

The Peter Cowan Writers Centre 2018 Patron's Prize for Poetry Competition

President's Report

I would like to thank everyone who put 'pen to paper' and entered this year's Patron's Prize for Poets Competition. I would also like to congratulate 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 and author. Dr Lucy Dougan's books include *Memory Shell* (5 Islands Press), *White Clay* (Giramondo), *Meanderthals* (Web del Sol) and *The Guardians* (Giramondo), and her prizes the Mary Gilmore Award, the Alec Bolton Award and short-listings for the 2015 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Poetry and the 2016 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry. In 2016 *The Guardians* won the WA Premier's Book Award for poetry. With Tim Dolin, she is co-editor of *The Collected Poems of Fay Zwicky* (UWAP, 2017). On behalf of the Peter Cowan Writers Centre, I would like to thank Lucy for being our Judge this year and for attending our Awards Day.

Judge's Report from Lucy Dougan

A little while ago I came across a quote by American novelist Richard Powers. He has stated '(W)hat I really like to learn how to do is to build sentences that are equal to mental states.' I immediately sensed a kinship with this, as I feel this way about making poems too. I hope that the texture of the language and the movement of thought in any poem that I try to make might have something to say about being alive. If I had to say what it was that I looked for in a poem it would be something close to Powers's idea but in relation to lines as well as, or instead of, sentences.

In judging the Peter Cowan Writers' Centre's 2018 Patron's Prize for Poetry I was looking for poems that make a world, and stay true to that world; and that encapsulate something through the contract between subject and sound in each line. Raymond Carver likened this to laying down courses of bricks in the building of a wall.

The hand-made is always the hand-made with all of its human beauty and striving to find that containment of which Powers speaks. I don't believe that there are definitively right and wrong things in poetry but here are some traits to consider avoiding: poeticisms and clichés, excessive abstraction, excessive sentiment, preachiness, big subjects, and spelled out or stagey endings. Whilst a poem is not a formula, it is always a balancing act at any one moment of the different ways that sound can mean. It is also always an act of noticing something specific: little things matter. Ultimately, I was drawn to poems that showed me the poet has been reading, not through subject matter or learned allusion, but attention to diction, line, image and rhythm. And I was also keen to find that attentiveness to making a world that holds up in the time of the poem. Along with this, I was drawn to poems that honoured a noticing specific to the poet—that were not generic but particular, quirky and grounded in that specific.

One thing worth noting is that by far the most compelling overall group of entries were, for me, to be found in the Adult Novice entries. This is surely heartening.

I would now like to say something about the awarded poems:

Judges Encouragement Award for Youth

‘The Colonial Almanac’ by Ella Girdler

This is extremely sophisticated work for a young writer. The challenging subject matter is well researched and handled with great sensitivity. The dramatic historical voices are skillfully ironized and the end achieves a welcome catharsis.

It has been a great pleasure and a privilege to spend time with each poem entered here. My congratulations to all the awarded poets and my best wishes to all entrants, especially for their writing.

Novice Poet Award

‘Another time, maybe’ by Erica De Jong

This thoughtful atmospheric piece of suburban coordinates has original imagery and mystery. What is not said or revealed leaves an ample space for the reader to explore.

Commended

‘Overnight in Bright’ by Maurice Corlett

This prose poem holds a clamorous energy. It lets everything in and somehow manages to hold it all there together for long enough: the hurly burly of a brief time away containing family, friends, drinking and goodbyes. Its faux naivety holds an appealing sweetness.

‘Popping the heads off lavender’ by Tee Linden

Up close to its subject, this poem is an onomatopoeic delight. The ‘snap, crackle and pop’ of its sound patterns enact an experiential sense of its tight little world.

‘Consolations’ by Madeleine Tingey

Careful attention to lineation is a feature of this beautiful, compassionate poem that captures the hermitically sealed space of a hospital room but finds a means for the world outside to break through. This difficult subject matter is handled with grace and balance.

‘Last words’ by Shey Marque

This meditation on the tension between absence and presence in a kept piece of writing is fable-like in the delicacy of its imagery and its mysterious tone. Its long-lined tercets help to create the dreamy atmosphere.

Highly Commended

‘The Footprints at Laetoli’ by David Lockett

This displays a beautifully assured use of the sonnet form: a meditation about how as readers of the world’s deep history and early traces we can only surmise but still feel an intimacy, a proximity.

‘Siren in Gold Pants’ by Erica De Jong

Freewheeling sass and specificity, glamour and grunge make this hypnotic off-the-cuff piece full of life. Long lines, which can be hard to manage in terms of rhythm, hold their energy here and trip the reader lightly out through the door.

This word portrait zones in on evocative details but what it doesn’t tell us is also a very big part of both its charm and its strength.

‘Perth Free Transit Zone’ by Ross Jackson

This poem is an engagingly pared back filmic walk through ‘the outer rind’ of Perth. To wander is to wonder, to be open to an existential dereliction that is realized through just the right images.

‘So it goes’ by Edward Reilly

Spooling out from Philip Glass’s String Quartet No.4 “Buczak”, this atmospheric piece captures mood, time and place in everyday acts (listening to music, swimming). Its long, graceful lines skillfully abut thoughts on mortality and the mythic up against the domestic in compelling ways.

Third Prize goes to ‘Baker Street’ by Maurice Corlett

This poem holds a conversational ease, whimsy and intimacy. Its powerful simplicity avoids any easy nostalgia about deep memory and the poem’s ‘turn’ shows the reader how a longing for what has been is never straightforward.

Second Prize goes to ‘Anticipating Mothers’ Day’ by Fran Graham

This accomplished poem is clear-eyed and displays a strong grasp on tone. The latter immediately undercuts any cosy or sentimental notions of mothers’ day. Rhythm and sound patterns throughout each line create a sense of unease and convey how difficult and isolating deep old age can be. The increasing use of ‘o’ sound patterns in the last two stanzas ratchet up this sense of unease.

First Prize goes to ‘In my boyhood city’ by Edward Reilly

This arresting poem begins biographically to move out into the world audaciously via the imposed shape of the year to take a selective riff on October (amongst other months) in history. Shaped by a beginning and ending in two cities, it holds a restless inventive energy relayed through striking imagery and electric leaps and connections.