

Poetica Christi Press Poetry Competition 2024 - A new day dawns

Judge's Report

I so enjoyed the taxing but rewarding task of choosing from this year's 196 entries. Poems varied in length, topic, and depth; all were true to the enlightened theme. There were many worthy, beautifully-made poems. Free verse outnumbered the few formal poems (villanelles, sonnets, haiku and prose poems, an acrostic poem, and a delightful concrete hybrid in Sudoku form!). Honest tributes to family, faith & nature dominated, as did literal dawn descriptors. It's a challenge to write about 'The Dawn of a New Day' – such a universal, known and written theme. Some poems told (rather than *showed* the reader through sensory details and fresh images), slipping into clichés that undermined the unique lines. Poetry invites and opens us to possibilities, revealing the world and ourselves in *new* ways. The better poems explored these possibilities with nuanced expression.

Poetry *distils* language and ideas. Its clarity and brevity captures, surprises and *explores*. (Webster defines the verb *explore*: 'to travel in or through'). The finalist poems travel rhythmic trails through scrub and sky, on bikes and waves, in the past and other lands, where 'bells fill our heads' and 'stars glint like enamel', where a 'cat sits with dreams' and we are 'lost in...raven's hue', as 'the future hides behind the moon' and 'we wake to everything', 'with probing beak(s)'. These are some of the stunning lines that held me with their woven originality and sealed my 25 choices.

The winning poem, Ellen Shelley's 'Wild With Scrub', wowed with its surprising turns of phrase and direction. Shelley tracks the narrator's challenges through concrete and abstract images, metaphor and paradox, 'turning hours like a sleeve up and over' – beautifully exacting the effort of being a mum – to 'I have done enough (walking/ escaping) to turn around' towards the poem's end. 'A new day dawns' at each effort, as momentum marries flow throughout. It's a tight, meandering and carefully-crafted poem that demonstrates its meaning through expert wordplay. It causes me to wonder and feel, and speaks to other, universal journeys of culture and gender.

Second place was hard won, since three poems particularly took my attention: again, Ellen Shelley excels as runner-up with 'A Cool September Eve' –her surprising prose poem. I have taught short story for 16 years so am quite skeptical towards this hybrid form, but Shelley's mastery of well-placed words that enlighten realization within the setting won me over. The structure supports content via word choice, and sensory action and reaction. The subject's running pastime in past time, 'around an oval', along with the 'bike ...being held by a/ stranger... (I) felt strange/ unease' hints at a skewed experience. Again, the poet takes us far, from home safety to threat, and through the redeeming sustenance of habit. It's a highly original poem that evokes theme all the way through.

Colleen Keating's 'Fifth Symphony' balances an artist's response to the destruction around him, and the poet's response – both witnesses to the ongoing 'music that plays like a mountain brook tumbling'. It's a deceptively simple, nuanced poem. The poet contrasts fire watch to water music, amidst sounds that 'cry for' an eventual new dawn, transforming the moment and beyond along with the lyricist's crucial work. Keating's exacting metaphor exposes a paradox, conjuring beautiful composition out of the chaos of war. It was a strong contender for second place, as was 'High Jinx' by Laurie Keim. Keim's structure riffed on and overtook the poetic subject – watching (and becoming) birds. Lines like wings extended imagination to see these avian 'signs' resulting in the narrator's realization that 'it's all in your fingertips/feel the breeze/ like a tremble/ through your feathers'. It's uplifting, in every sense. There's a touch of Mary Oliver about this poem, a complexity through simplicity as thought and sight explore and expand meaning in air, flight in birds, knowing power in unknowing. These gifts are so carefully and care-freely rendered by form. All three were well-wrought poems.

It's been my pleasure to engage and immerse myself in these poems of laughter, intensity, care, and fruitfulness. What a humbling, inspiring exercise. Congratulations to all poets involved – long may your art and craft continue to grow and affect. Thank you for the experience.