

## Sentinel Annual Poetry Competition 2015

### Adjudication Report by Afam Akeh

Reading Jacques Ranciere for a poetry essay I began before doing this competition meant that I would be specially concerned about egalitarian representation and fairness in the adjudication process. I would show much willingness to negotiate inclusion for non-standard forms and practices. I had judged poetry in the past with a decided perspective, possibly trained prejudices, on form, style, subject and value. This time I wanted to allow a fair hearing (or reading) of poems that do not sound or look like whatever poems are supposed to sound and look like. I was willing as judge to deploy enough elasticity in interpretation to enable competition success for any kind of poem, including poems with controversial subjects or references.

I was certainly looking for evidence of competence and consistency in craft, but the approach would be to allow equal opportunity for both centred and 'fringe' conversations on practice and the nature of form in the contemporary. There would be no obeisance for notions of the well-bred poem sponsored by creative writing education or other syndicated official poetics claiming canonical primacy in our common creative representation of the contemporary.

In choosing to side-step differential aesthetic assessment of the entries (on the basis of form, style and subject), I hoped eventually to strip the adjudication process of overdetermining criteria and focus entirely on performance. The challenge I had was to determine relative and comparative levels of ambition and achievement in the competition – what poems were offering the best creative and contextual value to me as reader and judge, how well each poem worked with the creative material available to it, whether a poem was doing the best and most it could for the kind of poem it identifies as, how skilfully it was fulfilling the creative goals it set for itself.

Real value is determined by measuring the performance claims of one thing against that of another of the same kind, or by measuring achievement across forms of value relative to purpose. This meant looking for where the competitive advantage was won between poems of a similar kind, and then among those representing different practices or poetics. There were nearly three hundred poems to choose from, many of them equally deserving of honour. Beyond evidence of competence in craft, I sought poems of individual character and affecting sensitivity, meritorious work with a fresh quality to them. Perhaps in critique of Ranciere, I was open to embrace exceptional or unique value wherever I could find it – including in the many entries representing that familiar, patently safe but now oversubscribed, narrative interpretation of the poem as personal diary or escapist journal.

As may be already evident to some readers of this report, all my efforts at enabling equal access to the adjudication process for every kind of poem would in the end not negate the reality of subjectivity in judgement. Informed critical judgement depends on learning and experience, which, even with standardized or restrictive regulation, remain subject to differentiation through individual interpretation. No two literary judges will always exactly agree. This is why in a poetry competition not winning is not always the same thing as not being good enough. Winners and non-winners of any closely contested poetry competition, such as this Sentinel competition, can celebrate or otherwise be consoled knowing that a different arrangement (even a different set) of winners is also possible.

However, judges can and do often achieve trained consensus or agreement on value, on what remarkable genius or notable talent may look like. We can expect that any number of fair, trained and experienced judges will recognize and accurately select representative excellence from the best value works in a competition. What we cannot so easily predict in a close contest are the particular poems independent and uniquely experienced judges will finally favour for the available prizes. It can be assumed then that in this Sentinel poetry competition, even with its generous policy of promoting eighteen winning and commended entries, some deserving poems have been left out of the honours roll.

In conclusion, I now feel able to concede that integrity in the adjudication process depends not so much on any fail-safe science of interpretation or some uncontested truth in our understanding of value, but on *joint enterprise*, that is, on our common investment in the profitability of the process. This overarching profit motive is personal and also corporate. All the involved in poetry competitions (the organisers, competitors and judges), individually and collectively, want a rewarding outcome, one that validates them as people of achievement, so they all work really hard to make that happen, deploying their finances, talent, training and experience to the best of their ability. The common goal is success and excellence. A successful poetry competition promotes the winners, but also validates this human sense of possibility, desire for achievement, and expectation of progress. In the end it is this common investment in the profitability of the process, not any weighting of the particular manner of intervention by a judge that guarantees success and longevity for poetry competitions.

Of particular interest to me as a poetry reader and competition judge at this time is the increased referencing of the political in a growing proportion of new work, including the poems entered for this competition. I am intrigued that this is my experience in a competition located outside Africa or elsewhere in the developing world. The proportion of politically themed poems submitted for this competition was of course much lower than the significantly higher numbers usually entered for competitions in the developing world. But the experience of this UK-based Sentinel

competition does seem to suggest increased recent encroachment of lived politics into creative spaces, affecting practice.

It is a much troubled world. The contemporary unconscious is exercised by sectarian and economic divides in many countries. There is the renewed unpleasantness of militarism among superpower and regional power actors – and terrorism, state and corporate surveillance activism, the impact of all these on personal safety and freedom, that sense of an increasingly inhospitable earth, with depleted resources and restive migrant populations from warring nations challenged by closed borders and closing minds. It should not at all surprise that some of the new poetry is taking notice even in parts of the world which are usually differently focused. Interpretation and levels of signification differ but the sense of a more politically sensitive poetic was certainly evident in this Sentinel competition. There was also a significant number of poems interested in the visual arts, some merely referencing art history. I was pleased by this sense of an engaged interdisciplinary interest in the poetry of this competition.

I note finally that an encouraging number of poets submitted several poems. This can be read as subscriber endorsement of the Sentinel poetry competition, now with its established place in the British literary competitions calendar. It is the case that even in a competition which is judged 'blind', that is, without identifying information on the poets, experience with competitions and poetry reading may still offer clues to a judge and help to associate any number of entries with one poet, name remaining unknown. Through this 'close reading' of the writing and print style it was possible to discover and celebrate the fact that a supportive number of poets had multiple entries in this competition. As noted earlier, this Sentinel annual competition honours eighteen entries. These include the first, second and third prize winners, five highly commended poems and ten other honourable mentions. As competition judge I have kept pleasant company with all these poems, and now know them well enough to offer my brief thoughts on some of them in the competition result which follows.

## Competition Results

### Commended Poems

**Al McClimens** - *Keats on the Moon*

**Mandy Pannett** - *Wings*

**Audrey Ardern-Jones** - *Sight Beyond*

**Anne M Carson** - *Vintage Song*

**Heather Combe** - *De Motu Cordis (On the Motion of the Heart)*

**Eithne Cullen** - *The Whisper of Stars*

**Mary Rozmus-West** - *Upon a Night*

**Seán Street** - *Liverpool Bay*

*Ruth Calway - Homing Bird*  
*Sharon Black - Naming the Colour*

## Highly Commended Poems

### **Aelred Down** - *Redacted*

A poem with the appearance of a crossword puzzle, in which significant portions of its 21 lines are blackened out to achieve that impression of redacted information in official secret documents is not an easy winning choice in a poetry competition. But this short poem is worthy of its honour because beyond that innovative inking out of words, there is evident competence also in the crafting and linkage of the words which do appear. Repetition is deployed to enable the idea of the poem as a redacted document from a hostage-taking or interrogation situation.

There is something profoundly existential about the incompleteness of the information the poem provides, and its forbidden dark patches – black holes? – which invite a reader to enquire more. The reader is moved to mentally experiment with versions of possible information fillers for the redacted portions of the poem's incomplete world of meaning. This is a successful graphic depiction of censorship, which in its bid to silence disclosure with redaction actually draws attention to those missing parts – what they do not say, what they are not allowed to say

The men have experience in these..... theatres / -----  
----- we have asked them----- to / ----- we have  
demanded that they do / ----- that they do this-----  
job in hand / I pass the gun to her and say----- / -----  
----- if you don't----- / ----- your son  
will die today

It is not clear that the poem is representing just one document or even imagining only one incident, but similar redactions are recorded three times, including these in the concluding lines of the poem

The men are wailing in the streets----- / -----  
- and are covered in----- ambition / and are covered in bone  
dust----- / ----- and in tears / I pass the child  
to her and say----- / ----- If you don't-  
----- / ----- your son will ----- die today

**Noel Williams** - *Overgrown*

A 'neglected' garden shed is at the centre of this part-confessional work. The shed is storage space for disused or broken furniture and other household belongings. It harbours secrets, things hidden away that should have been given or thrown away

In it those toys that Oxfam should've had – / the microscope with slides  
of spider-legs / and eye-bright copper sulphate, a bible scribbled  
through, / bruised Swoppets and the yellow saxophone / with scarlet  
keys still creased in cellophane/ as if a toy-shop window bent and  
buckled around it.

But the shed also serves as a dump for old distrusts, disappointments and disagreements, a means by which the poem unpacks intricate aspects of the relational politics of a couple (one of whom is involved with writing), revealing some unresolved issues

You knew I'd kept them. But never said. As if / your silent threnody  
could scour guilt from these things / heaped up and hidden. Forget this  
pushchair with rust-soiled wheels / once a chariot. Imagine this  
typewriter / stuffed with your hundred spidered drafts / holds nothing  
but pages yearning to be trees.

The aim is to clear out the shed, end that cloying hold of a broken past on the present – perhaps on the relationship – but there is some reluctance to let go. There are 'brambles' on the way to the shed to deter movement, but also the decision that it was probably

Time to cut this to the root.

The reader is left with the thought, however, that there remains an abiding conflict in the situation, a continuing dispute about what is important, what matters in experience, or in a relationship

But what's the point of knowing? I know this billhook, / for example,  
was your aunt's, borrowed to slice / the first thick swathe of nettles from  
this yard / to clear it for that red pedal car. So what?

**A C Clarke** - *In the Walled Garden*

This one is for the purists, for those who wear their poetry like badges of honour and want their poems to look and sound exactly like poems – with enjambments, metonymy, metaphors, personification, imagery, with poetry's unerring genius at

giving lyrical voice to the mundane life, making innocuous moments matter. 'In the Walled Garden' does these standard things of poetry well. It wants to mark the change of seasons, and sets out from the first line to suggest that

This afternoon on the cusp of October / each blade of grass still keeps / its glitter-drop memento

Autumn is the represented season, but Autumn in this poem isn't so much about passage, about loss or the faded-out life of Not-Summer. This is a poem about recovery, renewal and reinvention, about the continuity of experience

A feather dropped from a pigeon rests / near a litter of shed leaves. / It doesn't matter, / the way a tumble of windfalls / means not carelessness / but plenty, their bruises / glut for wasps.

For those who live, death is never far, nor is the damage of the existential grind, as Autumn faithfully reminds, but survival is also possible

Outside, traffic is growling, a plane / thrums overhead. I think / of glass and steel colliding, the sharp / glint of wreckage / flesh crushed purple; / and how bombs, falling, burst / into angry flowers.

Autumn has its losses well covered by the assurances of this poem.

### **Oonah V Joslin** - *Toronto Girl*

With only eight lines, this is one of many excellent short poems in this competition but 'Toronto Girl' caught my special attention because of its subversive form. In the pacy run-on lines of its first stanza, things, thoughts, places and moments seem to happen and then quickly move over or away, to be replaced by other seemingly unconnected things, thoughts, places and moments.

There is constant movement, no breaks or stops (as the poem itself notes), and ultimately the sense of an inadequately lived, frenetic or freaked out life, mostly going through the motions of experience. There is the suggestion of the postmodern in this unsettled, uncommitted sampling of a gap-filled life

Slender quick how you think no consonance no consequence no breaks events through / the day like cup of coffee double shot no lid no lip you flit among high rise traffic / fumes and sun-glint twenty four carat bank finger-sampling sushi mall-bites a / fluttering cyber-walk mannequin ear-plugging louder to drown the surround sound / long into the slim-line stream-line uniform casino Niagara night falls.

A *slow* reading of the enjambed lines yields fruit, connecting for the reader the experiences of an eventful but perfectly ordinary metropolitan day. Ironically, it is in the staccato bursts of the much shorter lines in stanza two that we get a more complete sense of living as an ordered human experience.

A representation of life as a series of passing, possibly unsatisfactory, non-relational activities continues in this final part of the poem, but the clipped lines also successfully convey a fuller sequence of meaningful experience

restful dawn / golden girl awakes / another gadget-day to go

### **Catherine Atherton** - *Austral*

The sense of isolation and remoteness of location hinted at by the title, permeates meaning and experience in this reportorial work. The warning from the poem's stand-alone opening line is emphatic

Do not expect a rescue service

Life is on edge. Location is not exactly stated but there is enough information in the poem to indicate a polar experience or something close to it. We encounter penguins, seals, icebergs and the usual sense of a polar time warp

Day and night, separated / only by gradations of light, / make sleep a  
conscious act / timetabled from the darker world

The relative safety of passage in a ship does little to help this passenger cope with the arbitrary location and its challenging weather

Cold invades the bones. / The ice in my gin is millennia old

But there is also much in such a location to inspire the imagination, and it is in one of such stirring moments that the best part of the poem is born. The experience of watching ice break is covered with fresh farmyard imagery and mythic metaphors

A mass of icebergs on the horizon: / as they calve, their offspring melt /  
into mythic forms – dragons, sphinxes, gryphons, / pleated like  
whaleskin.

An otherwise simple nature poem, 'Austral' charms with its realistic portrayal of life in extremis, an experience to which is summoned unusual survival skills, humour and imagination

I float among seals whose home is the sea / fly with birds who sleep in  
the sky / wake at the edge of the planet.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize Poem

**Philip Burton** - *Garments*

An introductory guide of some sort to the world of garments, but this is of course not all that recommends this quirky, jolly poem. The poem parades garments, or lists them, with lyrical fervour. We find a 'glam' dress sense, hipster retro couture and related sartorial exotica

Egyptian gingham, spandex kimono, / the fresh cool finger-sift of chesca  
bead / Indonesian bolero, silver lace midi, / the backhand slap of gold  
sequin mesh / organdie, organza, spandex, tulle, velour, / the knuckle  
rap of beaded scallop / hint of chiffon, pale braided paisley lace

Rhythm, repetition and its alliterative play on names are particular interests of the poem

organza, organdie...  
ritzy plain, plain ritzy...

Even the overfamiliar onomatopoeic word 'whoosh' still impresses in 'the whoosh of louche vanilla blouse', because, as readers, we are drawn in and led on by the bonhomie conspiratorial tone and sense of play by which the poem progresses. We allow personification like 'backhand slap of gold sequin mesh' as the poem successfully enchants and involves us even more in its treasure hunt at a second hand clothes shop.

It is not so easy to write a light-hearted poem which marks its readers, especially one which has clothes as its subject, and knows what material they are made of, what parts of the world they are from – 'Egyptian gingham', 'Indonesian bolero', 'Ottoman jersey', 'sandy camel hair gap-year anorak', etc. Almost imperceptibly in all that playful banter, the poem darts across, mid-humour, to its one weighty thought regarding the displayed garments

a live rendition of democracy; love / how they pull together on the rail –  
people should take a lead from clothes –

And then, quick as a flash, it returns to its playful stance with a final orgasmic gasp as the shopping choice is made and purchase ensues

ah! The worsted pull of gabardine. / I pay. I should pay more. I go

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize Poem

Noel Williams - *Return to Kabul, 1990*

One of a significant number of political poems in the competition, but the strength of this poem is the controlled documentary showing of its truth. It is about the ravages of war, but there are no great tears here, only the telling evidence of 'crazed walls', 'a blackened mile of buses lining the pits', 'sixty thousand silences' and a 'fizzing' television set about which the terrible question is asked: 'Is it kicked in and sightless, like Mazar-al-Sharif?' That image of a city 'kicked in and sightless' abides.

A human family is at the centre of this poem, determined to enable the simple tricks of survival – keeping things normal, even traditional, to keep the anomie away, continuing, for example, the tradition of the family meal, filtering rice and cumin with fingers, chewing 'kidney beans folded in spinach', just hanging in there together and finding humour in small things

Stained by firelight we laugh about the carpet, / the lost washing  
machine, the hours / we prayed at that fizzing TV.

But things are not the same of course. The Kabul to which this poem returns is a beaten up land with 'the carcass of a T72' now part of its landscape. Since there is no epic celebration here of the fabled *indomitable human spirit*, life, redemption and continuity almost pass the reader unnoticed but these too are documented in the midst of the damage

In the Ziaranth glazed by autumn sky, / a woman in a white burqa  
kisses the caliph's tomb. / Those lights rising over the broken stone / are  
not the beams of any helicopter.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Poem

Diane Cook - *Strix Aluco*

All the major creative faculties seem at work in this winsome paean for the tawny owl. The poem progresses by a dramatic monologue, infused with humour and historical references, in which the tawny owl is both subject and relational other. It is in direct conversation with the owl's active but non-speaking presence. Though a knowledge-based poem, familiarity with the subject isn't all 'Strix Aluco' puts on show. It can be read as a nature poem – evoking the vulnerability of its subject

But the irrational was god / when he put your ears on askew, / crowning  
you an unholy bird. / You've turned that around: / calculating where  
two angles cross / soft scamperings in leaf mould / down to the third  
claw / left paw.

but also the capacity for devastating predatory activity – the tawny owl perhaps  
symbolic of that seemingly contradictory life enhancing and also damning logic of the  
natural order

You have solved the swoop-grab ratio / of vole-shadow to deepening  
wingspan / as easy as  $\pi^2$ , and digested / the full philosophy of mouse  
/ before the dark had a chance.

Worth noting too is the relational place of human agency in the poem – how the  
poem's subject (the tawny owl), like much of the natural world, affects its human  
presence and is in turn affected by that human agent, sometimes in really definitive  
ways. In the poem this interaction between the human and the tawny owl  
(representing the natural world) moves the human to a dream of heights and bird-  
flight

From your urban revenant of forest / you tear a hole in my dream. / The  
one where I'm on the precipice of bird-flight

That interaction can result in a dominated human experience

with your wings sprung like flick-knives, / your man-trap talons. / This  
close, / I am no more than an idea of animal sinew / flexed behind the  
membrane of your eye.

but there is also that evidence of the human agent dominating and pressing the natural  
world into service for the healing and nurturing of human life – interpreting  
experience in human terms

No wonder they called you Strix, / the Romans. They knew / a single  
lunule egg would check alcoholism, / long before the dawn-rakers / in  
circumferential sway around the ivy / mixed their random pukings /  
with your pellet's perfect revisions.

In poetry a little humour helps, and there is that sense of this information-laden,  
potentially dark work being lightened just the right hue by the injection of humour.

## **Administrator's Note**

Many thanks to Afam Akeh for this really beautiful report. It is a great essay in its own right and is one that I suspect many entrants whether or not they have come away with a prize today will return to over and over again. Afam's report reminds me of reading detailed and respectful adjudication reports by such previous Sentinel competition judges as Will Daunt, Roger Elkin and Noel Williams who has achieved a Highly Commended poem and Second Prize in this competition. Williams has over the years won Sentinel Literary Quarterly Prizes and even judged some.

First prize winner Diane Cook is a newcomer in the Sentinel Writing Competitions Wall of Honour. It has been such a pleasure to see the names of poets who have won or been commended in past Sentinel competitions come into this year's line-up of winners and commendees, notably;

- Sharon Black, first prize winner, Sentinel Annual Poetry Competition 2013.
- Philip Burton, first prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (August 2014).
- Seán Street, second prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (November 2014)
- Al McClimens, second prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (January 2011)
- Audrey Ardern-Jones, second prize winner, Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry Competition (August 2015)
- And Mandy Pannett, third prize winner in the very first Sentinel Literary Quarterly Poetry competition (July 2009).

That six of the eighteen poems in this year's list of winners are by our past winners spanning the period 2009 to 2015 is a testament to the support Sentinel has enjoyed over the years. It is also noteworthy that in these competitions judged blind by different judges, these poets have been recognised.

The eighteen poems from this competition will be published in the July to September issue of Sentinel Literary Quarterly on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, 2016.

Congratulations all and get ready for the Sentinel Annual Poetry Competition 2016 also to be judged by Afam Akeh.

**Nnorom Azuonye**  
Administrator