

Rosalind Porter

– Foreword –

What is an essay? This is perhaps one of those Delphian questions that everyone can only sort of answer. Many definitions exist, of course. A ‘trial’ from the Old French *essai*, which has been in circulation for centuries; ‘a profe . . . experiment’ says Montaigne, purveyor extraordinaire of the form; ‘a literary form expressing an original and universal idea in a language common to us all,’ claims Tom Kremer, the founder of the Notting Hill Editions Essay Prize. But much of the modern essay’s appeal, no doubt, is down to its intrinsic fluidity within a somewhat rigid framework. It is not memoir, reportage or opinion *per se*, though often contains elements of those genres. It is categorically not poetry or fiction. Regardless of what the essay is, what it must *do* is persuade, and that is precisely what each of the five runners-up and the one final winner of this year’s prize did.

Joining me as judges were author, broadcaster and cultural commentator Travis Elborough; novelist and critic Kirsty Gunn; editor, critic and essayist Sameer Rahim; and author, critic and essayist Daniel Mendelsohn. More than five hundred submissions were whittled down for us by a team of early readers (thank you, readers!) to a manageable seventy-seven,

from which we selected a shortlist of twelve followed by five finalists and one winner. It was a highly harmonious and thought-provoking discussion, but there were disagreements. For what is an essay?

Some of us felt it was an argument put forth and proven, or at least that a viable attempt to prove an argument had to be evident. Others saw it as more of an investigation, with little or no need for teleology. The writing had to matter, as did style, tone and purpose. The subject did not.

What was obvious, though, was that no matter how much each of us clung to our particular set of criteria, we could always think of examples which were exceptional to the very principles we were clinging to, and this helpfully informed our conversation about the essays in front of us, which we judged according to their own merits rather than by a set of arbitrary guidelines.

‘In My Head I Carry My Own Zoo’ by Karen Holmberg is an expansive consideration of the work of British collagist John Digby. It’s a testament to Holmberg’s writing that I quickly went away and Googled Digby, taken by her descriptions of his art, which is no mean feat, but also the elusive portrait that she presents of Digby by weaving together her observations of him with his own words.

‘Grub: A Man in the Market’ by Garret Keizer is a personal essay about doing the weekly food shop. But of course the essay isn’t about that at all. Deceptively

simple in its methods, Keizer takes this quotidian chore and uses it as a platform to discuss all manner of things: capitalism, marriage and modernity, to name only three. Affectionate yet authoritative, this essay brilliantly captures the many moods of the form itself.

In ‘The Future of Nostalgia: Orhan Pamuk and the Real Imaginary Museum’, Patrick McGuiness argues for the importance (and the usefulness) of nostalgia which, along with melancholy, morbidity and introspection (nostalgia’s ‘bandmates’) gets a bad rap for being solipsistic. But McGuiness, by way of Orhan Pamuk, shows us how a longing for the personal past can give us a stronger perspective on a communal future.

Most of us didn’t know anything about ‘common-place dachas’ in Russia until we read ‘Dacha’ by Dasha Shkurpela. With its uncertain meandering through the meanings of temporary and permanent summerhouses in the Russian countryside – its questioning and hesitating – this essay threw up strange and surprising links between trains of thought.

As did ‘Losing the Nobel’ by Laura Esther Wolfson, another unapologetically personal essay which touches effortlessly on the mirage of regret without any hint of self-pity. It’s also a wonderful introduction to the work of Svetlana Alexievich, whose work I would urge anyone to read, and a superb meditation on translation and interpretation, and the nuanced differences between them.

‘Five Ways of Being a Painting’ by William Max Nelson was ultimately named our winning entry, and deservedly so. It is a curious mix of the philosophical and the personal, the argumentative and the ruminative, with each of its many modes mutually illuminating the others.

‘It feels larger than itself,’ argued one of the judges. ‘It is idiosyncratic in a persuasive way,’ remarked another. The deft blending together of the strands of Europe and China, past and present, hiding and seeing; the delicate but forceful episodic style; the intellectual reach – this, we concluded, was a real essay.