

## Second Light Network

### Competition Report – 2006, Penelope Shuttle

One of the auxiliary pleasures of being a poet is being asked to judge poetry competitions. The bundles of entries come through the post, and just before I begin to unwrap and to read, I always feel the anticipation and excitement of wondering what new discoveries are waiting there, what new visions and perspectives will unfurl. This excitement is sobered by the sense of responsibility I feel towards all who have sent their poems in. It is a privilege to be reading these poems.

In his poem, *What You Should Know to Be a Poet*, Gary Snyder says that, among other things, you need to comprehend *your own six senses, with a watchful and elegant mind*.

The poems in this year's competition that came alive for me, waking me up and energizing *me*, certainly revealed watchful and elegant minds, poets in touch with their own six senses.

How do we know a poem is a *good* poem? Good is perhaps the wrong word. I prefer the word *living*. As I read through the competition poems I was looking for poems that were alive, poems that were unique creatures of language and feeling.

When such a one comes along it is as unmistakable a sensation as getting your shoes on the right feet after walking a couple of miles with them on the wrong way round. One is no longer stumbling, but striding along the road of life with this new companion, the living poem.

I felt the standard of the poems in this year's competition to be very high. Those poets whose work was not placed will, I hope, take comfort from this. In many of the unplaced poems I was stuck by individual phrases or by vital and enthralling ideas, but felt that somehow the poet had not yet drawn all her threads into a unified poem. So perhaps these poems are still moving forward to further drafts.

The prize-winning, highly-commended and short-listed poems all shone, possessed lyric poise and came up off the page with energy, clarity of vision and sureness of diction. The first prize-winner Pam Hughes, in her poem *Seven Sisters*, uses the sonnet form with great skill and confidence, without ever compromising the language or using forced rhymes. It is natural, song-like, and magically evokes the personalities of each of the chalk-cliff sisters.

I hope all Newsletter readers will enjoy, be moved and inspired by all these poems. A good poem hands on its inspiration and frees us into our own voice, our own poems. My thanks to all the poets for the delight I have had in the reading of this year's competition poems.

**Penelope Shuttle**

### **The Seven Sisters**

I am one of seven sisters. We fall  
like laundered sheets from earth into the sea,  
our splayed feet anchored in a charcoal sprawl.  
Haven Brow is riddled with pyrites.  
She shouts at busy larks. Careless Short Brow  
tiptoes into waves. Rough Brow's ill at ease.  
I am brass point, the only sane one now  
with a shrinking peak. Such a sad disease.  
Flat Hill's just a foolish girl. Bailys Hill  
is in decline. Went Hill lost chalk years ago.  
Conjoined from shoulders to our tide-rushed feet,  
we gaze unblinking through fierce suns and rain.  
No sea birds come, we'll not feel nests again.  
We look towards Hope Gap. Our still hearts beat.

### **Pam Hughes, First Prize**

#### **Snegurochka**

*after a Russian folk tale*

I owned not a drop of blood.  
The villagers tiptoed closer  
in their hats and coats, shivered  
at the pitch of my voice  
but there was hope in whiteness.  
An old couple, long childless,  
declared themselves my parents.  
I melted their crusted faces  
each time mine froze  
into a different silvery smile.  
A surprise that never ended,  
I breathed lace over windows  
and I even frosted pastries  
by singing glacial notes.  
Some nights I draped myself  
round the steeple to fall asleep.

As the days grew milder  
being their snow maiden  
was a burden; a pain  
gnawed my ice-bones  
so I scattered to flakes,  
flurrying with the wind  
or I let myself subside  
into a drift by the road.  
My parents dared not  
embrace or kiss me—  
I might thaw against  
their skin, their lips,  
their store of warmth.  
I belonged to no-one  
except winter.

**Anne Ryland  
Joint Second Prize**

#### **The Photographer's Apprentice**

I have been taught to measure and sift  
the lightening powders, I love their names,  
the burning power within, chlorate of potash,

sulphurate antimony, gunpowder, pyroxylin  
and magnesium. They are poisonous, rank,  
evil, are most dangerous to work, being fierce

and unpredictable when transformed into heat  
or light that scorches. I burn crushed sugar  
with potash or sprinkle magnesium powder

onto guncotton or grains or saltpetre.  
Monsieur waves and I light the powders  
but today I am distracted.

The studio is dark in winter light; the mirrors  
gleam with silvers, scimitars of silver.  
The woman undresses, my body swollen

by heat as she unpins her hair, it explodes  
over her soft pale flesh. Monsieur is impatient,  
shouts, *Allez!* So I strike the allumette,

return the woman's smile, forget to remove  
my hand as powder ignites and detonates  
while the mirror disintegrates in a green shower.

**Margaret Speak  
Joint Second Prize**