

## THE PETER COWAN WRITERS CENTRE - PATRON'S PRIZE FOR POETS 2017

### **PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS:**

I would like to thank everyone who entered this year's Patron's Prize for Poets Competition. Our Patron, Professor Andrew Taylor, passes on his congratulations to everyone who has been short listed for an award today.

By entering this competition, poets are provided with an opportunity to present their work to a highly qualified and respected poet.

I would like to read out a short biography on this year's Judge.

"Dr Sanna Peden is a lapsed academic and recovering writer. Her academic work has focused on cinema, memory and nostalgia; and she teaches writing and presentation skills at the University of Western Australia. Sanna writes in a range of styles, and her poetry has appeared in Cordite Poetry Review, Creatrix, Visible Ink and Westerly. Her dissections of the sonnet are out in Informalities, a collection of transformations of classical poetic forms published by Normalitie Press, produced in collaboration between Sanna, Scott-Patrick Mitchell and Matthew Jamieson. Sanna has competed in poetry slams in Perth, London and Helsinki; she has performed at the Perth Poetry Festival, the Perth Fringe and the Denmark Festival of Voice and is a regular reader at Perth Poetry Club and Spoken Word Perth."

I would like to thank Sanna for agreeing to be our Judge this year for the Patron's Prize for Poets Competition. I would also like to thank her for being here today, so as to read out her excellent report which provides much valuable feedback.

### **JUDGE'S REPORT –**

#### **Patron's Prize for Poets 2017 – Dr Sanna Peden**

I begin by acknowledging that we meet on Wadjuk Noongar boodja land that has never been ceded, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

It is a great privilege to be invited to judge the Patron's Prize for Poets, one of the most alliterative poetry prizes out there. This year's poems take the reader to the ocean, speak of suburban heat and taut family relationships. There are slices of Australia that tessellate in their familiarity and foreignness, the not-quite presence of salt, sand, schoolyard games and bushland. World history, and the passing of time on a personal level, take up many lines, and there are visitations from several languages, signalling everything from musical sophistication to the names our grandmothers went by. The animal world invites a variety of feeling, from the care and awe of the delivery of a colt to the perennial menacing of a plague of moths. In short, to read these poems is to trespass in other people's lives and to share for one condensed moment their perspective on the world. I am grateful to all the poets who were brave with their work and entered - some, perhaps, for the first time in their writerly lives.

(Many of the chosen pen names evoked a character of their own, too, and some I wished to introduce to one another, none more dearly than “Joan Baez” and “Ziggy Dylan”.)

It is of course customary to note that judging a competition of this kind is hard – and indeed it did take some effort to put back in the pile some of the poems that had to be left behind – but ultimately it is not the decision that is hard, but the *justification* of it. There is no apologising for subjectivity: if we thought the world could be neatly, evenly and objectively categorised we would not write poetry in the first place. Any rubric will have its limitations and only take you so far. What remains is to explain the hold particular poems had on you, the lives you could see yourself living in other people’s stanzas, and how their imagery infiltrated your sleep. Without further delay, these are the poems that continue to rattle around my head and poke me in the ribs, long after the first read.

## Commended -

- **Lenore Munro (WA) for “Dormant Until” (Novice)**

Memory and movement flare up for a moment, “Mercurial and convincing”, as mysterious figures dance to a music that is not heard but *felt*. In “Dormant Until” the body is captured by its own senses, and following its sudden and total animation returns to a state of waiting, now alert to its own potential. This is a poem with a pulse.

- **Evie Monro (WA) for “Perpetual Perplexity” (Youth)**

The percussive alliteration – “Pounding in / To pierce the peace” – and bursts of rhyme – “the thick paint will spill / To pervasively fill / Every corner” – introduce chaos into the poem, just as time and momentum intrude on the half-conscious thoughts at the centre of the text. “Perpetual Perplexity” is a well-paced reflection on the momentum of time and the demands of waking life.

- **Ross Jackson (WA) for “At The Fringe”**

There are two fringes in the poem: first there is the Thin Man, “old enough to be invisible”, taking up as little space as possible with his repressed art. Then, there is the explosion of activity of the Fringe Festival, framed here as the willing spectacle of young bodies measured in “acres”. A petty resentment animates the speaker’s observations about the “anointed [...] genius” of the burlesque tents, and while the final “bums and tits” particularly undermines the artistic pretensions of the young, it is clear Mr Thin’s painterly journey into primitivism can only benefit from the... exposure. At its heart “At The Fringe” is wry and real.

- **Lindsay Hay (NSW) for “Complexity” (Novice)**

A promising poem with sustained tension, “Complexity” has us waiting for a cure. The repetition of “everyone is listening” invites the reader, too, to huddle closer to the poem and take part in its silent diagnosis. Layers of science and technology peel away to settle on rough measurements and plain words, finding the subject “is a bone long”.

## Highly Commended -

- **Shey Marque (WA) for “With A Naked Eye”**

Spores, mold, bacteria and other infections take over the page – and they are delicious. Tell me you can find a better description of “do[ing] the student thing” than “din[ing] on yeast / with pizza and beer” and I will tell you you are wrong. This is a poem that travels in space and time, stretching back 25 years and reaching in to microscopic detail, bringing together the first tastes of a strange cheese and iconic discoveries in medical science. I do not pretend to know how many poems have been written referencing, among other things, Professor Barry J. Marshall and the discovery of *helicobacter pylori*, but by way of a footnote, and for the benefit of future Google searches on the topic, let it be known that “With a Naked Eye” is one of them.

- **Shey Marque (WA) for “Foal Watch”**

The poem positions the reader as a witness and midwife in a moment of calm, where all control is freely relinquished. Birthing is a “wave”, the foal is “spilled” and even when born could still be “nothing / but the notional bending of light”. Human hands are welcome here, even if they do remain entirely unnecessary. “Foal Watch” gleams, invites and affirms. There is also, on the level of form, a pleasing understated parallel between the couplets and the “standing position [of] two small hooves”.

- **Christopher Konrad (Vic) for “Menagerie”**

Is it just the reference to Siberia that makes me see Bird, Mouse and Train as characters in a Russian novel? There is Mouse with the prickly riddles (“gender me this, mouse, in your cage / your Gulag”) and heavy inevitability (“you know, don’t you?”). And Train, with its all-consuming desire for purpose and its attendant, brutal physicality (“pins and gravel shake, / tremble; let the hot air bullet past windows and trees”). And poor Bird! In any other poem, in any other literary tradition, there might be the promise of freedom in its flight – but in these skies are “grains that usurp tomorrow [and bring] down the sun in its correct time“. “Menagerie” is a striking poem, burning with passion and inevitability.

- **Damen O'Brien (Qld) for "The Thesaurus"**

Immediately arresting, "The Thesaurus" was one of very few entries experimenting with the way a poem uses space on a page. The choose-your-own-adventure poem has the makings of a gimmick, were it not for the way the alleged synonyms offered in parallel with each other demonstrate the precision required in poetry. The thesaurus may always be the poet's friend, but "[i]ts promises are teeth."

## **Novice Poet Award -**

- **Leanne Wicks (NSW) for "Family Game"**

The poem progresses in uneven jolts with occasional sharp rhymes (e.g. "custody rope / trying to cope", "rigid legs tense / high fence", "will / to / kill"), the poem's unpredictability reflecting the struggle to stay ahead of the would-be killer, of avoiding the tragedy of those headlines about estranged fathers, how he 'seemed like a top bloke' and how no one could have known. It is a disquieting poem, its close—"Do / I / dare / let / go / of / the / rope?"—posing a question that is fundamentally impossible to answer, and cruel to ask.

## **Youth Encouragement Award -**

- **Mia Dorsett-Sayer (WA) for "Die Mauer"**

The poem reflects on the 139 people who died at the Berlin Wall, mostly while trying to escape to West Germany. "Die Mauer" is built of colours, division, death: "pale figures; stark contrasts / against the obsidian". The poem also connects the Berlin Wall to its historical antecedents: the Great Wall of China and Hadrian's northern fortifications. "Die Mauer" is a great achievement for a young poet, revealing a valuable ability to capture individual tragedies in the shadows of history.

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Prize -**

- **Damen O'Brien (Qld) for "The Moth Years"**

I have made the mistake of reading this poem in the dark, alone. Yes, the fire is on and yes, I have my cup of tea for comfort but I can still sense "The Moth Years" somewhere in the back of my head as a physical presence. There is a pleasing unsettling in the poem, achieved through the banal practicalities of a world overrun and the fluent doublespeak required to deploy the word "harmless". We live today, to varying degrees of complacency, amid so many disasters that it is no stretch at all to see ourselves in the origin story: "no one knows which unzipping mix / of mistakes / has brought us the Citronella Century". It is too late to parse which of our many errors has led us here, all that matters now is "that feeling of someone / looking over your shoulder: / the long, tactile tongue; / the pale, compound eyes".

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Prize -**

- **Jan Napier (WA) for “Blue Glass Heart”**

“Blue Glass Heart” is a poem that demands repeated reading, moving as it does from the refracting beauty of a glass heart to the human body’s “meaty busyness of living”. The language is evocative without giving anything away: just as the speaker’s skin begins to sweat the last line – “Here are found apples and seashells, harps and swans” – closes the door in front of any prying eyes, leaving the reader with the *thumthump thumpthump* of their own “flutter[ing] valves”.

## **1<sup>st</sup> Prize -**

- **Amy Crutchfield (Vic) for “Child Receding”.**

A poem of both momentum and stillness, “Child Receding” is written with great restraint. The imagery is assured (“pocket Olympian, slender baton”) and the poem’s pre-emptive nostalgia for the moment that is still in progress is leavened by fleeting alliteration (Leave me as lizard tail / lying on the wintergreen). The poem holds its ground, and deserves its place.

Congratulations to the winners, and thank you to Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre for continuing to create space, time and opportunities for writers of all stripes.

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