

“Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toenails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone and not alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own.” Dylan Thomas

I read this quote some years ago and it has stuck with me. I had Thomas’ words echoing in my head and used them as a foundation for judging this competition. I have always maintained that good poetry comes from the gut and recently learnt that there is more serotonin there than in the brain, so for once I could be on to something.

I was really quite overwhelmed with both the number of submissions (!) and the quality of them. The whole judging process is daunting from the initial reading, through the longlist to the shortlist. It is always the top spots that cause sleepless nights in the run up to the final decision. One poet wrote, “what’s it like behind a waning moon?” a line I repeated to myself in late night musings.

When I selected the longlist I was looking for collections with a strong narrative arc, language that pushed beyond the ordinary – the kind of words I wish I had chosen and lines I wished I had sculpted. I was moved by many, *Sodium 136* sticks in my mind for its honesty and authenticity. An authentic voice is paramount, as is a compelling, well-constructed pamphlet.

When looking at a pamphlet as a whole, as apposed to individual poems, the narrative drive has to be strong, the reader has to long for the next poem and the next and the next. In *Filling the Gaps* the poet took me into a rugged world, the language was menacing, yet beautiful – the tale gripping. There was a natural, well-thought out cohesion to *Whalelight*. The poet had a delicate touch and sublime imagery.

For me, the top three nudged forward because I felt these pamphlets had the strong elements of of all the longlist put together. They all had a deep musicality, unexpected and daring imagery – they were haunting tales that really flexed their muscles.

From to opening poem *The Nature Factory* had me gripped:

### **Chrysalis**

I’ve spun my own womb.  
I’m all newly-painted eyes.

See how I emerge.

I was immediately hooked and the poet did not disappoint. I was inside this book and this factory – here are great titles, each thoughtfully placed in the narrative – the weight of each beautifully tipping into the next. The language was precise, there was a lot of clear thinking in this to make it as tight as possible and the meticulous editing paid off.

*Naked Against Rock* was a no holds barred ekphrastic piece based on the life and works of Keith Vaughan whom the poet described as “a gay Neo-Romantic painter whose work mainly focussed on the male nude and landscape”. This pamphlet chronicles the artwork, the life-models and Vaughan’s life. In *Adam* we read:

I shape him naked as a silver birch,

breathe life into his nostrils.

It is through powerful writing that the poet breathes life into this story and the entire pamphlet jangles with authority – it is fibrous, hard-edged and well-researched. The poet has really pulled off a magnificent piece.

*Self-portrait as a diviner, failing* has real finesse. The poet lures in the reader, there is a sense of fore-boding from the start, a dark uneasiness. The form of the opening (and title) poem sends real shivers down the spine:

### **Self-portrait as a diviner, failing**

Face and arms bruised by the sun, bare feet  
bleeding clay, I'm calling,

*I have the questions —*

calling,

*Come to me —*

The amulets, the potion pots weight  
my neck. I'm clutching

at sacred barks,

calling,

*Send me a vision —*

calling,

*Speak —*

Words

are only dried wings. The spirits have turned away,

my bitter tribe

divided

back to pale names, villages  
too far cornered for compromise.

My lips crack, split

and still I'm calling, *Please* —

*I know the shuddering and the spells.*

*Bring me the dreams.*

*Guide me through this fitful pass, this*

*misunderstanding* —

And so the poet sets the scene for a pamphlet that spans 85 years, taking the reader from Lithuania on the Veld, South Africa in 1931 to the United Kingdom of 2016 and carries the reader in the “weight of blood”. A collection about heritage, apartheid, segregation, and we inhabit cultures where “Chickens squawk / in the yard and new laws of apart- / ness cinch their grip. In *Family Portrait*

...she smells of heaviness, of a history  
the girl has only heard in whispers, foreign

words: *pogrom* could be *programme*,  
*pilgrim*, *pompom*. the woman's

flaccid arms engulf, words suddenly clear,  
in all their looping madness, *you are*

*my blood.*

This is an incredibly moving read, rhythmical, each poem almost moans from the page. I really do recommend you buy this when it is out. I can't wait to see it in print.

Thank you to everyone who submitted it was a pleasure to read your work.

“All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it however tragic it may be all that matters is the eternal movement behind it – the great undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation and ignorance – however unlofty the intention of the poem...” Dylan Thomas.

Abegail Morley

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