

PRESS RELEASE: Celebrating Exmoor Through the Power of Poetry

The Exmoor Society has just announced the winners of its poetry competition for 2020. The purpose of the competition is to inspire people about Exmoor, one of England's finest landscapes, and especially poignant this year with the travel restrictions.

The judges were impressed with the standard of entries. Rachel Thomas, The Exmoor Society Chairman, said: 'I am delighted the Society is encouraging the literary traditions. Each poem was judged anonymously and I am very grateful to the two judges, prize-winning poets themselves, who had the very difficult task of choosing the winners.'

First prize went to Terry Dyson and the judges' commented: 'Exmoor is a place of many kinds of mood. Its dramatic forms, wild weather and long distances encourage reflection. Here, the poet first conjures up the dynamic life of a specific Exmoor place at dawn and then finds that 'Time scatters' as past history comes tumbling – like the swallows – into the present. The past, the Second World War, is in turn vividly conjured by 'A man preparing to leave' – on active duty, no doubt. The endings of poems are always of particular interest. Here the poet first shows us the 'perfect V' of Victory and then leaves us with a great contrasting detail: the returning soldier's 'grinning irregular teeth'. The poem is especially timely as we remember VE Day on its 75th anniversary. Apart from its notable woodlands, North Hill is strongly associated with WWII through the important battle training carried out here.'

1st Prize: 'North Hill' by Terry Dyson

At first blink of light
 vague haze of pink
I dream of you all as stripling oaks
 branches squabbling fisticuffs
scratching low at my windowpane.

Only real sound so far my heart
 drifting home to its shell
demanding more
 of your wartime spiel
 spat and disorder before I was born.

Time scatters as swallows
 tumble and hefted ewes blare

 to a drumming
exchange of war
 rippling gun fire fracturing air.

Did I hear your voice - just then?

A man preparing to leave

thumping feet
tea slurped slosh of sugar
clank of alloy spoon
brush of bags dragged along the floor.

Sunlight splinters through, and just
when I think you've gone
you're back turning

to raise a perfect "V"
grinning irregular teeth.

Second prize was awarded to Jan Martin's poem, of which the judges said: 'Like 'North Hill', this poem opens out from a particular Exmoor place onto a landscape of reflection and history. However, here the time is deeper, stretching back to the 'hidden chapel' of a remote past, and also looking forward – or perhaps we should say 'listening forward' into a 'far future'. The poem's short lines help focus on the strong beats on important words, such as 'the rocks and crags / of our faces', a bold shift from the outer landscape of rugged Exmoor to the close-up anatomy of an ageing individual. The poem produces a lulling rhythm suitable to the convincing image at its close, in which 'the wind / from a far future blows quiet songs'. The active verb 'blows' is especially well-chosen here.

2nd Prize: 'Porlock Weir' by Jan Martin

Where the land falls
into brown sea,
and stones rattle under the surf
like rounds of applause,
there's a history
that's invisible and alive
in scorching wind,
or gray stillness tracked
by unbearably sweet birdsong
and the crack of guns.

There's a haunted wood and
a hidden chapel that draws us up,
and dense silence settling like fog
softens our outlines
and soothes our horizons
into dreams of another life,
where our stories can embrace

all the rocks and crags
of our faces, and the wind
from a far future blows quiet songs.

Of the third prize winning poem by Richard Westcott, the judges commented: 'Exmoor is a place of literary pilgrimage, as we have been reminded often in the year in which the 250th anniversary of Wordsworth's birth is being celebrated. As well as Coleridge and Shelley, other – later – artistic talents are deeply associated with Exmoor and one of them particularly, Hope Bourne, with the site of this poem. The poet celebrates not only a remarkable artistic personality, but also the wildness of Exmoor – and finds a way to blend the two.

3rd Prize: 'In a Storm on Ferny Ball' by Richard Westcott

Bright beech branches bend in the wind –
fragments flying. I turn from the west,
rain on my back, clothes stuck close.
Was that the protesting movement of trees
or something different – a reminder
of someone shuffling then sliding
through the loosened-up, torn-apart hedge?

Crooked and trunk-twisted, bent like a tree
the vision continues to vanish –
washed away in the rain, as if wishing
to be somewhere else. No shelter or company
anywhere here, just sharp surgings,
straight-ahead rain – the prevails of a gale,
such as she would know only too well.

Struck on the neck by a stick in the wind
I spin round, feeling a summons
to face all these forces. Part deafened,
face streaming, I find my thoughts
scattered like leaves. Nothing is
tamed. Here this is wildness where
the loosened is freed and freed are caught.

Who would be out in a place like this
on a day such as this, unless fleeing
from home and from others, with a wish
to be elsewhere? She's slipping past green trunks
of bent-over beech, whose branches are waving
at a dwindling figure now blown away
by this westerly, and storm-distorted senses.

The three winning poems are on The Exmoor Society's website and will be published in the 2021 edition of the *Exmoor Review*, the Society's annual journal. There are also plans to

collate a selection of the competition entries from the last few years into an anthology of Exmoor poems.

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Image: ART-012-044.jpg – The track from Ferny Ball – Hope Bourne © The Exmoor Society

