

Judge's report by Naomi Foyle

It's always an honour and joy to be asked to judge a poetry competition. As one takes the large manilla envelope of poems from the courier's hands, one feels the weight of responsibility, the poundage of love, thought and effort saturating the paper; but senses also the sheer delight of discovery. Who's out there? What are they writing about? How *are* we? Reading so many poems anonymously gives rise to a choral effect, both intimate and epic in sweep, each private voice singing its part in a polyphonic ensemble, a collective response to our times it is a privilege to read.

This year, I felt the communal nature of this poetic murmuration more keenly than ever. For as the threat of nuclear war joins the litany of crises we are facing as a species, it becomes ever clearer that whoever we are, whatever our background or privileges, if we are to save our precious planet from climate catastrophe, we must acknowledge our interdependence on each other and the Earth. And though there are many reasons to despair right now, had I lost any faith in humanity over the pandemic, judging this competition would have restored it. For here, from poems that constantly impressed me with their heart, wit and skill, emerged a complex ode to life as we are living it now: timeless explorations of loss, love and war counterpointed by poems unafraid to address contemporary challenges from lockdown to mass extinction, the refugee experience to the invasion of Ukraine.

Pleased as I was to read such a compassionate and informed collection of poems, ultimately, I was seeking poems that generated their own power and velocity, and invited the reader to dwell on and within them. All the poems in this anthology were arresting on first reading and revealed greater depth of heart and ingenuity each time I returned to them. They became friends I was always glad to meet in the crowd, my pleasure in their company only growing with time.

Three poems, though, rose above the rest. 'The Lord sends our roots rain', stood out as the first poem I encountered that I felt I had to read aloud. Moving gracefully between the moment and memory, sensuality and reflection, emotion and silence, these finely honed couplets create their own exquisite sense of song.

It is hard to write a sestina: several were submitted, but many faltered or stalled. Detailed as filigree, strong as steel, however, 'Delicately Wrought' impressively fulfils the promise of its title, using repetition to build suspense and undermine expectation as the poem's drama builds in both quiet and literal force until its devastating end.

The winning poem, 'Almanac for Sunless Haunts' captivates me still: I never quite know where I am in it, only that I want to keep reading, following each seemingly spontaneous line through a landscape of language that, in fact, chimes with thoughtful music and exudes an inexorable truth: no matter how much we know, or think we do, we are all, in the end, humbled by the Earth.