



Editorial

THIS ISSUE IS OVERDUE by some three months, as many subscribers have reminded me; a delay caused by my having to read 8,500 poems for this year's National Poetry Competition, a matter I'll return to shortly.

Despite the recent silence, it has been a busy year in *Dark Horse* stables. My book about the magazine (see the journal's website for details) was published by HappenStance in July. The *TLS* covered it in their 'NB' column of 16 September 2016. Colin Waters of the Scottish Poetry Library wrote an appreciative, interesting account, with reference to the magazine's 'bullish' and 'pugnacious' editor, for the *Scottish Review of Books* blog. The *SRB*'s editor, Alan Taylor, later gave the book a full page review in the print paper itself. Unsolicited responses from many another reader added to the general mix and the sense that it was a book worth publishing.

Writing the book was difficult only because it meant revisiting in detail many years and things I'd be happy to forget, and had a dual effect on me. For one, it consolidated my idea of what the magazine had done, and marked an 'officialising' of its presence. Secondly, it made me take stock and look at what it might now do, a process which is continuing.

To return to the 8,500 poems. They arrived in six boxes on 22 November, with a strict deadline of 9 January to produce a shortlist of 50—the same as for the other two judges, Jack Underwood and Moniza Alvi. The longlist of 150 was then circulated to us all well in advance of the final judging meeting. Understandably, the first read-through felt Sisyphean. I had worked out I was being paid, roughly, twenty pence per poem; this was quite a high hourly rate with a run of really bad entries; less so with others. If there was the slightest doubt about a poem at a first read, it went into the 'read again' pile. This produced a second pile of some 600 poems, which subsequent read-throughs progressively reduced. The smaller the pile, the more one became aware of one's own subjectivity; which is, of course, partly the point. If all judges had the same taste, or there was a generally acknowledged 'gold standard', there'd be little difference between one judging panel and another.

There is more to be said elsewhere, but it offered a fascinating oversight into contemporary poetry among writers likely to enter competitions—many of whom seemed to have only the vaguest idea of what a poem was. (Slap some rhymes down, give it some 'fine feeling', et *voilà!*) Many a poem did not survive beyond its first couple of lines, often of such spectacular badness that there was no real way it could recover. Others were more competent, and therefore harder to decide upon; some made an immediate impression, then faded; others clarified and deepened with successive readings. The results were announced in the Savile Club in London on 29 March, 2017. For me, meanwhile, it is back to the curry-comb and the—somewhat hectic—stables.