

## Joint First Place:

### Act of faith

John Baylis Post (Castletownbere, Eire)

I cried this morning. My only shame.  
The choir singing to an empty church. The bell  
tugged for a sou by a chorister. The church doors  
are open; the boy can see the nod  
from the mayor when it's time to stop.  
And watch.

I know bark. Oak burns well, but a slow start,  
and they can only spare offcuts; ash, if it's dry;  
cut holly is bad luck for someone. Poplar is slow;  
there's winter apple-prunings, sweet and smoky.  
I want smoky.

It's a feast day, stalls selling pies and cider wine.  
That girl's from Domrémy; I taught her  
how to make Brigid crosses – an Irishman  
showed me in camp. The girl puts one in my hand,  
not catching my eye.

There are dogs in the square; two mongrels coupling.  
I could whistle sheepdogs, turn the flock  
into the meadows after mowing, gather rushes  
like the girl's. I can't call to those curs;  
my lips are dry.

Between clock-tower and gatehouse  
I can see a smear of rainbow; there's sun somewhere.  
The somewhere drizzle won't douse,  
just slow the burning to smoulder;  
anyway, there's pitch.

My shins in spasm against the chains,  
iron through to bone; blood and shit  
trickling unasked. They gave me beetroot for dinner.  
My chemise is singeing at the hem. I hear weeping.  
It isn't me.

I can't taste my last mass-bread  
cloying like ashes from an English hand;  
no voices now – no shame in silence.  
Jeers and prayers drift  
through the fumes.

Apple-smoke and crackling.

## Judge's comments

**Act of Faith (joint first)** This imagination of the thoughts going through Jeanne d'Arc's mind as she is about to be burned to death at the stake is a near-perfect poem technically (just a little wobble in the fifth stanza) which sustains its vivid and detailed re-creation of the scene from 'The bell/tugged for a sou by a chorister' down to the 'Jeers and prayers' which 'drift/through the fumes'. Jeanne's country lore - 'I know bark', 'I could whistle to sheepdogs' - is deftly sketched in, not as extraneous detail but to bring out her apprehension and her struggle to maintain dignity, to cling to the hope suggested by 'a smear of rainbow'. What a brilliantly chosen word that 'smear' is.

The poem does not flinch from physical horror 'iron through to bone; blood and shit/trickling unasked' but it is not gratuitous horror. You feel that every detail in the poem is there for a purpose and it manages to be both rich in texture and sparely told. The last line 'Apple-smoke and crackling' with the double meaning of 'crackling' so subtly undefined by the choice of *apple-smoke* is a little *tour de force*, like the poem itself.