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Who would ever have thought that the simple bivalve, the Mussel, could serve as Muse to so many different sweet-tongued verse-makers! The Mussel as Muse! Indeed it could be the title of the competition. I suppose it's the reputation of the Connemara Mussel Fest itself that attracted so many into the net. Well I can only say ye've got a lot to answer for!

Anyway, in reading through and then re-reading through, and then reading through again this massively bulging haul of mussel-verses, I feel thoroughly sated by the feast. One of the things I kept thinking as I read, was how wonderful language itself is, that could find so many ways to describe, analyse, elegise, celebrate; so many ways to taste, mock, give voice to, enter into civil discourse with, or simply relish the one thing: The Mighty Mussel. Histories weighty with information, Recipes to make any mouth water. Memories to bring smile or tear or raucous anecdote. Yes, here was a trove of poems erotic (oh yes—the mussel seemed to be challenging the oyster as aphrodisiac of choice --well, at least throughout the Festival, I guess)—erotic, neurotic, memorial, familial, frantic, tranquil, hungry, sated; comical, tragical, historical, and—oh yes—scientific. There was even a poem by a 9-year-old poet, ending simply and sincerely with “You are so delicious and / never malicious!/ Dear Mussels I love you/ I do!” Not to mention the limerick about “the edible bivalve,” whose punch-line was “And it's smart—spending life in its bed.”

Indeed, once these bards got started there was no stopping them, and no anticipating the direction any of the poems would take. And so every time Marian sent me another course of...well... ok . . . mussels, I just took a deep breath, blessed myself, and waded in among' em. And here I am at the end of the culinary-literary adventure, still standing, though (to be frank) taking a silent vow not to look another mussel in the bivalve for a wee while. I am, in other words, taking a sabbatical from this incredibly inspirational sea creature—but just, of course, for a wee while.

Meantime, I had to do what any judge-reader finally hates to do: select from the rich haul those he or she has to decide were most impressive, had the tangiest and most substantial taste, left the warmest memory. So: I've selected 5 honorable mentions, 1 runner-up, and one winner. And here they be (drum-roll here please; or at least a clacking of mussel shells).

5 Honorable Mentions (in no particular order)

I've chosen these from the crowd, because all worked on their own terms as interesting, serious or comic takes on their chosen subjects.

I selected two comic poems (one of the distinguishing marks of this competition was the number of comic poems submitted—a great many chuckles). These two seemed to work

as poems, as well as containing a good deal of lively language-energy: I could hear them; they pleased me as poems; and they made me laugh. They are:

The Mighty Mussel, and Mussels for Muscles

I selected three others then, all tending towards a serious encounter with their chosen theme. They are:

Embedded, and All in a Row, and Father

The standard of my long and then short and then shorter lists for the winner and runner-up was high, so it took me a lot of pondering before I came up with my final selections.

And so, **the Runner-up prize** is awarded to

Blue Mussels---

a lovely meditation on mussels themselves, with their “casings of seaweed and grit,” and on the metaphor they in their intricacy can provide for a human relationship (“if the softest part of ourselves/ wasn’t hidden”).

And the **Overall Winner** is a poem called

Sweet Intertidal Flesh--

which shows an impressive, entirely pleasing, yet simple control of the language, and --while being very sensuous--is at the same time an economic, compact, instructive history lesson:

*Thrown on a campfire
they steam in their own juice,
delivering sweet intertidal flesh
to the hungry hunter-gatherer.*

The last stanza of this poem begins, “*Honour the sandy salty strings/ of their beards, that cling them/ to rope and post and stone . . .*”, and I felt this could be an epigraph or motto to the very large collection of poems that had been entered in the competition. For they all in one way or another “honour” the mussel itself, as the Connemara Mussel Festival honours it too. Long may they both—giving all kinds of pleasure--endure!