Introduction – the judging process

The moon and the cosmos have been popular subjects for poets - right from the early fragments of Sappho. So this year’s SaveAs theme challenged writers to find different things to say, and different ways to say them. It was a challenge that has been well and truly met.

Judging the competition has been a demanding task, as much a result of the variety and quality of the work, as of the high volume of entries submitted this year.

I tend to read a poem in much the same way as I might listen to a piece of music, to read it often and to come back to it after an interval of reflection. I like to read a poem aloud – responding to sound as well as pleasing shapes and coherence on the page. I am always looking for freshness of language, and a strength and authenticity in the relationship of the poem to the theme. With 317 poems to choose from, this took some time, with three full passes giving me 52 definite yeses, with a further 29 maybes.

During the next stage I looked at more technical aspects of structure, the poem’s emotional content, and its effectiveness at conveying an idea. At the end of this stage I was left with the 21 poems that comprise the full longlist. Reducing this longlist to a final shortlist of nine was, perhaps, the hardest part of the process. There are many fine poems that remained on the longlist, and which can be checked out on the SaveAs website.

The nine poems that you are going to hear tonight are diverse and exceptional, and all poets can take pride in beating off such stiff competition. They will be read in alphabetical order of poet’s surname.

*Super Blue Moon* by Fiona L Bennett

Beautiful and evocative, this taut little poem shows us a narrator unexpectedly caught out by the moon. And by so doing, it demonstrates what it is like to submit to nature rather than to attempt to acquire it.

The language is inventive throughout, a static adjective becomes a verb, and there is a nice patterning of sound in “cobbled cut-through” or the open vowels of “the moon in her closest orbit”. It gently moves the reader from images of clenched restraint, to the unlocking of mind and body.

*Stella Maris Nursing Home* by Michael Casey

Read by  Dr Agata Rozek

Our second poem looks inwards rather than outwards, the universe of its protagonists is closing down. The occupants of the Stella Maris Nursing Home are stardust, but no longer golden, and succumbing to their depleted carbon state.

“Gravity won out in the end”.

The poet is unflinching in the way he conflates astronomical entropy with physical frailty, and there is a mordant humour throughout in the biting metaphors. This is a spiky, direct and honest account of a possible hard landing.

*Sleeping in Space* by Jo Field

There were a number of poems that dealt with the experience of Michael Collins, the third, non-landing astronaut on the Apollo 11 mission.

This next is a hypnotic account – dreamlike and surreal in places. The swooping motion of the capsule, as it passes in and out of radio contact, “plunging to the far side and back”, is efficiently conveyed throughout by initial and medial caesurae.

The steady heartbeats and unblinking stars are set against a wavering and hallucinatory isolation.

*Frank C Mars creates his first chocolate bar, Minnesota, 1888*

by Anna Kisby Compton, read by Danny Rhodes

The premise of this poem is intriguing and unusual – history is condensed to draw a comparison between the dreams of a poor, sick prairie child, and mankind's desire to travel beyond our home planet.

There is a fabulous sense of place, with hardship and extreme weather centre-stage from the very first line. Threats, natural and man-made, swirl around the Minnesota cabin – plosives rattle like hard pebbles of rain against a window.

“polio-pallid fingers”, “boned-bodice like a brace”

The achievement of the space programme is shown to be ambiguous, and allowed to teeter on the edge of banality – space candy with a corporate logo.

Nevertheless, there is a rugged determination in the efforts that have brought us here, and which deserves admiration. The ending is finely poised between laughter and wonder.

*Earthrise* by John Ling, read by Gillian Laker

The subject of this work is probably the most famous photograph of the twentieth century, certainly one of the most influential in its effect on the nascent ecology movement of the time.

The poem has a breathless quality. Compound-complex sentences carry us on relentlessly, through repetition and the piling of detail upon detail. Anticipation is palpable, until we are stopped in our tracks by the sight itself. The end of all our exploring is, as Eliot said to “know the place for the first time”.

*The four moons of a harvest* by Shanley McConnell

An extremely accomplished and original poem that mixes musical notation with the quartered moon. Controlled and expertly-structured, this work is shape-shifting and sonorous. The down-stroke of the bow.

There is grief at the base of each quarter, but a grief that has such a rich and strong connection to the living, natural world, that it allows no turning away, even from the harshest of images:

“there is a chance of storm, but not where the children are x-rays of a dry desert”.

The final phase is concerned with the solace of memory, a compendium of precious and brilliant fragments.

*Launch Pad 34 – for grissom, white and chaffee*

by Christopher R Moore

The subject of this poem is, ostensibly, the tragedy of Apollo 1, and the launch-pad fire which resulted in the deaths of three astronauts. There is a breadth of imagery which takes us from the cradle to the grave, but also back into deep time, and to man’s first strides towards technical advancement.

Shame is expressed in lines that are spare and precise, the result being a sense of chocking, which both matches the subject and the anger felt after the event. There are some beautiful internal rhymes, half-rhymes and discrete alliteration.

*“*We cut those frail bodies from the failure of the craft”

The movement from tenderness to anger is reflected in the accumulation of technology – leaving us with wider questions around what it is to be human, and what it is to be a machine.

*Cassini’s Moon Maiden (1697)* by Marina Sanchez - read by Jane Lovell

This poem took me by surprise, as it initially appeared quite formal in layout and in title. But there is an excitement of discovery reflected in the struggle between control and expression, between the age of reason and the romantic imagination, the latter over-spilling the confines of regular stanzas.

Here the use of enjambment is never awkward or quirky. New meanings can be discovered from each rereading, much like the characters Cassini saw in the seas and mountains of the moon’s surface.

Truths are various and fleeting, often found on the edge of chaos, with the known only given shape by the unknown. Or, as the poet says,

‘in the penumbra before sleep”

The ending is both enigmatic and urgent.

*Too Much* by Gary Studley

The moon in this poem is almost an adversary, illuminating more than it should. It does not allow a soft darkness to cushion pain – or a veil to be drawn.

Our human failings are thrown into stark relief by a harsh light. And yet we continue to search for an intimation of support, for opportunities, for signs of life, much as a child might seek approval from an absent parent.

From the delicious shock of the first two lines, the single stanza tumbles over itself, stretching vocabulary, moving swiftly from image to image, the old and the young, the rational and scientific, the imaginative and the fey.

The last four lines returns us to stillness, and a bleak revelation.

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| The Canterbury Christchurch Poetry Prize*Cassini's Moon Maiden (1697)*by Marina Sanchez | Commended |
| *Frank C Mars creates his first chocolate bar,* | Third |
| *Minnesota, 1888* by Anna Kisby Compton*Too Much* by Gary Studley | Second |
| *Launch pad 34 – for grissom, white and chaffee* |  First |

By Christopher R Moore