

Poetica Christi Press  
2017 Annual Poetry Competition - *Wonderment*  
Judge's Report

by Peter Stiles (Dr.)

The poems entered in the competition this year were consistently of a good standard. Reading through them all was an enjoyable experience. They reflected the meaningful moments and thoughtful observations that a significant number of poets wanted to capture and share in a variety of poetic forms. Many of them encapsulated what poetry does best, that is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', as Wordsworth put it in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in 1800. Poetry helps to shape the individual consciousness and serves to temper the frenzied superficiality of so much modern living. It is undoubtedly therapeutic. Good poetry emanates from stillness, even silence, and is attentive to detail in a way that other literary forms are not suited to or ignore. There are exceptions, of course, such as the Australian novelist and essayist, Tim Winton, who is a reflective and respectful observer of the natural world.

The best poems in the competition drew me into a moment of time, a slice of life, a particular experience that had deep meaning for the poet concerned. Some dealt with seemingly mundane situations, like standing at the kitchen sink and looking up at the sky. Others focussed on exotic themes, such as the mass migration of Monarch butterflies. Both types captured the wonderment that is possible for those who take time to be attentive. The world we share, as poets, is alive with enchantment, wonder and mystery. I first read *The Orange Tree*, by John Shaw Neilson, when I was a boy. In that poem this early Australian poet visualises the magic in the everyday so well.

Effectively capturing this richness, however, can be a challenge. Poets should read over their poems again and again to see if there is a better word, a more apposite phrase, some fresh and original ways to express an idea. Good poems usually have concentrated language, but read well rhythmically, with a lyrical quality that rings true to the ear of the reader. *Preludes*, by T. S. Eliot, is an excellent example; perfect in diction, perfect in cadence. It is a truly memorable poem. The best poems in the competition had this quality. They read well, and would be satisfying to the listener if read aloud.

I particularly liked the poems in the competition that had a clear sense of direction and were essentially transparent. Obscure and inscrutable poetry does not serve the cause of poetry. Some of the best poems had a delicacy and simplicity about them that was compelling. Less is usually best in poetry. Having said that, I also liked the poems that had a historical theme, and also those that had an inter-textual quality to them. Deep learning and wide reading are often captured in good poetry. Christian poets should restrain their desire to turn their poems in homilies. Gentle understatement is the best way to allow God's grace to be felt through verse.

Finally, I passed over poems that obviously made no reference to the theme of wonderment. Strident poems with an aggressive or abrasive tone seemed to have little place in the context of this

competition. Good poetry avoids the clamour and attention seeking purposes of some other forms of written expression, and relies on subtlety and nuanced language to reveal the truths about the everyday. Our lives are full of riches and wonderment, just waiting for the eye, ear and heart of the discerning poet.

The winner of the competition was 'Flight of the Monarchs', an excellent poem about the mass migration of Monarch butterflies to Sierra Chincua, Mexico. It captures this spectacular, exotic event in a succinct, compelling manner, the reader drawn into a journey that juxtaposes life and death, flight and breathtaking clusters of colour in the forest. It is a very suitable poem for the theme of wonderment. The runner up was 'Ink', a touching poem about the loss of a brother in World War One. This clever poem explores the impression that writing can have on our memory, our consciousness, using ink as a metaphor for blood. The hopelessness and waste of war is stressed throughout. Wonderment is subtly suggested in the enduring nature and profound legacy of the written word. Other poems that stood out were 'Two-sided coin', 'The colour of music', 'Rayonnement', 'Sleeping in Sturt's Stony Desert', 'Summer Peaches', 'Illumination', and 'Apollo 8'. All had a special quality that set them apart from the rest of the poems.

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