

Judith Barrington

Winner of the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize

Cork, Ireland, 2013

Judge: Thomas McCarthy

A winter migration of nearly two thousand poems, arriving by email and regular post, gives one the opportunity to see the world working and meditating. More than half of all the poems submitted were of a high enough quality to be published. No editor would be ashamed to stand over them and be their public advocate. There were poems about wildlife, the sea, travel, deserts and mountains, fathers (fathers feature more than mothers), parents in nursing homes or surviving cancer, recession, politics and sport. But the recurring motif that runs through much of this poetry is that of attachment and subsequent separation. Attachment, to lovers, fathers and places, was an overwhelming theme; or, more specifically, an overwhelming anxiety. Nearly all of the winning and Highly Commended poems share this communal poetic enquiry into our one great contemporary existentialist crisis: the difficulty of attachment in a world that has lost the great Father. My winning poem 'The Conversation' carries this anxiety into its most extreme exposition. Here, the narrator is beyond life but yearning to complete unfinished business in a world abandoned. Human life is presented in all its ordinariness within the parentheses of Frost and Lorca, cleverly invited as Father-witnesses. This is a poem that has made a wide clearing for itself, slow-burning and attaching itself more compellingly to us at each rereading. Here, the dead, the ones 'lost for language', may never return to familiar and familial attachments. Upon rereading, one sees that it is the world and its capacity for attachment and disappointment that 'has kept the words that belong in that talk/ stuffed inside my mouth which is firmly closed/ like my eyes.' The entire poem with its four robust stanzas and one orphaned line coheres as a single thought. This is a brilliant technical achievement; it reminds us all that great poetry is both fine thinking and achieved style. The narrator describes and teaches, telling us that death – and death in life – is 'too late now for that conversation we never had' – We can't leave 'The Conversation' without becoming implicated in its anxieties. Technically, this is a mindful, thoughtful, calculated and superbly pre-meditated work. I have no hesitation – dare I say it, no anxiety? – in advocating it as my winning poem for the Gregory O'Donoghue Prize.

— Thomas McCarthy