

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION 2016 JUDGE: ALISON BRACKEBURY: PRIZE WINNERS

‘These are very good poems,’ I noted happily when I began judging for Second Light. ‘These are very good poems,’ I repeated, sorrowfully, staring at a fat folder I could not possibly fit into the most generous shortlist. Poets, do try every opening for your work – including Second Light, next year! The winning, commended and shortlisted poems range from wicked humour to heartbreak. I admired their variety: the courageous, the colloquial, the cosmic... The best had a quality I particularly associate with Second Light: the combination of intensely good writing with the warmth and wisdom of experience.

Alison Brackenbury



Short Poem First Prize Winner: Caroline Price

The fiancée replays her video

She points them out proudly, can name them all:
that's Goody, that's Glovebox, that's Dangerous...
Someone has set these moments up,
the machine guns propped on a low stone wall
like mantises clinging to their own shadows;
beyond are wasted fields and a glimmer
like light on water. On the soundtrack
the music is bland, disarming, a cheerful thump
drowned out from time to time by caterpillar chains,
the twin rotors of a Chinook. Or the poppoppop
of gunfire, followed by a tangerine burst
of flame, mud spraying out
against a mountainside. *No-one else
can understand...* Her eyes not leaving the screen
where now the soldiers are standing in a lake
waist-deep, their arms round
one another's shoulders, *aren't they gorgeous!* –
naming them again, individuals now
but alike still in their agelessness, their grins
of young men in water anywhere.
The anodyne beat resumes and then
a quickfire of close-ups, their wounds displayed
like medals, a purple crater, a gouge, a trench...
*He's one of the rest now, he knows what it's like
to get shot at, kill someone* – On the screen
running infantry muscle their way
through a barricaded door while children watch
wide-eyed, *that's Noddy, that's Shy, the one
who died* – and suddenly they're back
in England cramming a coach
to the service, a flag-draped hall, the mother
who never stops crying though she smiles too
when the officer, after his speech, hands her
a T-shirt, the platoon's grey shirt
that they've all signed, and lifts her glass
with them, to Alex! and all their names.

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Long Poem First Prize Winner: Schoolteaching: five sonnets for performance, by Alison Mace

I

Just sometimes you begin to wonder why
you stay in thrall to a job like this:
no time for coffee – break duty –
no ‘frees’ (on cover) – so no time for a piss –
not crucial, that, in the light
of meetings at lunchtime so no chance
anyway for a drink at all, just straight
on through, weaving the weary afternoon dance,
then off again, legging it to some distant hut
for a ‘twilight’ cramming session before the exams
kick in. Then home, cook a bit, mark a bit – and that,
that breathless hike... just about sums
it up. Bedtime. That was your day.
No wonder a third of the teachers stayed away.

II

Away, some night, on a trip, perhaps to a play –
such a great thing to do, despite the tricky
preamble – money, drop-outs, people away
all morning, all day – but there for the bus if you’re lucky...
worth it, to see them have a taste of theatre.
I think of Huzma, lost in Hermione’s trial,
turning, huge-eyed: ‘How can he *do* this to her?’
Mamillius lost – the girl aghast and pale.
She’ll be the one, this time, as we say goodbye
at the dark school gates, to thank us. If no one does,
though, it won’t matter. This is me on a high!
It’s stuff you don’t *have* to do makes teaching buzz.
Home with no marking done and just nine hours
to morning registration. But who cares?

III

Who *cares*? Well, the Pastoral Staff, those specialist folk
who’re paid to process angst, and do their best
to soothe it. But kids will go to someone they like,
tell their griefs to a person they know and trust,
and that’s their English teacher, often as not,
who’s read their poems, who’s had a privileged look,
in ‘Drama’, at what is eating out a heart –
who understands, from knowing them, how they tick.
And any pretext’ll do: ‘Miss. I can’t
do this York thing. Because he used to take me there,
often. My dad. And it keeps...’ He only went
to answer the door. Just slumped across a chair,
dead. Over and over it plays in her brain.
She cries it out. Never talks to me again.

IV

Some never speak to me again, ever –
though more of them must know me than I recognise,
as we tread our town. The ones who gave most bother,
those are the gooduns, the ones who told you lies
upon lies, who tied you in knots – they’re happy to own
you, later. In Brooks’s, looking for fireback clay,
I jump: ‘Ey up, Miss, aren’t we talkin then?’
‘Marc?’ ‘Marc Richards, ay!’ ‘And it’s Marc with a C,’
I add, and he grins all over. ‘Miss – I’ve got
to apologise to yer – I know I wa’ reight bad
in them days...’ No, Marc, no... It’s really not
for him to say sorry. Because I knew – dear God! –
what he had to put up with at home, that lad. And how!
But here he is – through it? – and beaming to see me now.

V

Now, how many years later? – seventeen
since I fled the full-time slog – do I regret
the treadmill? No. I can’t. It’s odd, it’s germane
to being yourself, or having the kids you’ve got –
wasn’t that a treadmill too? – but one you trod
like breathing, to keep you *you*, to grow, to make
you the person you have to be.

But I tell you: God!

I wouldn’t do it again, if I could look
forward from when I started. And anyone
who’s dear to me, let them keep away from school –
but someone, I guess, has got to drag the young
from child-minded cradle to when they draw the dole?
No. That’s brutal. I loved it. But was I free
to live? I was not. That’s what I have to say.