

Judge's report: Paul Turley

Few of the poems submitted to this year's competition know what they are talking about. And those few that do fail as poems.

It is not a poem's job to know things. A poem guesses. It doesn't explain, it hints. Poems, as Dickinson told us, tell it slant.

A poem is a log that has been whittled clean down to a small stick with which to poke at the world, turn it over and have a look underneath.

A poem pokes at something half hidden in the grass, it prods to see if it is alive.

I have chosen 25 pretty good poking and prodding sticks here.

I could have selected 29 or more but 25 were asked for, and here they are.

Each of them prod the theme of journey and turn up all kinds of stuff hiding in the dark, all kinds of treasure and trash. They poke at loss and lostness. They turn pain and passion and pathos over and then over again.

In *Colleen (County Cork)*, with the smell of the old country still on her, a young woman, herding her *brace of brothers* half dreams, half glimpses a new world over the horizon. The walker in *Three on the Road* catches sight of a different world, also,

Each poem is its own journey. Some like *When Did You Know You Could Write?* And *Cremorne – last walk with my father*, read like physical journeys but, like good and useful sticks, they turn over the obvious, discovering the slower, labyrinthine journey of realisation.

Some prod and prod at the ordinary to make it give up its more than ordinary. *Walking the lighthouse track*, *Feral Goats*, *The Blanket*, *Drifters*, *Grey Plover*, and *A Thankyou Note* poke at mud and dandelions, goats and afternoon heat, smells and breathing.

So many poems, chosen and not chosen, poke at what is moving away from us; what we are leaving: *One Thing Remains*, *BC*, *Missing Her*, and *Any Day Now* all prod at the hollow spaces, the places that remain cavernous.

Some poke at a strange quietening that sometimes comes to some of us near the end: *Crossroads*, *Old Age*, *Beads on a string*.

In some the burdens are still heavy and the caverns ring like a giant bell: *You Return Kinder*, and *At the Gold Coast Airport*.

A few poems in the unselected pile did fail to take the advice of the MA Lit supervisor in *Following*: use fresh thoughts especially about roads. But so many more like *The Road We Killed*, and *Vesna* poke and prod the strange world until it stands up and speaks.

And so, to the poems I selected as the winner and the runner-up.

Why these two?

I like them. I like so many that I read. But these two got stuck in my head. They poked at me: Hard.

In *Birth Journey*, the runner-up, the short and perilous journey that we have all taken, is delivered in a high register. This is language fit for this most ordinary and extraordinary experience. *Ancient, travail, triumphant, glorious*. This is me. This is you. This is our own private Genesis.

In, the winning poem, *Space Travel in the 80s*, a little, ill-equipped *alien* is *traversing* the *planets* and *craters* of a strange and unknowable universe. Always off-centre, off-kilter, off-world: *always wanting*. There is no navigating here, only stumbling, half-shod. And this is no astronaut of exciting TV memory, no star-ship Enterprise exploring strange new worlds going boldly where no one has gone before. This is just *one of many kids* on the move from one gravitational pull to another, from one atmosphere to another, always dragging equipment and never the specialized tools that would do the job of making a home. Always wrong place; wrong time.

Space Travel in the 80s is a poem Kurt Vonnegut could have written for his book *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*: 'They have had to believe all their lives that they were perhaps sent to the wrong Universe, since no one has ever bid them welcome or given them anything to do.'

Space Travel in the 80s is a poem for us all.