**The Canterbury Christ Church University Poetry Prize 2018**

**Theme: Gothic**

**Judge: Sonia Overall**

It was a great pleasure to judge the entries for this year’s prize. I was impressed by the quality and range of the poems, many of which showed genuine proficiency and originality.

When judging the prize, I was looking for the obvious qualities of a good poem: the confident use, or misuse, of form, sound, and technique. Beyond this, I had three key qualities in mind.

1. **Originality of approach to the theme.** ‘Gothic’ is a tricky theme to respond to, summoning literary tropes: the vampire’s graveyard, the crumbling ruin, the haunted castle. I was looking for poems that either wholly subverted these tropes or offered something more surprising. The poems on the longlist touched upon the gothic without lapsing into cliché; many of them nodded to literary tradition without leaning wholly upon it. For example, ‘Rain over the Moors’ by Gabriel Griffin, ‘Bluebeard's Cousin’ by Mary Mulholland, ‘Shelley's Heart’ by Derek Sellen and ‘Thing’ by Sarah Wimbush all demonstrated an ability to riff upon the gothic literary canon in different and interesting ways. ‘Escheresque’ by Rachel Goodman turned the nightmare prisons of Escher’s prints into spiralling and claustrophobic turns of phrase.
2. **A strong voice.** I was looking for poems with distinct voices, with expressions that showed a clear style and a consistency of tone. The poems I have chosen use powerful voices that drew me in: these pieces radiate confidence and authenticity. Some poets chose to use the first person, inhabiting narrators that are deeply unsettling: ‘Lollipop Man’ by Tina Cole, ‘For the Record’ by Lizzy Huitson and ‘Optimum Weight’ by Pamela Trudie Hodge are strong examples of using the first person to deliver a narrative shiver. Other third person voices offered strong narrative poems: ‘Ice Palace’ by Jo Field offered a historical narrative with a detached tone; ‘From a Black Lake’ and ‘With the Passing of Days’ by Graham Burchell gave a sideways glimpse into uncanny stories and situations.
3. **Lightness** **of touch**. ‘Gothic’ can imply a style that is heavy or elaborate, melodramatic or dense. The longlist shows that serious themes can also be handled lightly and, in some cases, with wry, dark humour. In fact, there were many funny entries, which, as a judge, were very welcome.

Ultimately, I had to narrow the field. So here are the poems I selected as my top four, and a little more about why I chose them.

**Honourable mention**

Of the comic responses to gothic, this was, for me, by far the funniest. The voice makes strong use of dialect, creating a credible character. The reader can see what is coming, but the final stanzas are delivered with such deftness and humour that the twist is still a delight. The list of herbs at the end shows a joyful precision and is wonderfully understated. So, an honourable mention goes to **‘Optimum Weight’ by Pamela Trudie Hodge.**

**3rd prize**

This poem is deeply unsettling. The use of first person is almost confessional, yet gives very little away. Speaking from beyond the grave is the least of this narrator’s gothic qualities: what they did in life, and how this has been ‘celebrated’, are hinted at through disturbing details. Third prize goes to **‘For the Record’ by Lizzy Huitson.**

**2nd prize**

This is an example of how effective a good title can be. It sounds innocent enough, but as soon as the gothic lens is applied, it becomes very sinister indeed. The lines of this poem pop with alliteration. It also packs a lot of punch in a very short space. The interplay of innocence and predation is deftly handled; the final line is devastating. Second prize goes to the very troubling **‘Lollipop Man’ by Tina Cole.**

**1st prize**

This poem got my attention straight away, and grew on me the more I read it. It is intriguing, clothing the fragility of its protagonist in extended domestic metaphors that let the reader in but also keep them guessing. The piece reminded me of Charlotte Gilmore Perkins’ novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*, but with added forensics. Sound is beautifully handled in this poem, building to a terrific final stanza that rings in the ears after reading. First prize goes to the stunning poem **‘Wavelength’ by Rachel Goodman.**

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Shortlist

‘Lollipop Man’ by Tina Cole

‘Wavelength’ by Rachel Goodman

‘Optimum Weight’ by Pamela Trudie Hodge

‘For the Record’ by Lizzy Huitson

Longlist

‘From a Black Lake’ by Graham Burchell

‘With the Passing of Days’ by Graham Burchell

‘Lollipop Man’ by Tina Cole

‘Ice Palace’ by Jo Field

‘Escheresque’ by Rachel Goodman

‘Wavelength’ by Rachel Goodman

‘Rain over the Moors’ by Gabriel Griffin

‘Optimum Weight’ by Pamela Trudie Hodge

‘For the Record’ by Lizzy Huitson

‘Bluebeard's Cousin’ by Mary Mulholland

‘Shelley's Heart’ by Derek Sellen

‘Thing’ by Sarah Wimbush