

5th Place – Fiona Bennett for “Sugar Lipstick”

Sugar Lipstick

Edinburgh in the early 80's, cold,
always bloody cold and damp
and windy. We wear brown fur coats,
second hand from Stockbridge,
then use them for bedspreads
over our threadbare blankets at night.

Leaving Maxi's, full of red wine and
tipsy gossip, we risk The Meadows
at one in the morning, hoping the wind
will push us along, link arms and
sing our way between the trees;
soon talk turns to hunger, we imagine
warm, soft dough that'll blot up the alcohol.

Reaching Marchmont, there's sweetness
on the wind; we hear loud voices
in the night and step through the fire door,
propped open for nocturnal visitors.
“What can I get youz ladies?”
“Three jam doughnuts please,
separate bags.”

Feeling the moist heat and fat seep through the paper,
climb our tenement stairs, stiletto steps
echoing, Christine finds her key,
Fiona puts on the kettle. Not until
we have mugs in our hand do we take
our first bites, sugar lipstick, jam dribbling
through our fingers, red spots on white Formica
and, revelling in friendship, listen to
the street sweepers below.

What the Judges said:

Part-reportage, part photo-album: cheerful voices ring through this poem, which demonstrates a strong 'ear for place'. Its meandering slip-slop footsteps track Edinburgh

lasses tipsily home after their girls' night out, singing uphill arm in arm to their tenement beds where they will spread their flea-market fur coats for warmth on top of their thin blankets. An affectionate evocation of a city and an era ('cold, always bloody cold and damp and windy' – but with 'sweetness on the wind'), captured in deft details such as 'the fire door, propped open for nocturnal visitors', the friendly greeting from the late-night baker ("What can I get youz ladies?"), or, safely ensconced, the sound of early street sweepers below. It dispenses homely images of inexpensive happiness: 'moist heat' seeping through the paper bag, jam dribbling through fingers, the 'sugar lipstick' of their camaraderie.

About Fiona:

I am a member of a writing group which meets once a week. I particularly like to write poetry but attempt all genres. I have been short listed for Grace Dieu poetry competition twice before and came 5th some years ago. I have had several of my poems published in competition pamphlets, been long and short listed for the Plough Prize and had a short duologue performed at the Everyman Studio in Cheltenham.