

Sentinel Champions #9 | February 2012

Foreword

This issue Sentinel Champions is different from others because it features work from not just the Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry and Short Story Competitions July 2011, but also the winning and highly commended poems from the Sentinel Annual Poetry Competition 2011 (SAPC-11).

Let's begin the delicious journey with 'The Maitre d'' – the first prized short story by Leo Madigan from our July 2011 quarterly competition. It is a charming tale about Jimmy, a waiter who wants to make good, live the good life and give Suzie, his girlfriend the time of her life. Madigan so brings to life the insecurities of the poor stepping into the world of the rich and famous that we can taste them. But at the end of this story, Jimmy gets to realise that things are not always what they seem and that he is not alone in the world of make-believe. A well-accomplished tale with believable characters.

We move straight on to 'The Causation of the Virgin Mother in a Tipperary Barn' - the multi-layered poem by Terry Jones, winner of our annual poetry competition £500 first prize. My Catholic-born wife was not at all very pleased with the poem simply on the account of the title. She never read it, but wondered why a poem about sex with the Virgin Mother (thinking Virgin Mary here) in a barn should be so honoured. Having not read the poem myself at the time, I had said, "first of all I don't think *causation* means having sex, and in any case, I don't believe that Virgin Mary ever was at a barn in the Munster area of the Republic of Ireland." After five readings and I am certain to read this poem some more, I can attest that this poem is a masterfully-crafted, somewhat mischievous brain teaser that ransacks the back garden of physical and spiritual relationships to show how egos in relationships respond to each other's actions and feelings. There is intimacy here and the beautiful girl in it could be any special one on any given day and it is all highly subject to interpretation. This is how *The Causation* begins:

O but she was a lovely girl, the shadow in her hair,
and her eye like a glint of water, light on her face,
way she stood with a bend of the hip like a tree
and her head tilted. Pure as a well the leg and lift of her;
light as a blossom on a meadow's wind,

Then there is Jen Campbell's 'The Chicken, The Egg and My Sister' – third prize winner in the same annual competition. This poem reminds me of the 'horror' I feel sometimes that living in England, my son may never feel comfortable slaughtering chicken for Christmas or other festivities as we do in Nigeria. In this poem however, it is all somewhat disturbing and numbingly graphic:

My sister didn't mind killing chickens; it was the killing
of cows that bothered her most.

...

She'd stand on the power-washed patio stones
bleeding the hen's neck into a milk pail./

...

On Sundays she'd stalk supermarkets,
buy all the beef she could find and re-assemble it.

It is quite possible to think the poetic narrator's sister in this piece needs a shrink of sorts. A delightfully uncomfortable read.

'Honesty in Winter' by Linda Burnett won the annual's £250 second prize and is a soaring portrait of the vicissitudes of faith and failings and seeking alternative anchors. Clever use of the lunaria – those herbs of Europe also known as Honesty to depict this intangible state of being and believing. Roger Elkin in his adjudication report points to the poem's study of the tensions between Christianity and Moon worship, and it does appear the moon wins:

Those Coins of Judas tempted us to play, dissect
then carelessly discard their wealth, before
rushing home for tea; our broken faith
essential to reactivate the growth
and resurrect the moon.

The five Highly Commended poems from SAPC-11 also delight, being 'Turner: Rain, steam and speed' by Lynn Roberts, 'From on High' by Paul Groves, Geraldine Paine's 'Her Riley', Harry Batty's 'Goose Green' and Stephen Dempsey's 'On Balance.'

At this point, I invite you to savour the beauty of 'Children of the Rubble' – the second prized short story in the July 2011 SLQ competition. This wonderful and highly symbolic piece celebrates emancipation from paranoia and mental incarceration. Here, the children of a drug-whipped former movie star shielded from government goons who would reprogramme their minds as part of a crime prevention experiment, in a rodent-infested home, finally come of age.

You will also smile through 'Table for Two?' – Warren Paul Glover's SLQ July 2011 third prize winning short story, and a chuckle is not going to be out of place here when this story is put side by side with Madigan's 'The Maitre d''. This is a story about infidelity in marriage, in which Peter does his best to give his mistress Fiona, a memorable birthday in the city of love, and fibs to his wife that he would be at a work-related event in Leeds. But Paris holds a nasty surprise for him, where he realises that his sinned-against wife Carol is no angel after all. The birthday dinner and weekend in Paris goes terribly wrong. Table for Two? will get many cheated women on their feet screaming 'yes, yes, yes.' Glover's story is sparse, very economical and engaging. It leaves the reader at the end writing the next scenes. Some people may have issues with the severally alternating points of view in 'Table for Two?' but I can't shake this feeling that, Glover, being an accomplished playwright has adapted this story from a short play and has kept the scenes as they were.

Were space no object in this magazine, I would certainly have something to say about every winning or commended work published herein. Just quickly, I'd like to say what a great joy it has been to read Jenny Donnison's beautiful 'Starlings' - winner of the SLQ poetry competition (July 2011), about a couple whose relationship is choking on textured silences who take an evening out to see a flock of Starlings showing off against the backdrop of Brighton Beach's sky. You will find this poem fascinating, from the visual form of it – a rectangular block in the middle of the page,

the minimal punctuation and lines running into each other that punches the air out of your lungs. Starlings is a worthy champion poem in the great company of her own other poem 'Aestivation' and Richard Halperin's 'The River 8' – the respective third and second prize winners in that competition.

I am particular grateful to our great July 2011 quarterly competition judges; Kachi A. Ozumba (short stories), Bob Beagrie (poetry) and Roger Elkin, judge of the annual poetry competition for the job of finding the winners and commended work that have fed this quarter's Sentinel Champions magazine. But more, my gratitude goes out to the hundreds of writers who continue to support the Sentinel writing competitions.

This year, we shall be introducing the Sentinel Annual Short Story Competition to be judged by Tears in the Fence editor David Caddy. As usual, we shall be counting on your continued support and participation.

Enjoy SC#9



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