

2019 TOM COLLINS PRIZE JUDGE'S SPEECH

24 February 2020

It was again a great honour to be asked to judge the Tom Collins Prize. I think this is the fourth time I have judged it, the first being in 1986. In the competition's first two years (1975 and 1976) the judge was Fay Zwicky, and many well-known Perth poets have followed in her footsteps since.

There were 354 entries in this competition, a healthy and daunting number, though it has to be said that many of these poems ruled themselves out of contention pretty quickly by revealing an almost total unawareness of the basics of poetic art and craft. There were many incredibly small and flimsy pieces; one consisted of eight words, less than half the length of a haiku, scattered on the page. On occasion I felt a bit angry that some people, and I stress only some, would think such writing, and I use the word loosely, would merit any consideration.

As suggested, this competition is highly regarded, prestigious, and has been running for 45 years. It seems common sense, therefore, that poems entered should show some signs of work and art and skill. While a poem's length was not in itself a primary criterion, I was certainly more interested in those poems that showed command of form, the sustained development of ideas and images, and that spoke to me with serious intent. It was disturbing that many poets gave no indication of awareness of what has happened in the past 100 years of poetic development, let alone the past thousand or so. I am now 65 and have been writing poetry for 50 years. Far more importantly, I have been *reading* poetry for 50 years, for enjoyment, but also to try to find out how and why poems work and move us. And, at 65, I am also entitled to be a bit of a Grumpy Old Man!

The American poet Robert Lowell wrote: "Though art is not just the mastery of technique, art is not art without it; and accordingly the first critical appraisal of a poem or novel is whether the person who wrote it knew how." It is sometimes said that judging poetry is a subjective matter. Perhaps, in the final stages, there is some truth in this. But there are many objective criteria that can be used in assessment of a poet's style and voice: diction, structure, control of syntax, effective imagery, some musical component, balance, flow, tone, surprise, purposefulness, awareness of aesthetic values, risk-taking, memorability, nuance and connotation, technique, and much else. Evelyn Waugh said that "Good writing requires three elements: euphony, clarity and concision." He was referring mainly to prose, but his criteria are even more relevant to poetry.

Although I have said length was not a primary criterion in the judging, it was taken into consideration. There were many good smaller poems, perhaps 10 to 20 lines or so, but relatively few that took advantage of the 50 or 60 line maximum in order to really make the most of extended forms. Some of these, as will be seen, were awarded the prizes and commendations. The hardest part in the judging process was whittling my short-list of 17 or so down to a more manageable 11. I had to try to find reasons for choosing A rather than B, and satisfy myself (and others) that I could

justify my decisions. It would be ingenuous, however, to suggest that some degree of subjectivity was not at work in these final decisions.

Let us now go to the results. I begin, as is usually the case, with four Commended poems, and I stress that these are not ranked in any way. So in no especial order these are: "The Death of Who I'm Not". This is an unusual, quirky and well-sustained sort of self-eulogy. It is traditional in that it uses carefully constructed quatrains consisting of rhyming couplets. It is a haunting riff on the nature of identity.

Next is "On the Hill". This is an elegiac, elegant and atmospheric poem, full of unexpected and subtly developed metaphor, such as "Hours go by slow as freight trains, impossibly long/ and all carrying the same fright." There are many other surprising but apposite images.

And next is "All Shook Up", a delightful piece of nostalgia, an era evoked via depiction of a well-known and loved Milk Bar in the "old" Perth. It is full of meticulously remembered detail, whimsical and gentle humour.

And the final Commended poem is "Step-by-Step". This is a poem about the author's mother that successfully combines wit with pathos, all cleverly held together by mathematical expressions and allusions. Its finely controlled structure is integral to the success of this poem.

We now move to those in the Highly Commended category, and once more there is no especial order here. They are all fine poems. One such is "Day of the Spiders". This is a long, rhythmical contemplation of the art and craft of spiders, and much else. From its arresting opening "Across the blowing fields of stars" its pulse and drive do not let-up. The technique is exemplary in its graceful, dare I say interweaving, of imagery with alliteration and assonance. It is a lovely poetic journey that concludes with a suggestion that "We'll move along these lines/ ourselves one day, connecting star/burst star to the next."

Next is "Boronia Megastigma". This is another well-crafted poem with irresistible opening imagery: "Close to the ground/ its flowers are little bells/ nuns carrying golden lemons beneath dark brown folds." Breathtaking stuff. This celebratory response to the flower includes nostalgic flashbacks to family outings, as well as snippets of Renaissance history succinctly presented. It is an intriguing mixture of the personal, the informational, but above all the vividly sensory.

"The Lifeguard" is another unusual poem that hooks the reader with its opening line: "I'm scanning the pool thinking about Jesse James." The contradictory juxtaposition seems at first completely out of left field. But it's impossible not to read on. The image of the lifeguard transitions from the literal to the metaphorical, the "lifeguard mind" keeping a watch on the narrator's own mental health. It is a poem hard to categorise, yet is continually engaging with its changes of mood and other surprises.

And the final Highly Commended poem is “Cherry Blossom Contemplations”. As the title states, this is another flower-centred poem. It too moves back and forth from the beauty of the blossom, its importance in Japanese culture, to more universal reflections and observations. And yet again, the crafting is superb. The 5-line tanka form is used, as is a delicate and appropriate use of careful rhyme, and much assonance. It is an exquisitely nuanced poem of great skill.

Now to the main prizes:

Third Prize goes to “Of Shearing”. Because we are mostly urban people, our poems mostly reflect on urban subjects and themes. This was one of a few, however, that commemorated and celebrated the rural world of wheat and sheep farming. It is a poem infused with the vigour of remembered youth. It is in fact a poem of immense and intense recollection. The arrangement of detail and the abundance of sensory detail are beautifully judged. There is a great sense of excitement in these words. Diverse as all these winning poems are, they have this one thing in common: a sense of style, a personal voice, and an understanding of what poetic technique can do. The reader is hurtled into the frenetic routines necessary for the shearing season to be a success. Strong images and strong beats abound: “where morning, staccato as the rhythm/ set by the young gun, races on until/ his first fifty’s done.” Deep feeling, thought and craft have gone into this fine poem.

Second Prize is awarded to “The Straining Rowlocks”. Like many poems entered, this is suffused with a strong vein of nostalgia (once considered a medical condition, by the way). But there is little sentimentality here, as “An ageing man” immerses himself in memory (“Your mind merges with the current”). The process of fishing is described with considerable poetic art and precision. There is much that is musical and memorable: “the eddy of memory”, “the gleam of fluid diamonds”, “the stained glass cliffs”, and much else. There is a fine sense of control of form as we return at the end to the poem’s starting point. It is a poem that, like any effective poem, yields more at every reading.

First Prize is awarded to “Missing Pieces”. Yet again, this is a poem in which the poet is in firm control of his subject, form and technique, combining them to a strong and moving conclusion. From the beginning, the tone is assured and purposeful, wistful and wondering: “They could be described/ as musical pieces, those/ things that you crafted/ across the years.” Essentially a homage to and celebration of the poet’s late father, it inevitably makes the reader think of his or her own relations with parents, especially elderly ones. The father has been a family doctor for more than 50 years, but also an avid and loving gardener, a devotee and player of a wide range of music, a man with passions in his life, yet a “responsible” family man, respected in the medical and wider community. The poet presents so much of a rich life in these 13 quatrains arranged in three parts. As with so many of the poems I have been referring to, each new reading has the capacity to further surprise.

I would like to congratulate all the poets who entered this competition and hope that, while continually honing their craft, they will enter the next Tom Collins competition.

Just before concluding, I would like to mention a personal loss and a loss to Perth's poetic community with the passing of Dorothy Dellaway in January. She wrote under the name of Dorothy Clancy McGowan and she won First Prize in the Tom Collins three times, a record. She also judged the competition in 1991. Her book, *The Face of the Earth*, published in 2017, is well worth searching out.

Thank you to all the hard-working organizers of the competition and of Voicebox and, again, thank you to all the poets.

Shane McCauley
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