

## **Judge's report:** Mark Garner

It was very encouraging to read such a large number of poems on wide-ranging topics: enthusiasm for writing poetry is far from dead! A good poem typically makes us as readers surprised by something familiar, and we are made to think about its significance in a new way. A good poem changes us in some way, however small. This was true of the majority of entries: the poetic eye was very much in evidence, making the task of judging quite demanding. It was by no means easy to decide which ones should be included in my final list, by selecting approximately one in ten of the total number of contributions. A number of contributors were unlucky that their works, although worthy, did not quite meet my criteria for selection.

There is evidence in a number of poems that the authors had worked hard on crafting the language in order to express their meanings in a striking and memorable manner. This requires a particular sensitivity to the extent to which language can be reworked from the everyday in order to communicate profound, often highly personal, thoughts to others.

Unfortunately, this creative capacity was not always in evidence, and some poems slid into obscurity. It is rarely effective simply to write a string of synonyms or related words, without embedding them in some way in fuller text. Nor can it be assumed that simply breaking the conventions of typescript and presenting the poem in an unusual physical layout will necessarily complement or enhance the meaning. The physical difficulty of reading can detract from, rather than contribute to, what the writer wants to express.

There was also a sizeable minority of entries that, for all their artistry, did not really engage with the theme of 'transformation'. A number spoke eloquently and movingly of an intensely personal experience, very often in the first person, but did not express how this had led to, or taken the form of, personal change, metamorphosis, conversion, or the like—in other words, in what sense the experience was transformational.

The winning poem, "Graceful and gentle", is a beautifully crafted, moving tribute to an old lady ("our mother, our centre") as she undergoes the ultimate transformation from life to death. The gentle rhythm of the short lines, and the regular beat of almost understated rhymes, evoke the steady intervals of shallow breathing moving to the inexorable moment of slipping away. As she goes, she "accepts now—as we must—this dying of the light". And we are inevitably moved to contemplate how we shall go into "that good night" when our own time comes.

"Benediction", the runner-up poem, reminds us powerfully but subtly of the sustaining role of prayer as we confront new situations. The quiet rhythms of the language reflect the patterned preparations of a woman for her day ahead. She is in a room, perhaps in a nunnery, but she is deeply enmeshed in the natural world through the open window, and her every soft movement is like a prayer. The poem ends with the moment in which she, like the old lady, enters into a new world: she leaves the room and "enters this new day with all of yesterday's conviction".

My thanks go to all of the many people who contributed. I encourage you all, regardless of whether your work eventually appears in this publication, to keep on writing.