy Surfacing’**

I found this poem mysterious and kept coming back to it. There's a sense of the human body emerging out of deep time through the mineral and biological, but also that this body is a weird and disturbing human/natural hybrid coated in a skin on more-than-human life. It has some great lines in there like ‘the wind quietly untying its light’, and all kinds of unexpected shifts in direction that keep the reader guessing and filling in the gaps. More than anything, this is a poem that has atmosphere and understated implications.

#### **2nd Place – JR Carpenter – ‘what I’m after. Is a language’**

It's tricky to write a good ‘experimental’ poem but this one does it with skill and clarity. To work, a poem like this needs to show us how to read it and it justifies the extra time it takes to allow its effects to work. And once those effects are working, it needs to add up to a structural/ formal metaphor that explores through the process of reading a key idea. In this case, it seems to me to be about the relationship between perception and naming, but there are other things going on, too. Much of the poem depends on the use of the full stop: take them out and the poem flows nicely, but read them properly, linger over them, and the phrase fragments they isolate start to work differently and with a productive instability. The title is a good example of this: the poet wants a language of things, but is ‘after’ them (pursuing them), but also after them in the sense that they've also been missed by language (and potentially lost through global heating/ biodiversity loss). So there's a sense of loss in there, but a desire to try to entangle a broken language with the sensual world. The spareness of the language lets this desire through and ring true: the process of trying to bring the otherness of the natural world into language is ongoing and this poem brings that into the very moment of reading.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> prize – Jane Burn – ‘Love Affair with the Nest Door’s Birch’**

What I love about this poem is the way it carries me into the heart of its matter with such energy, fluency and precision. It begins simply with a moment in time and describes a sense of loss and outrage at a beautiful, familiar tree being cut down: there's a sense of violence and close identification between the poet and body of the tree. So far, so good — but, perhaps, familiarly so. What makes this a winner is the transformation that takes place at a more intimate level as the tree rots into a different and strange thing full of extraordinary resonances and comparisons. The poem casts a spell over the broken body of the tree not to mask it but to reveal what it might tell us. It does so through language that sings and flows, but which is tempered by the use of gaps to break the flow. I love the description of mould as 'white rot angels'; or the months worrying the bones of split wood in their mouths. I like the careful use of the technical term 'spalted' and the craft knowledge of the process of sanding down. What gets revealed is a moment of re-orientation, a re-appraisal of the death, decay and the transformation of energy in a natural thing. What might be considered disgusting, even fearful, from the perspective of the human body and its mortality, becomes something beautiful and consoling. The body of the tree is cared for with great tenderness and carried through something akin to a funeral rite. Through this preparation of the body of the wood the poem beckons us into the heart of the natural world, acting with (and wondering over) its process and timescales rather than against them. What the soul of the tree might be we may never know, but the map left by its passing made by the poem stimulates the desire to go into the hidden worlds it contains.

### **Essays – Judges Comments – Jenn Ashworth**

Overall comments:

Reading this bold, sensitive, intriguing shortlist of essays, I couldn't help but be reminded of the intricate ecology of thought that the essay as a form makes possible. Though the climate crisis demands and deserves an urgent response from politicians and citizens alike, there is no propaganda or polemic here = or if there is, these essayists achieve it through gentle, subtle means. Each essayist has attended to their subject with patient and curious care and in each essay, an act of writerly attention has become a form of activism.

To summarise each essay or to give you a flavour of the ecosystem of a vibrant shortlist will only do them an injustice - each essay deserves a wider readership. But to make an attempt at it...

These essayists considered anew the ways in which humans help, harm and physically interact with their local environments.

From the patient, endless work of rescuing amorous toads from death on a country lane in Jane Smith's painful, thoughtful essay *Crossings*

to Ruth Bradshaw's view of an urban woodland 'loved to death' by a fresh influx of locked-down ramblers in *'Stories of Coexistence'*

or Ian Carter – *The Gentle Art of Tramping* – the joys of solitary trespass and walking without mapping and Laurence Rose who in *Timestream* is also interested in the way walking, navigating and journeying can result in a more 'ecocentric' rather than 'egocentric' view of the environment

Language was a common theme, with many of these essays interested in the challenge of naming, describing and recording in a way that does not preclude seeing:

from a father patiently translating placenames on a map of Highland Perthshire in a story of belonging and estrangement – Iona McDuff's *Fatherland*,

to a poet's caution on the 'naming and taming' of an unexpected garden visitor in Gregory Leadbetter's *The Cucumber Spider and the Transnatural Tongue*.

Anna Flemming's essay *Dinorwig* invokes an elegiac remembering of what can be read in the cracked face of an old slate quarry

And Noa Leach reminds us in their startling essay [Ice tongues: Cryo-acoustics in polar literature and ecomedia](#) that language can acknowledge the mysterious too - their work evokes the eerie oddness of song, voice and memory contained within ice.

Ian Wyatt's aptly named *Future Places*, explores the ways in which literary techniques can guide us in imagining the world, leading, he says 'to cooperative understanding and action' and Saskia McCracken – *Field Notes from the Isle of Barra* precisely describes the micro and macro worlds observed, while acknowledging how much of what is not known, not seen, and can only be dreamed of or imagined. 'Below the surface, other worlds' she reminds us.

The means by which an essay can reach its reader and invite us into the dance of understanding are various. Though the subject is serious, and most of these essays acknowledge loss and the sacred work of climate grief and mourning, there's humour here too.

Anne Taylor's essay *I am but a worm... scorned by man*, tells us about Charles Darwin's worm gardens (among other things) and

I was startled, delighted and entertained by Patrick Laurie's description of the eel, 'legless with a foot in two worlds' in his essay *The Eel, A whipstock, A Roman Candle*

Most of these essays were interested in change, and while mindful of its painful consequences, found vantage points from which to hope -

from Leonie Charlton's *Recovering Ground* – which tells the tale of the egg-collector turned wildlife surveyor's work with golden eagles to

Nicola Carter, essay *Fragments of the Mountains edge*, which boldly reminds us of the internal and external costs of climate change.

It is almost illogical to pick a winner, and to prize an individual's work from the literary ecosystem to which they belong.

Nevertheless:

Anna Flemming *Dinorwig: Play and Resistance in a Post-Capitalist Landscape* - a lyrically evoked history of Welsh Quarrymen and the ecology and economy of community.

Leonie Charlton's *Recovering Ground* - a direct and urgent exploration of responsibility, care and connection reminds humans struggling with existential loneliness that they belong to the world, and the world to them

Nicola Carter *Fragments on the Mountain's Edge* - a bold, innovative account of a direct exploration and interconnectedness - the essayist reminds us that the climate crisis is also a spiritual crisis.