

Tom Collin's Poetry Prize Report 2020

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There were almost three hundred poems submitted for this year's Tom Collin's prize. These poems were pleasingly varied in terms of concerns, ranging from COVID and bushfires (#2020), through a remarkable amount of poems about solar bodies, and the expected reflections on plant and flowers – as twitter user Caed_account wrote on December 21st, “a good 30% of Australian poems are just the speaker looking out their kitchen window and naming 1 species of bird, 1 species of tree and 2 species of flower”. From this botanical, and other, wealth, I formed a long list of 40-ish poems, including a surprisingly good poem about cricket.

The poems that made this long list were those that used the forms and techniques of poetry to best reflect on their thematic concerns. Poetry is, at heart, the art of the line. There were lots of poems that attacked interesting subjects, but fewer that did so in interesting ways. Particularly there were many poems with wildly irregular line lengths that did not aid the reading of the poem, as well as many poems that were centred down the page without reason. A few interesting formal trends emerged, villanelles appealed this year, maybe for their relationship to grief (a common theme), as did prose poems. Many of these prose poems used numbered sections especially to tell history – familial and otherwise – some were beautiful meditations but veered just slightly away from poetry and would be better re-crafted as creative non-fiction (a fine line).

From within this long list, many had zinger lines that made me stop and clap, for example this from “Coles Magazine Recipe for Chocolate Sponge Roll with Rhubarb (in a pandemic)”:

“here on Zoom the women come and go talking of their Insta-glow”

and potentially my favourite lines of the year:

“Airports / are amazing. Queues at KFC counters in airport terminals / are amazing”
from Caroline Reid's “DEVOUR”.

The poems that made it from the long list onto the short list, could not be defined by singular lines, but rather by how they moved from line to line, image to image.

Unfortunately many poems across the breadth of all entries were let down by not letting their images do the work, instead they over explicated like a detective in an Agatha Christie book who has gathered us all together to bludgeon us with the truth. While others had very promising starts but petered out without reaching a climax, a poem need not be epiphanic in ending but it does need to feel whole within itself.

There were eleven poems on my shortlist in no order:

“*Unmade*”, Maddie Godfrey

“Prayer-fish”, Anne Casey

“these pastures held my heart”, Allan Padgett

“The Break”, Shastra Deo

“DEVOUR”, Caroline Reid

“public health the silence of god”, Andrew Sutherland

“Barren Grounds in late Autumn”, Peter Ramm

“Ruining the Light”, Shey Marque

“bleakness”, Kevin Gillam

“A Handful of Salt”, Elizabeth Lewis

“All your red flags, black”, Sharmin Paynter

First up the four commended poems:

“Prayer-fish” by Anne Casey is an unusual eulogy, threading together thematic and linguistic strands of corvids and covid.

Shastra Deo’s “The Break”, is a taut narrative poem, crisp and precise in its telling of an interaction between mother and daughter.

“Ruining the Light” by Shey Marque startles with its progression from “the last of his beer’s in your mouth” through to a philosophical contemplation of what worms cleaved in two can remember. It is an example of what couplets can do when executed well.

Sharmin Paynter’s “All your red flags, black”, is a poem that almost doesn’t work (it even breaks a line on a “the”), however the idiosyncratic images (a smile / filed to a point) created a tone of unforgettable malice that I couldn’t ignore.

Then I would like to highly commend four poems:

“these pastures held my heart” by Allan Padgett is a frenetic, audacious, inversion of the pastoral from the perspective of “the agronomist I might have been” who “would have stooped to stipa / hermaphroditic & perennial”.

“A Handful of Salt” by Elizabeth Lewis and “Barren Grounds in late Autumn” by Peter Ramm are beautiful meditations on family and the potential of loss. Lewis’s “A

Handful of Salt” blends scientific language and history into a long elegant prose poem for a niece, while Ramm’s “Barren Grounds in late Autumn” drew me in with its long James Wright-ish lines.

Finally, Kevin Gillam’s “bleakness”, with its fourteen line structure, ghosts a sonnet, one where “40W through the drip, bleakness keeps / me jaundiced, a sick moth, crazed and looping”.

While each of these four poems could easily have made it onto the winner’s podium, the three winning poems stuck with me, lines resonating long after I finished reading and re-reading the selection.

The third and second place poems were decidedly of this moment.

In third place “public health the silence of god” by Andrew Sutherland, is a series of vignettes established by the key line that “the best way you could bear a clinic wait was cast it as a Bergman / film”. As the speaker wonders and wanders between telehealth and phlebotomist appointments the poem traces Bergman films against the landscape of the HIV “drain-aged epidemic as a new pandemic starts to rain”. It is an irreducible meditation on mortality and the systems surrounding it.

In second place Caroline Reid’s “DEVOUR” made me laugh. More than once. I read it to my husband. He laughed. This is harder than it sounds. To write a genuinely funny poem is a difficult task, to write a genuinely funny political poem that doesn’t shy away from puns (for example the Prime Minister is referred to repeatedly as the “Crime Minister”) I would’ve thought may be an impossibility. Let alone one that also blends thorough reference to Patrick White. “DEVOUR” manages all this, and brings us lines like steep switchbacks: “If I was a fact writer for *Libra* I’d write things like: / Your chance of finding a horse on fire in a river is extreme”.

In first place “*Unmade*” by Maddie Godfrey, is both historical and contemporary. Taking as its central object “a brass four poster bed, that dismantled / into sections for boat transportation”, this was a poem blending the almost clinical description of the museum display with sudden and unexpected reflections such as “hand washed shame stains differently, like a knotted / rag that refuses to release what it knows”. It is a poem where each image and thought is justified and cumulative, building towards the assumption by the speaker of the role of the tour guide who announces “*some months sadness unmade her. / still, she rested on what remained. / she demanded to be remembered not only / for her grief, but never without it*”. Above all, it is a poem that trusts us as readers to follow it into feeling.

Congratulations to the winners and to all who entered, it is truly hopeful to see the breadth of great poetry being produced across the country.