The theme for entries to the Sci-Po 2019 poetry competition was a rich and complex one: *Plants, Brain and Imagination*, a challenging tripartite provocation to thought and invention to which the overwhelming majority of poems responded with impressive originality - many with quiet subtlety, others with brio and lively energy. Not one of the submitted poems failed to invite repeated readings, many of them as searching and probing as they were charged with feeling, a real achievement for the competition which is a credit to the cross-disciplinary vision behind the whole Sci-Po project.

The late Irish poet Matthew Sweeney used to say about writing that a new poem should always look a little strange. Certainly wonder and strangeness emerged strongly as presiding spirits across the whole entry this year, from contemporary imagery such as the ‘flowering’ brain of MRI projection to the popular and enduring narratives of metamorphosis and transformation myth.

Many of the poems took particular plants and trees as their subject, evoking their singularity in precise and lyrical detail, exploring the connection between naming and knowing, and there were several strongly-felt poems about personal encounters with medical science, about environmental degradation, and what one thoughtful poem memorably called ‘ecoanxiety’. A good number of poems played with the very live idea that the greater organic world of which we are part might somehow contain wisdom, understanding or solutions for us that we can only so far guess at, evoked vividly in one poem in the figure of the green man, the healer of maladies, not least of the mind.

The stand-out Highly Commended poem ‘The Innocence of Trees’ continued to hold my attention through many re-readings with its dramatic and meditative intelligence evoking the mysterious certainty that arises when knowledge makes way for wordless understanding. In the end and after a great deal of deliberation, the three winning poems carved their lasting space in my reader’s imagination by force of their propulsive flowering all at once of feeling and ideas and language, that magic combination described by Les Murray as the integrated ‘trance’ composed of heart and mind and body. It’s an effect achieved also within the individual and memorable worlds of all four commended poems, but especially successfully in the three winners – in the tight propulsive grace of 3rd prize-winner ‘Elixir’, in the terrific
human narrative and sense of time in ‘Cactus house’ (2nd prize-winner), and in the 1st prize-winner ‘Samphire’ with its searching language, reaching for exactness as time and erosion eat away at history and the land.

JD May 2019