

Judging The Save As Poetry Competition

When I first sat down with the large pile of poems entered into the Save As Poetry Competition, I set the poems out into three smaller piles: Not Quite Poems Yet, Poems But Not Fully Singing, and the third pile: Definitely Poems. It might be helpful then, if I define what I think a poem is.

A poem, on a very basic level, pays close attention to words and the music they make. A poem builds cohesive pictures from words and uses robust metaphors to carry over its weight of meaning. A poem is a distillation of the world, it is elegant, and it carries no more words than it needs to translate experience from writer to reader. The poems I have chosen as winners of this competition do all of this, and in so doing, burnt themselves into my imagination like light on photographic paper.

I lived with the stack of 20 'Definitely Poems' for a few days and knew that of course, I must whittle the list down even further. The poem that I eventually chose as the winner of the competition was *August 1914*. Given that much has been written about The Great War in its centenary year, I was particularly interrogatory when I first read this poem. If a subject has been covered a lot, and that subject is a powerful and emotive one, any new poem must shuck off familiarity and make fresh. *August 1914* does exactly that in a surefooted – here is my subject, listen to me – manner. It begins and ends with the hands of men. It talks of work tools, a blind horse, and sets out just what class of *smithereening* man's hands are capable of. The men that leave their village for the war are claimed by the jerky photography that framed them walking away from their lives and into a history which remembers them only as *insignia of grin, tash and fag*. The final section of the poem, the narrator enters the poem to claim one of these men as their own grandfather – a stranger, a ghost who sits in his *workshop, just to stare at his hands, hour by hour*.

The poem I chose as second place winner also drifted to the top of the pile easily. *Robert Frank: Prairie Mailbox* is an extremely deft piece of Ekphrasis that conjures perfectly the mood of a Robert Frank photograph for me. There is a hollowed-out loneliness carried by the empty mailbox that whistles and breathes to mark the passing hours.

Father is a hybrid poem/prose poem, which I have placed third. It feels to be part of a larger narrative about a dysfunctional family who *follow each other's absences around the house, /Breakfast in shifts*, but perhaps that larger narrative is life. The shifts between prose and poetry in the poem serve as dramatic devices to control the flow of time in the poem; the shorter lines convey a deeper meditation.

I would venture that most people judging this competition might have reached the same final 20, but the poems I've commended here are the ones that sang out to me loudest. *Lazulum* for the poem's ability to still a fleeting moment, *The Moon Option* for its inherent sadness and haunting final escape, and *The Dragon's Confession* for how it plays with myth, belief and ambiguity. *Twin* is a beautifully judged metaphor.

I very much enjoyed reading all of the poems entered into the competition – even the ones which needed a little more work to resolve them. Finally, it must be remembered that the only poet we are really in competition with is ourselves.