

Edward Thomas Poetry Competition 2022

Whittling the long-listed fifty poems down to twenty was a more painful process than I had imagined; then reading them all again to reach a shorter list of ten even more so. And so on for the final three poems chosen as winners and the five recommended. The discomfort of judging comes from seeing various strengths and merits but having, perforce, to pit one poem against another, which is – it hardly needs to be said – an unnatural way of reading.

Various kinds of ‘nature poetry’ were a common feature of the whole batch, and I suppose that this comprises a loose category in which Edward Thomas himself might be conscripted. The minute, local and informed observation of his natural surroundings, and how they mesh with an inner landscape, places him in a continuum with Wordsworth, and it is with this tradition that many of the submitted poems align themselves. The urgency of an ecological crisis, already apparent to G.M. Hopkins in ‘Binsey Poplars’, inevitably hovers over anyone writing about nature at present.

‘Shadowland’, the poem I finally chose as the winner, has a clear link with Thomas, especially ‘Lob’, with its portrayal of an archetypal countryman, a poem likewise studded with ancient place-names. The winning poem’s fluent pentameters have a traditional, even a nostalgic feel to them, in keeping with the evocation of a vanished English landscape and history. The danger of this kind of approach is that nostalgia sites the poem safely in a past that is sealed and timeless, but I think the poet wins through with the fine-grained descriptions and sharply observed detail, as in this alliterative passage:

Hung there too was
The harness of the horses used by him
To drag the hewn trunks out on furrowed tracks
Which once the timber tug had gone, the deer
Took as their own...

(Perhaps a hint of Hopkins’s “who ne’er hung there” as well?) It is a deft celebration of country skills and lore that have all but disappeared.

Of the other two poems selected as winners, ‘This’ also has a traditional feel, with its refrain of ‘Nothing is worth more than this day’ which subtly echoes Thomas’s line “There’s nothing like the sun as the year dies”. As in ‘Shadowland’, there’s an intimate appreciation of the natural world but also the play of the mind over these observations which we see in the two ‘grey wagtails’:

Their bodies translate water
into sunlight, sunlight to water.

The overall effect is haunting and musical.

‘Kaze no Denwa (The Wind Phone)’ is in marked contrast to both. It addresses the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, dispenses with punctuation (though it retains a stanzaic form) and is composed in free verse, in a plain, stark style suited to its topic. This phone box, sited “in a garden/ overlooking the building site/ that used to be the town” has become a poignant mode of addressing the missing and drowned.

All of the commended poems have merits to set beside the winners – the ending, for example, of ‘April 2020’: “a little more aware/that the stars do look down – not on,/ but through us, as they always did”, and the surprising final lines of the ekphrastic poem ‘Siblings’:

each brushstroke still alive
in the mind of Sofonisba,
unable to step out from art as easily as they.

'Journeyman' is so stylistically close to 'Shadowlands' that I suspect it's by the same poet, and it shares many of the same virtues.

'Frost Heave' has memorable images and effects throughout, and the lines:

Nothing is like the unstimulating
quiet in the body when you've died

again seems to recall the terrific ending of that poem by Thomas: 'There's nothing like the sun till we are dead.'

Of course there's no need at all openly to echo Thomas in a competition in honour of him but I take these as happy signs of his enduring and vibrant legacy.

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