

Judge's Report – Joel McKerrow

Open Poetry Category

Judging this competition was wonderful, especially because each of these placed poems demonstrate such different approaches to what poetry can do. They all deal with themes of memory, absence, and observation, but in very different ways.

First Prize — *What Will I lose*

The winning poem is a moving exploration of aging in relation to memory loss. There is fear there, but also a deep celebration of the simple things of life. Moments on walks. Memories of little things. The poem could easily have gone too far into the abstract, yet, instead, it delves into specific, sensory moments. And not the large moments in life either. There is not the expressed fear of losing memories of weddings, of celebrations, of the moments we normally would fear to lose. Rather, it's the memories of the small moments. Dogs on walks. Mice in a wheat bin. Flowers. This is what gives the poem its unique power. In choosing small moments, rather than the larger ones, the poet is inviting the reader to delve too into their own unique, small moments.

The poet shows that memory is not a collection of facts, it is texture, colour, smell, landscape, and story. And so, at once fearing the loss of these things and too celebrating the vividness of life in its minutiae. The final imagery of stories that remain being '*lit like old candelabra*' draws us into an image that holds the rest together. Each minute moment another candle on the light piece. After the set-up of the poem at the beginning, this image is the only scaffolding the poet gives the reader to hold the moments together with. There are no abstract descriptions of memory loss. There is simply story, observation, and imagery. A restraint in not over-explaining. It is sophisticated and evocative writing with a genuine emotional core. CONGRATULATIONS!

Second Prize — *Before Truth*

In this second-place poem, it is the way the poet draws us into their loss which makes the poem standout. By choosing once specific detail about their relationship with their dad, the rose becomes a simple yet extraordinary symbol of their connection. Of all the things communicated but never spoken.

The line '*Memory arrived before truth*' holds the pivotal moment of the poem, as the loss is confirmed. It shows a deep understanding of grief. The memory of the ordinary rituals of relationship opening the poet up to the reality of absence. Grief often arrives in the small things. The empty chair. The Christmas card without a name. The power of the piece lies in the way the writer trusts the symbol of the rose to carry the emotional weight of the loss and doesn't seek to over-explain it. The final reflection, then moves us into the universal. *The moments you understand, when they are no longer there.* A beautiful, intimate portrayal of relationship. Well done!

Third Prize — *Facets*

Facets takes a different approach. There is no building over-arching narrative, the poem, rather, presents fragmented observations, as glimpses of experience. The numbering reinforces this windowed approach. The different *facets*. Each facet, each window of observation is acute and vivid. Beautiful, yet tinged with darker and stranger moments. There is no sense of explanation for the specific image or the reason for its placing in the mix. The power lies in the way the poet asks the reader to make their own connections within and between the images. Brilliant. Well done.

Highly Commended — *Journeys moving, journeys moving still*

I loved the structurally experimental nature of this poem. From right to left, and back again, throughout we are drawn into one moment post-birthing and a number of moments during pregnancy. Before and after snapshots that interweave the intensity and sickness of pregnancy with a moment of sheer, intimate joy with poet's child.

The poet doesn't try to overstate the themes, they simply tell us how it was until we come to the final emotionally resonant line, a resolution that shows how 'worth it' the rough pregnancy was. **"I am Seen."** I teared up as I read that last line. Thank you for this wonderful poem. Congratulations on the commendation.

Highly Commended — *Wedding day*

Wedding Day is the exploration of the mother/daughter dynamic played out in the snapshot of a pre-wedding moment. Emotionally raw. Emotionally resonant. The poet did an incredible job of showing us, rather than telling us, about the relationship. It is not overly poetic. Simply stated. Matter of fact. Yet dripping with emotionality.

We are drawn into the short moment and then, at the end, drawn out of it, to read of the consequence of resolution borne from that moment. To 'try – for the rest of my life – to leave her behind.' It was a brilliant piece. Well done.