

The competition for the Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2017 assembled 340 extraordinarily varied entries. This is reflected in the nine poems which won prizes or commendation.

I was struck by the seriousness of many of the poems. Yes, there's passion; yes, there is brilliant observation of scenes, people, happenings. One particular pleasure was meeting many descriptions of Western Australian scenery. And a few poems startled me with their depth of thought. But the lovers, the close observers, the philosophers often put their powers at the service of a cause - for instance, preservation of earth, air and sea and their creatures, integrity in public life, and opposition to racism and violence. This of course made humour and lightness of touch the more precious.

I'd say, going on the evidence of this and other recent competitions, that free verse has won the day - formal metrics and tight rhyme schemes are rare, and often awkwardly done when they are attempted. That doesn't rule out skilful treatment of rhythm and sound patterns - indeed, they become more important. The length and lie of irregular lines become significant and each line has, above all, to be worth writing and reading.

What qualities persuaded me to set poems in my long list of thirty-plus poems? Most important, I think, was my desire to read a poem again, my interest in what the poet was saying, and how. Energy of sound and observation was a factor here, and personality emerging in particular language or turns of thought. It's very engaging to find a poem you feel could be written *that* way, by only one person - the poet you are meeting on the page or as a voice. This is not a request for quirks; straightforward ideas, and both simple language and rich, ingenious phrasing are capable of registering individuality. I suppose this might be described as a high degree of sincerity.

I found myself picking out both short and long poems, and as for form - in that not-so-long list there is one villanelle, and one poem in prose paragraphs. I found myself after much re-reading with fifteen poems. The hardest task was to deny six of these poems a commendation! This one inexplicably changed course, another became predictable. I am glad the organisers asked for a short list because all fifteen merit strong encouragement.

COMMENDED

are three very different poems - NOT in order of merit, all rewarding reads.

"Carpet" - a carpet that has "slid from underneath" - is about unfulfilled desire or ambition, words that remain unspoken, the train missed, a destiny misdirected long ago. Its very form announces something unsettled: it consists of short phrases, arranged in alternating longer and very short lines. "Carpet" is by Colin Montfort WA

Also commended is "The Lie", which observes the meeting of a girl starting her university life, a young girl pretending to be older, with a man who "scrawls her number in green ink across his palm". Is this her destined man? There is something too soon, too inexperienced about the girl's excitement and there is apprehension in the voice of the observer, the voice of the poem.

"THE Lie" is by Laura Shore NSW

"Open House" is sub-titled "Palm Springs Modernism Week". Pretentious decor, pretentious poised viewers described as "worshippers" - are contrasted with the man who made the scene. "Out the back, by the gas-fueled fire pit, / the old architect sits / confused". The inconsistency of the fashionable scene with its creator is echoed by fuel-guzzling cars ("surely Texas still has oil?") and prodigal waste of water on "salad fresh lawns", in a land of "parched earth" and "rock-dry mountains". Thoughtless consumerism is the target in this entertainingly detailed piece.

"Open House" is by Helen Thurloe. NSW

HIGHLY COMMENDED

What joy, to read an utterly convincing love poem, a short poem in relatively simple language. Just twenty-six lines, saying simply that love IS, that it is the one truth, that desire is more substantial than words, that the existence of the two who love, is all that matters.

"Tell me you are here" is its first line and title, and its writer is Alex Ripper WA

Mathinna was a little indigenous Tasmanian girl, the daughter of an important man, who was after a fashion adopted by Lady Franklin, wife of a colonial governor. There is a beautiful oil painting of Mathinna. Lady Franklin was concerned to "civilise" her, dressing her, teaching her correct behaviour, showing her off. The Franklins separated her from what they thought wildness, but they left and did not take her with them. Her disoriented and drunken later life is seen alongside a description of the decayed mining township named after her.

"Mathinna" is a powerful piece of writing by Vanessa Page QLD

"Tom's Story" is a pretty indescribable poem, a conversation between the single dry phrases of the poet and the wheeling colloquial eloquence of Tom. Perhaps this is Tom Collins himself, that visitor at every door and recycler of rumours? What he spins out as his view of the world emerges from his preoccupation with words that go wheeling through his head, everything from hymns to nursery rhymes to "kiddie blather", propaganda and "self-promotion". Great fun, this poem, and a study of the all-too-articulate mind.

It's by Robert Lumsden SA

THE THIRD PRIZE

goes to a travel-poem, or if you like, a little dramatic piece about driving to and visiting the Iroquois Museum. It's got a cast-list of the speaker, her playful,

lively partner who drives, an old Indian living at the museum, his wife who doesn't exactly welcome visitors, a mother bear and cub, and a large black bear who finally "drops / on all fours. Swaggers off like a storm, crash / and splinter of branches in his wake." There's another animal, dimly sensed in the undergrowth, and ravens, crucially important in Indian culture.

It's a beautifully-managed approach to a different culture, the life of the place. What's surprisingly effective is the few words spoken, just three unassuming sentences uttered by the old Indian that for the visitor are stages in understanding. Once at the Museum, the focus tightens, to the powerful presence of the black bear.

"En route to the Iroquois Museum" is by Laura Shore NSW

THE SECOND PRIZE

It's a surprise to be gripped by someone else's mental shifts. That is what I found in the short poem "Orbit", about being "out of kilter" and then imagining or discovering an experience that "knocks you right back / where you need to be". The "out of kilter" is described as irregularly spinning, for instance, "your mind spiralling through infinite anxieties". The recovery is intense, direct, targeted, even frightening. There's a distant similarity with the denouement of the "Iroquois Museum" poem. But this is somehow stranger, with its success in using the usually clumsy future tense, and terse value in every word.

"Orbit" is by Vanessa Proctor NSW

THE FIRST PRIZE,

winner of the TOM COLLINS POETRY PRIZE, goes to a poem about talking, but it's not Tom's story. This time, dangerous talking. John is a talker who does not understand that getting on with everyone is to ignore motive in the people he talks with. He is an artist with the yoyo and this is cleverly woven into his repertoire of communication. He even gives his safe interlocutor, his radio, into the keeping of another before exposing himself to peril among strangers. The speaker doesn't want to talk about it and we know why. It's a poem about trust, trust misplaced and misapplied.

"Rock the baby" is a great war poem and the poet is Andy Kissane (NSW) the winner of the Tom Collins Prize 2017.
