

Geometry | Open Book National Poetry Competition 2018 Judges' Report

Thank you to everyone who entered the Geometry | Open Book Poetry competition. We enjoyed reading all the entries. This judges' report makes some general comments about our thoughts on 'poetry' and some things we noticed in the entries, and then has something to say about the winner and each of the judges' selection poems.

Poems that speak to and excite us have two characteristics: first, the language is important. The poem is made up of words that are crafted and considered and chosen because they themselves are important and convey something -- tone, texture, sound, rhythm -- beyond pure content. Attention to language is the difference between some words that are put in lines and something that can make a claim to be a poem. Secondly, a poem worth reading has a something it wants to say. An idea, a thought, an emotion. Putting these two together, we looked for poems that noticed things in the world, presented them in thoughtful, deliberate language and gave us a new view of them. As a side note, we'd say that rhyme is a particularly tricky way of paying attention to language. Searching for rhymes can distort the flow and meaning and easily overwhelm the poem.

As poets ourselves, we find that it is difficult to know how to end a poem. Often, there is a desire to tidy everything up, to put all of the feeling and the meaning in the last few lines. But the poem is already a condensed form, so this kind of ending is unnecessary. Many poems we received would have benefitted from being edited to remove the last few lines so that the reader was left with some work to do. Likewise, beginnings are sometimes just throat-clearing before the real poem begins. Some poems would have been more powerful if they started a few lines further in.

A good poem needs to commit to itself. To tell the reader: I am making a small world for you. We encountered some distancing or ghosting tactics in some of the work -- the most obvious example being, 'it was all a dream'. Other poems just recited emotions or thoughts with nothing concrete to ground them. When the poem gives itself an out like that, the reader is left feeling that the writer was not really up for the ride all along. The poems that worked best focussed on concrete details and did some world-building -- made a place for the reader to stand and look around.

So, language, ideas, focus and commitment. Poems with these characteristics, and a little something extra of poetry magic, made it into the judges' selection.

The winning poem, 'I eat men like air' by Paula Harris, exemplifies this kind of commitment. The poem is a sustained metaphor, comparing husbands to objects to capture their different characteristics and uses. The poem commits totally to this concept, carrying it with conviction through four sections of fourteen lines each. The language in this poem is so carefully chosen. It looks casual and deceptively simple, but each line is carefully selected, smooth and clear. The

couplets organise the content and give intention to the poem. There's a wry humour to the poem, which is held consistently through the work, meaning the poem has a distinct 'voice'. This poem also has something to say to our present moment in gender politics. Reading this poem was enjoyable and thought-provoking, and it was obviously the work of a writer who knows her craft.

Aimee-Jane Anderson-O'Connor's 'MRI' pairs a difficult and scary experience with absurd imagery. The outside world is brought into the MRI room, so that the poem is both expansive and claustrophobic.

'New World, 7:38pm' by Madeleine Ballard beams with familiarity and warmth in its quotidian detail. Its sacramental handling of the banal delighted us -- that wonderful detail of the salmon.

'A list of dreams' (Ruby Porter) is brutal in its approach to the emotions of a break-up. In less skilled hands the "collection of images" approach can get out of control, but here the guiding intelligence of the poet ties the poem together. We liked that this poem did some 'poem stuff' with repetition and line breaks. It was not too modest about being a poem.

'Robert' by Isabelle McNeur gives us the story and emotional journey of a common experience -- coming to see your parents as people who existed before you did. The story feels real and tangible, and this gives the poet licence to ask a big question about how any two people can truly know each other.

'Social network' (Kim Fulton) is a poem that inhabits the contemporary world, a small anecdote of 'how we live now' told with humour, detail and care. The poem zooms out to include past cultural icons Bogart and Bergman, touching on how human living and art are both changed by technology.

'Cutting Pumpkins in Botswana' by Amanda Hunt uses the central image of the implacable pumpkin to offer concrete and carefully described scenes, with wonderful movement -- the pumpkin being smashed down the backstairs, the mother who leans and scoops up her little boy without breaking stride.

'Thalidomide II / What if Rosie Moriarty-Symons met Sylvia Plath by chance down Cardiff High Street' by Jilly O'Brien is made up of short lines and clean surprising language that convey and contain the shock of its subject matter. The language in this poem does real work, the baby at the centre of the poem being described as the 'infant manatee/ finning through liquid love'.

To everyone who entered, thank you again. Keep writing, and even more, keep reading.