

SENTINEL ANNUAL POETRY COMPETITION 2010

(Sentinel Literature Festival Poetry Competition is now known as
Sentinel Annual Poetry Competition)

Adjudication Report: Roger Elkin

Adjudicating poetry competitions is always a challenge: demanding and simultaneously pleasurable. It is fascinating to read how other folk tackle the demands of their Muse; and many entrants submitted poems that were stimulating and humbling in turn.

The entries had a variety of forms - sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, regular quatrains and (primarily) free-verse structures. The subject matter was similarly varied and various: family (from grandparents to grandchildren); death (the dead, dying, new-born and still-born); the problems of life (work, unemployment, retirement); hobbies and pastimes (gardening, fishing); Nature poems (animals – lots of cats and birds); mood pieces of place and moment which were often nothing more than image-spinning exercises; loss (lost love; lost youth; lost moments; lost opportunities); love, courtship, marriage, separation, divorce; war from all countries and ages; paintings, music and photographs; and a crop of poems in response to recent events. While some had little idea of contemporary poetry and need to read widely from current collections and magazines, at the other end of the scale, there was much evidence of committed, dedicated, skilfully-crafted writing that deserves to be published, read and shared.

After two readings of every poem, the second one of which was aloud - my wife thought I'd begun to flip under the strain! - I arrived at a long-list of 40 poems. A third, fourth and fifth reading produced a further pruning to a short-listed 13 poems which I then allowed to simmer in my mind for days before several more readings (impossible to calculate) sorted the entries into the final order.

It is interesting to note that the prize-winning poems and several of the highly-commended share the feature of falling short (most of them well-short) of the maximum line-length. In other words, the quality of the writing in form and content is more relevant than the quantity.

Highly Commended (in alphabetical order by title)

- *August*
- *Etna*
- *Final Burn*
- *If I were to write honestly*
- *Lark Mirror*
- *Lost for Words*
- *Song and Dance*
- *Summer's End: Paxos*
- *The Butterflies, Kew Gardens*
- *Vino Del Licor*

Third Prize goes to *A small glow* by .

This is a deceptively casual account of an ordinary event, inconsequential in its significance and underwritten with a colloquial ease that captures exactly the almost off-hand relationships between friends travelling by car through the night. The description and imagery are pruned to an economic exactness which is both visual and full of feeling; the diction is precise and clearly-focused, - “the cherry glow dot of a roll up cig” - and the occasional internal half-rhymes provide a safe anchor. Though the friends get lost, the poem's journey is secure; its destination guaranteed.

Second Prize goes to *Standing With Oliver in Oliver's Garden* by .

This is a striking account of Oliver's attempt to re-awaken his language by forging it back into speech after a stroke. As the poem records this, it also presents, piece by piece, an image of this shoe-designer, almost building him like the shoes he designs, giving him identity like the corncrake's creak coming "out of a lagoon of mist below the hill". These processes are economically delineated, and imaginatively described – for example the use of "pencils" as a verb. This is a moving poem.

First Prize goes to *Filming "The Beheading of Daniel Pearl"* by .

From an initial reading, this poem struck forcibly home, not only because of its striking subject matter, but also because of its dramatic presentation with its use of short staccato phrases that lend the poem an almost surreal-brutal tone that echoes the brutality of what it describes. It is a grim subject; the description startlingly visual: "the minaret-necked cormorants"; the skin-dent "shallow as a GI's crew-cut"; the fake head "drooling ketchup". The casual, off-hand money-driven practicality of the poem's persona brilliantly parallels the hard-edged process of the actual decapitation: art mirroring life indeed. This is an accomplished work of poetry: uncomfortable and stark.

My congratulations go to the prize-winners; and a big "thank-you" to all the poets for allowing me to share their worlds.

Roger Elkin