**I would like to acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people of this beautiful land on which we stand, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging and to recognize their strength and resilience.**

**Judge’s Report: Rose van Son Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2023**

It is an honour and pleasure to be invited to judge the Tom Collins Poetry Prize, 2023. Thank you Louise Allan, Annie Wilson and all at FAWWA connected with this wonderful prize. The Tom Collins Poetry Prize is a sought-after, premier Western Australian Poetry Award, and one of my favourite Awards. It has been running for many years and has attracted many skilled poets.

Three hundred and seventy nine entries filled my judge’s box soon after the deadline closed, each poem demanding to be read and carefully considered until a list of 120 poems was reached. Surely, within the leaves of these 120 remaining poems I would find what I was looking for? Where was that elusive winning poem, a poem that I could say, *this is the one*. But judging is not easy. So many diverse subjects and themes: life, death, love, nature, travel, and everything in-between; so many forms of writing poetry: free verse, sonnets, prose, villanelle— so many good poems in this selection demanding to be reread. So began my long list of reading; this 120 became a shorter list of 60, then 25, all commendable in some way. I made notes as I read, adding asterisks here and there, ticks: one or two!

But what was I looking for? A poem that insisted I stop, consider, reflect, read and reread, penned by a poet who loved language and poetry and the language of poetry – the skilful putting together of things, often disparate, metaphor, imagery, clarity and mystery; a poem that spoke to me through sound, nuance, drama, breath, possibility; a poet skilled in the power of silence, internal rhyme, regardless of subject matter; a poet who invited me to follow the thread of language, follow the poem’s path, its story, to its surprising conclusion.

 I was looking for poems that moved me in some way, however subtly, poems that touched me in some way, wanting to discover something new, as poet Robert Frost believed.

 A poem must enlighten in some way; a good title does this, it is a clue to what’s to follow.

A memorable poem is a story of understanding, of empathy, of knowledge— for poetry is life’s philosophy on the page.

After much contemplation, from these 25 poems I chose the short list of 8 poems.

I have pleasure in announcing the winners of the Tom Collins Poetry Prize, 2023. Warmest congratulations to all these poets.

In **first** place...

***Mother and Child –*** *Michael Robinson (WA)*

A well-crafted, tactile poem, that gallops with ‘the tides of conflict ebb and roar’; ‘And every local skirmish has its long / Significance in legends of the deep’; it speaks of ‘The ruthless sunlight’; ... the river’s ripples with fragile fire.’ – Pain is felt throughout this poem until it reaches a surprising, poignant end.

In **second** place...

***Two Visitation Dreams -*** *Alan Fyfe (WA)*

A mysterious poem, its form adding to the mystery. It unravels, a story ‘playing out on the edge of a city,’ somewhere within the lines, there is music, there is sound, a story within a story, a story told and yet to be told.

In **Third** place...

***Wedge-tailed Eagle -*** *David Atkinson (NSW)*

The spirit of being in the natural world: this is not so much about the rhythmic flight of the wedge-tailed eagle, but of living within its wingspan. ‘A long journey to the interior. / The moment to explore the season / with Vivaldi...the fretwork of the river red gum.’ Beautiful use of language.

Highly commended: ***Figure without a landscape -*** *Isi Unikowski (ACT)*

So many exquisite sounds in this poem, ‘if even the magpie listening for a worm hears a loamy fidget / beneath its claws, beneath its own sandpapery intent’...

Beautiful imagery and sound...this poem asks – ‘why shouldn’t absence make its own sound’

So much in this to enjoy.

Highly commended: ***Window Birds –*** *Mark O’Flynn (NSW)*

A homecoming. ‘The house where birds fly into windows...’, ‘watching her breathe through the glass, watching her breathe / against the shallow wickerwork of her hands / like two birds snatched out of the sky /entangled in each other’s bones.’ This poem takes your breath, holds it still, then lets it go. Exquisite, simple words make this poem memorable.

Commended: ***Looking for the River –*** *Kay Cairns (WA)*

Reminds us of the urgency of life ...‘and the air contracts around us with the bone-deep cold of winter’. The visuals are beautiful; beautiful, too, is metaphor at play here.

Commended: ***Widow’s Walk*** – *David Terelinck (QLD)*

Of love and loss, the impossibility of waiting: ‘she knows the heart is a selfish organ’, ... ‘is immune to the wake of whalers / that may never return, ‘

Hope is sewn into the poem’s seams here.

Commended: ***Internalising Everest –*** *Ross Jackson (WA)*

Questions our reasons why, but it is so much more. The poet writes, ‘frosty corpses / will still be piling up /’...there is no answer to why.

...

Again, warmest congratulations to all these prize winners; it’s been a pleasure to read your poems, to read all the works entered. Thank you for putting pen to paper, for sharing your innermost thoughts, and for inspiring other poets and readers to write.

**Rose van Son,**

Judge, Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2023. (March, 2023).