Adult Category Judge’s Report

There were many tales of murder, betrayal and vengeance this year, some gruesome, some darkly comic, and some sending a fine lyric chill up the spine. Maybe because of the sheer volume of sinister stories, I found myself being more struck by quieter, reflective tones when it came to deciding on the shortlist. The overall quality was exceptionally high, and it took me many re-readings to finally arrive at my even shorter list of winners. There were many pieces that I thoroughly enjoyed and admired but which I simply don’t have space to mention here: clever political allegories; subtle, suggestive fairy tales and sophisticated vignettes full of linguistic play. Be that as it may, here are the stories that kept their shape most clearly in my mind after repeated readings:

Picture 1 – ‘The Climb’ (Category Winner)

‘The Danger of Absurd and Exaggerated Fashion’ came close to winning this category: the artful word choice, unspoken menace and underlying political resonance manages to achieve a memorably diabolic flavour. In the end though I chose ‘The Climb’ for its confident use of voice, understated drama and surefooted pace. It builds to its climax quietly but with an impressive air of inevitability.

Picture 2 – ‘The Wishing Pool’ (Category Winner)

I very much liked a number of contrasting stories inspired by this picture: ‘Waiting’ is simply told, like a folk tale, but carefully crafted and restrained. ‘Picnic Panic at Bletchley Park’ is inventive, intelligent and witty, and ‘The Forest Dweller’ is ambitiously artful, studded through with some wonderful imagery. ‘Rumours of the Stag Boy’ was a haunting little favourite, too. ‘The Wishing Pool’ is one of many ghost stories I read, but arguably the best of them: plenty of well-chosen concrete details, never melodramatic, and it makes a real effort to sketch in a sense of believable character and context despite the extremely limited space.

Picture 3 – ‘Owl’s Light’ (Category Winner)

‘The Magpie’s Nest’ is a simple chiller but the story-telling is energetic and full of clever touches, whilst ‘Winners and Losers’ and ‘In Between’ are both refreshingly oblique and very thoughtfully done. ‘Owl’s Light’ is fairytale-like (almost as popular a mode this year as ghost and murder stories) but fresh and up to date. It’s restrained and confident, letting the telling details do most of the work. Calm, confident story-telling.
Picture 4 – ‘Three Weeks’ (Category Winner)

‘She was waiting’ is one of several pieces in this category that explores the uncanniness of reading, the way it splits reality and time in two to make something ghostly of the experience. I liked all the pieces that grappled with this approach, but in the end felt this was the strongest of them. ‘Three Weeks’ just about shaded it for the category win, though: delicately told, scrupulously unsentimental and quietly moving. No fireworks here, but no need for them, either. Finely judged, mature writing.

Overall Winner – ‘Beak, Bone, Blood’

‘Beak, Bone, Blood’ is bravely understated, confident enough to leave the ‘real’ story almost completely implied. There’s a confident command of language, detail, pace and tone here which creates a resonance that many much longer stories would struggle to achieve. It’s a novel in microcosm, but never loses its eerily sharp focus on simple details that build to a strange and quietly compelling meditation on life, death and grief.

Wayne Price