

South Downs Poetry Festival Competition 2021

The Binsted Prize

The Winners

We are pleased to announce the competition results, as judged by David Swann. His report can be found below, as can the poems by the three Binsted Prize winners.

The winning poems and poems of the Highly Commended and Commended poets will be published in the competition anthology, which will be available for purchase. We are hopeful that the poetry evening to celebrate the winning poems and hear the poets and the judge read may be held later in the year.

First : Christopher Horton Wild Boars

Second : Philip Brennan Best Anniversary at Sal's Cod and Chips

Third : Cat Balaq Stealing Sunday Dinner

Highly Commended:

Miriam Patrick	Bolted Doors
Charlotte Cornell	First Aid Practical
Wendy Klein	About the Fawn
Christopher Horton	Crundale Buckle
Myra Schneider	The Word
Pat Murgatroyd	Tina's Wool and Baby Shop
Janet Montefiore	If
Cherrie Taylor	Reported Missing
Robin Ford	Do not be fooled by Islands
Trevor Breedon	Beyond the Call
Pratibha Castle	Memories of Kells
Jane Thorp	Tide Mills: Company Village, Ghost Village

Commended:

Jane Joseph	Dust to Dust
Sarah Kiddle	Human Remains
Adrian Buckner	In my Element
Philip Dunn	Returning is no comforter
Chris Warren-Adamson	Teddy

Margaret Jennings	Understanding Life
Sue Spiers	The Neighbour
Chris Hardy	Unhitched
Sonia Overall	Bay of Skail, Skara Brae
Susan Utting	The Thin-Skinned
Mark Wilmot	To Cray Ness
Denise Bennett	Dear Sappho
Michele Jackson	A Sussex Guide to Childcare
Jane Thorp	600 Pinch Pots
Sue Davies	Listening to Trees

The Binsted Prize, 2021. Judge's Report

The first cut is always the deepest. As judge, you need to slash the pile in half, so you're secretly hoping for poems with stale words and a lack of imagery – or poems that fail to suggest a hinterland of reading.

There were 270 entries, and I eliminated about a quarter of them in the first round. After that, the job became difficult. In the search for a top 30, I put aside plenty of poems with merit, but which perhaps didn't quite sustain their promise, or which failed to leave enough space on the page for the reader.

I was hoping to be moved, perhaps to tears or laughter, perhaps to a new way of seeing or thinking. I wanted goosebumps.

Sift, and sift again. The smaller the pile became, the less objective I could claim to be. That isn't to say I was looking for poems I agreed with, or found easy to approach. I'll admit to liking narrative, but my winner was a lyric. In the end, it's always about a union of sound, shape and sense – and about the poem adding up to more than the sum of its parts. It's about the poem's unique soul.

The last cuts were the hardest. If your poem is included in the anthology, it could have won. Towards the end I was putting aside lovely pieces, including 'Cabbages', 'Travel' and 'Slow Movie on the South Downs'. Reluctantly I was forced to part with one poem because the writer had left their name on the script.

A different judge would have chosen a different top 30. However, I followed a method I've learned to trust: to wait for the most memorable poems to rise from the pile – and then for the final handful to rise beyond being simply memorable – and to become haunting. These were

the poems that the hairs on my skin remembered -- the ones I thought about when I was out walking, or digging on our allotment, or trying to concentrate on my teaching duties.

'Best Anniversary at Sal's Cod and Chips' and 'Stealing Sunday Dinner' shared strong novelistic qualities: memorable characters, dramatized in vivid scenes. But they were shaped by poets thinking hard about imagery, sound, shape, and economy. I loved them both.

My winner was 'Wild Boars', which reminded me of Edward Thomas's work, not only in its regard for landscape and nature, but also for the unexpected angle with which it approached a major issue. I read some good pandemic poems in this year's entries, but none that haunted me as much as this one. There's an elusive, glancing quality in the reported experience, and a nameless yearning. It's a quiet, modest poem, not obviously a prize-winner, but I thought it evoked the uncertain times we're all enduring.

I would like to thank all the writers for sharing their work, and the organisers, Camilla and Barry, for being a pleasure to work with. There were 170 good poems in the envelope, so please don't despair if you failed to make the final pile. Those in the habit of reaching longlists are doing something right. Concentrate on the bigger picture, not the occasional setback. It's about the sky, not the dark clouds that pass through it.

Wild Boars by Christopher Horton (First Prize)

What we come to believe is what we want to believe
when the streets are paused to a standstill,
the surrounding hills our only retreat. For me,
the snapping of beech, the stirring of foliage,
was more real than the light that shone,
late afternoon, across from Marriage Wood.

When the two of them ran, we thought they were dogs –
at first – from the sound of their movement alone.
How quickly they made their way, one behind the other,
a maverick convoy of muscle and flesh
passing steadfastly to a destination only they knew.

Through the cover of branches, nothing was certain.
I could swear there was the lowering of bird song
and the sudden glint of an eye as they gathered pace,
surging uphill where no way seemed possible.

Still at that point of half believing they were dogs,
we waited patiently for their owner walking behind,
for a call at least. In the moments afterwards, the birds
regained their confidence but no voice was heard.

Best Anniversary at Sal's Cod and Chips Philip Brennan (Second Prize)

Sal dozes on the till as a hot bulb
dries out the battered fish
and a heap of meatless jumbo sausages.
Heavy on salt, light on patrons,
he spoke only once to curse the card reader:
'Fucking piece of shit fucking thing.'

You push at a grey chip
while I contemplate the table,
salt sprinkled on a yellowing grime.
You sigh, like this was a mistake,
but it's your own fault
for never having any ideas.

I thought a place like this would be endearing,
that I might resurrect laughter
by saying: 'You deep-fry my heart.'
Instead, as Sal's snores crescendo
you cut me short: 'What kind
of two-year anniversary is this?'

The entrance was all blue, all blue
bleached by a twenty-year fade,
which has crept into Sal, although
spider legs of bright blood vessels
light up the folds in his face.
He is incomparable to the young man

beaming a laminated smile
in the top right corner of the menu.
You wake him, exploding out the door,
and his till flies open, stark and empty.
It will not bash shut. He will not forgive you.
And I offer double, for a half-eaten meal.

Stealing Sunday Dinner by Cat Balaq (Third Prize)

We tell each other stories in a shallow bath,
pour them out hot from the tap,
let them lap around our knees,
smoke a roll up each. Flick ash in a scallop shell.

Lean into cold cast iron.
Tiles chipped, mold in the corners.
Candle nubs propped on the wire tray between us,
bubbles slopped on the white skin under your breasts.

The light of the day half dying.
Last nights dishes still suddless in the sink,
and the chicken you stole from the shop
over the road this morning, uncooked.

You wore my black overcoat
overwhelming your tiny frame.
Pockets long enough to hold truncheons
or jars of cranberry sauce.

And I'm overcome with the imperfect moment.
Too afraid to tell you how real it feels.
Your back arching over, the grope for the soap.
We tell each other stories in the bath.

Later we cook. Slip pilfered potatoes
into hot oil with salt, allow our lips to meet.
You sit on the counter to reach me,
fingers pushing the gaps between grout

while I take the words from your mouth.

We tell each other stories, pull out the plug,
let old water go.

And tell each other not to tell.