

Blake Prize 2013 Judges' Comments

Of the 500+ poems we read through we were impressed with the number of poems describing personal spiritual experiences which were mediated through descriptions of death, travel, illness, even intoxication. However in some poems the religious elements outweighed the poetic attributes. About thirty poems were particularly notable for their developed narrative and/or lyric craft and it was from this group that we selected nine exceptional poems.

The comments on the nine shortlisted poems are below and are presented in alphabetical order by poem title.

Robert Adamson, Michelle Cabill and Eileen Chong

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'Almost Pause/ Pareidolia':

Taking from its title this poem elaborates on the vague randomness of images with a narcotic-like vividness, evoking the spiritual. The language is at once specific, gorgeous and cleverly disconnected as meanings are deferred. Mermaids, forest cockatoos and the imprinted net on a turtle's back all become premonitions; the tone of self-address retains a calm, almost melancholic restraint. An intelligent, complex poem that addresses the phenomenon of meaning-making where there is none to be found.

'Appellations':

Citing the self-confessed poet Ishmael from Melville's *Moby Dick*, the narrator keeps the reader in suspense with an intriguing tale of nostalgia, mystery, intoxication, doubt and belief. The tone is by turns ironic and lyrical, with an imagistic control of the abstract. Dynamic and unexpected occurrences unfold with ease; appearances and disappearances are both discrete and inter-connected making the poem edgy, breathtaking, intoxicating to read and highly skilful.

‘Ars Moriendi’:

This poem takes a feminist and historically revisionary interpretation on the medieval notion of preparation for death. The versification is confident with a strong muscular language and an unflinching tone. In its formality this renders a political context to the persona of Lady Jane Grey soliloquised in her intimate final crisis. The imagery is suggestive, exercised with a delicacy that befits the speaker’s voice.

‘Grand Final’:

The understatement and a matter-of-fact tone in this poem as well as its extraction of the spiritual from the secular and everyday is beautifully and compellingly rendered. There is a central wit in the disparate association of mortality and sport. Incidental detail such as the cosmic catastrophe of asteroids skilfully develops the poem’s thematic layers. Flight and myth, death and departure are all given serious weight with dexterity. The language and voice are measured with care and great precision. The poem addresses the human need for a deeper, everyday mythology in our modern world.

‘Nocturne’:

This lyric free verse poem takes for its subject love in the Divine, intimate form. The lineation is sculptural, the diction and phrasing are unique and exquisite, evoking devotion in a spiritual sense. The tone is one of tenderness, the images are lucid and arresting, and the spiritual is addressed through concrete representations of love. The metaphysical argument of love, its narratives and philosophy are viscerally embedded with sensitivity and at times, with a whimsical irony.

‘Prayer: Quick & Dirty’:

This is a skilful, fragmented prose poem; a stream-of-consciousness monologue which blends imperative, descriptive and interrogative tropes. The language is elusive of a single or unified meaning, opening it to multiple readings. It contains wit, is accurate and original in imagery, which derives from the erotic, from urban as well as from pastoral themes that the poem successfully demythologises. A dense, fast-paced poem layered with images that, when read as a whole, address the restlessness of the search for spirituality in everyday life.

'River Lines':

There is tautness and a natural flow in this lyric poem's self-reflexive, meta-spiritual themes. Arguments about meaning, doubt and transcendence are abstracted and developed with restraint. There is paucity of image but the variation in tone from ironic to philosophical is persuasive. The poet manages to characterise essence and anthropomorphise river in ways which both tease and clarify the reading.

With its spare, whittled-down language, the poem emulates the physical entity of a river, of its movements, its depths and at the end, its recreation.

'The Pines':

This meditative poem works by combining astute observation with thoughts that seem to grow from the lucidity of its clean lines. The pine trees become a haunting metaphor that moves through the poem as it explores man's place in nature. The images of 'a woman and her children burying a dog' and 'common brown frogs' blend effortlessly with others drawn from memory such as 'Christ under a veil of Carrara marble' in Naples. The language is fresh, original and powerful, especially as it addresses the crafting of a poem in the stages of image-gathering and thought-connecting, such as 'skimming the tight skin of a thought'. It evokes a spiritual world that exists in the poet's lines without any direct or obvious language or reliance on traditional religious symbolism.

'The Quality of Light':

A triptych on light with chiaroscuro themes redolent of Renaissance art, this deceptive sequence gives materiality to the illumined states. Image, symbolism and address are used deftly to evoke the communal effects of light. Through weather a sense of transition is manifest. Abstractions are intermingled with simple but precise images to validate the description of things 'incandescent', 'unforgiving' and 'unbroken' and the ending is splendid and compelling.

A quiet meditation on life in a town, with its simple, ordinary pleasures and everyday landscapes, and of the human struggle to live alongside nature.