

Edward Thomas Fellowship Poetry Competition 2021

In judging the competition this year it has been a real delight to step away from my screen and the ceaseless information-cascade that lurks there, in order to just sit quietly with so many lyrical poems on paper. At this moment in the current global pandemic it's of course tempting to look for unifying or underlying themes. But while there's been a more marked tone of inwardness and reflection, and of remembrance and regret, in a large number of the poems I read, the strength of the best work revealed an impressive variety of ways in which to explore and unfold those impulses to feeling, observation and thought.

Many of the shortlisted and winning poems this year play to differing degrees with ideas of the beauty that can be found in suffering and loss. It's a recurrent theme in Thomas's own work, not least in his diary - "Enemy plane like pale moth beautiful among shrapnel bursts." The winning poem **Bedlington Terriers** works a compelling fusion of the real and the visionary, charged at every step of its economical narrative in its vivid exploration of the power held within Craig Aitchison's crucifixion paintings - resonant also with the significance of Easter within Thomas's own poems and life.

Both the second-prize winners, **Our Lady of the Tortelli** and **Evidence**, share that same power of vivid onward propulsion in their explorations of their very different subjects. I recognised immediately how touched I was by the sheer joy that lifts from **Our Lady of the Tortelli** in its rise and fall of imagery and transformative vision of the pasta-maker at work, a poem that I imagine must have uplifted the poet in the writing of it too. In a similar way, I knew straight away that **Evidence** contained something far beyond what a first reading of its building, sharpening narrative could give me, with its quietly detonating visionary moment in the final lines.

This has been an interestingly difficult final cut to make this year with so many strong poems submitted, and I have to say warm thanks to all the poets whose work I've read even though sadly not all could make it to the final shortlist .

JD 21 Feb 2021