



Judge's Report

The submissions for Half Moon Books' 'Wild life' themed poetry competition were a wonderful roaring, hissing, tweeting, growling menagerie. There were rhinos, seahorses, stoats, snow cats, kestrels, kittiwakes, newts, bonobos, bitterns and parakeets. There were poems that mourned man's destruction of nature and shouted 'Just look at what we're doing to our planet!', poems which addressed the issues of dog mess, micro beads, lawn management, fly tipping, global warming and consumerism, and quirky poems that charted the metamorphosis of humans into bears, dogs, ducks and hedgehogs.

There were dozens of well crafted 'portrait' poems which evoked their subjects (puddles, humming birds, rivers, dragon flies, kingfishers) very effectively using precise, intricate, almost photographic descriptions but what I wanted was something that told me something new, something that looked at its subject from an unusual angle, something that shocked, stunned, startled, intrigued or moved me (to either tears or laughter) in some way. I didn't want poems which told me how I should feel or what I should believe. As a reader, I tend to prefer poems which suggest rather than command. I don't want the message or meaning of a poem spelling out. A good poem should allow its reader the chance and space to come to their own conclusions. Here's where that well-used creative writing/poetry maxim, "Show, don't tell." comes into play. The writer Anton Chekov summed up this idea very effectively in one beautiful sentence: "Don't tell me the moon is shining, show me its light on broken glass." Thankfully, there were plenty of poems that showed me something with subtlety rather than told me what I was looking at.

As well as being inspiring, reading the entries for the Otley word feast competition has been educational. There were many times during the judging process where I had to call upon the encyclopaedic services of Google. I have learned a lot. I now know about Haareis (a type of ice that forms on dead wood and takes the shape of fine, silky hair.), the frequency of humming birds' wings, the 'hornpipe' worm dance of the lapwing and the mating habits of nymphs. I have also added several beautiful words to my vocabulary: benthic, sessile, slobland, exuviae, hirple, planthic. gneiss, wauping, pugmarks, fizmer, bauxite and berberis.

And though the poems fell short of the shortlist, I want to give credit to the authors of these wonderful titles: The Day I Turned Into a Bear, You came back as birds, Lawn Son, Not River, We Were Looking For Frogs, A Dirty, Dirty World, Art Deco As English Bird Songs, Walking Carrour To Spean Bridge, How to Make a Curlew-an origami Poem, Lily Greenwood Lived, Becoming Hedgehog, A Wilder Kind Of Living, Bonobo Knows, Nash Got The Colours Right.

It took weeks for me to thin my very voluminous long-list down to a shortlist because the quality of entries was so high and even now, after a great deal of pruning, my shortlist is still quite long. I would like to comment on every single poem in the shortlist but it would take me too long so here, in brief, are my comments on the 1st & 2nd prize winning poems:

1st Prize: (080) Owl pellets are gruesome and poetic objects, 'compact parcels of feathers, fur...and bone' which, unable to digest, the owl regurgitates. They are fascinating things, neat, brittle journals of an owl, and, in 'Owl Light', a woman takes daily trips to a 'tooth hole ruin of a barn' at dusk to gather these treasures. We don't know why. The reasons are not explained and, to me that doesn't matter. It's an intriguing poem that ends with these dark, ambiguous lines: 'Half a lifetime ago/and still the bleeding, unseen beneath gold/the skeletons in her pocket carried home'.

2nd Prize: (020) 'The Bright Silences' zooms in on the minute music of the everyday. It has the qualities of a slow, gentle prayer uttered from a calm space in the frenetic world. It starts with introversion, looking into the body, the self, then moves out to encompass a more panoptic view of things until we are way above looking down at the earth, observing two dolphins 'small as hatpins'. There is some wonderful imagery, 'a dog fox flattening himself/to a puddle of dark in a wide field...', inventive intermingling of the senses, lovely odd couplings of words ('this quiet din') and some graceful internal rhymes.

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