

Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2018: Judge's Report

Dennis Haskell

I'd like to begin this judge's report with Tom Collins' immortal words: "Unemployed at last!" That's because the report is the end of a long – and mostly enjoyable – process: the number of entries submitted for the 2018 Tom Collins Poetry Prize as well as their range and quality demonstrate that poetry writing is flourishing in contemporary Australia. I don't know how many poems were submitted – they came to me in neat alphabetical order according to title rather than with numbers, but they completely filled a large ringback binder. So poetry reading was flourishing in my small part of the world. I would like to thank Peter Bibby and the team who were involved in the administrative details because their work was immaculate and made my job easier. I'm not complaining about the size of the task; the job was difficult not because of the number of poems but because of the number of very good poems and by their variety.

The poems, in both form and content, reflected the fact that we live in an age of uncertainties – a circumstance that is difficult for living but stimulating for literature. . There was a significant number of rhymed poems, which was interesting, and at the other end of the scale a significant number of prose poems. Where these were weak it was often because the rhyming was heavy handed and because the prose poems remained short pieces of prose rather than becoming poems. The prose poem is fashionable at the moment but it is a very difficult form to handle in English, in which we have no substantial tradition. There were some poems about topical issues, particularly climate change, refugees and child abuse. Not surprisingly a number of these displayed elements of moralising, which is death to poetry in our time, but some were admirably subtle and reached my long list. The ringback binder included a few poems presented entirely in bold capitals, which is the visual form of shouting; all of these were from inexperienced writers. There was a notable number of poems which began well but then didn't develop – which suggests the value of the workshops run by FAW and the other writing organisations. As always in a group of competition poems a number of poets simply try too hard, not trusting their language or the reader sufficiently. Disconcertingly, there were many errors in punctuation – many more than in grammar! But on the positive side there was a good deal of humour, more than I usually find in any group of poems. Humour is difficult to do in any form of writing but it is a universal truth that every reader who picks up a book is in need of some humour.

Every judge of a literary competition knows that the really difficult bit is the winnowing process to find the winners. My first, very strict and judgemental run-through produced a 'short list' of 27 poems, so it was a short list only in the Furphy sense of the phrase! The winnowing wasn't helped by that wonderful variety: as evidence I can report that one poem was written (ostensibly) by a lid, one by a cockerel etched on Venetian glass, some by old houses, one by a piece of poo, and one was spoken by the State of WA. The entries included

a mix of private poems and public poems, ballads and a notable amount of nostalgia, especially for country places now lost and available to the poet only through memory. This probably reflects the age cohort of the writers – who, I'm glad to say, were not known to me, except in two or three cases where I could recognise a style or had heard the poem at a reading.

I'd like to report my long short list since some of the poets will be here:

Long 'Short List' (in alphabetical order):

After You Left
Barney Embraces Technology
Busted Piano Man
C.
Coming of Age
Consecrated Lives
Corellas in Toodyay Park
Cross Current
Dreamlands Hopscotch
Elk Rapids, Lake Michigan
Homage Marguerite
In Somnolence
in the vault of things lie
Known unknown
Lazarette on Peel Island
Learning the World
Love-locked
Monopoly
Night walk at Tidal River
Rufus
strands of us
Talking to My Father
The History of Sugar
The Life of Caves
The snow years
They
Through Slow-turning Days

My initial Long List included also:

Acknowledgement of Jam Tree Country
Beauty Spots
Berlin

Diasporic
Dust
End Papers
Modern Witch
On Every Land Mass
resistance
Shark Nursery
Sometimes on Honeycomb
Street Talk Melbourne
Visiting

You'll know as a matter of logic that the winners come from that first batch of titles, but I did admire and enjoy all of these poems. They all seem to me worth publishing.

From there the winnowing brought me to a more realistic short list of twelve poems, namely:

Barney Embraces Technology
Busted Piano Man
Coming of age
Dreamlands Hopscotch
Elk Rapids, Lake Michigan
Homage [to?] Marguerite
In Somnolence
Lazarette on Peel Island
Love-locked
strands of us
Talking to My Father
The Life of Caves

After that it got very tough, and I'll be the first to admit that once you get to this stage a different judge might make different selections. There is time for a hundred decisions and a hundred visions and revisions. But I was the judge and after rereadings of rereadings decided on the following:

Commended (in alphabetical order):

"Dreamlands Hopscotch" This poem provides a wonderful insider understanding of the refugee issue; it presents a refugee child who escapes her dreadful reality through playing hopscotch. A sense of circularity, frustration and injustice is conveyed powerfully through repetition of the hopscotch moves and the simple word "again".

"In Somnolence" This prose poem offers an intelligent, detailed study of a difficult subject: sleep. Its three stanzas present very different rhythms and tones to come at the subject in diverse ways.

"Lazarette on Peel Island" is a thoughtful and sensitive poem about the past and present treatment of lepers. The moral issues are delicately handled and the poem's simple expression belies the complexity of contradictory emotions evoked.

"Love-locked" is another prose poem; its clever title derives from a note given to the poem: "54 tons of lovelocks were recently excised from the Pont des Arts, which was collapsing under its [sic] weight". Lots of intelligent detail comes at the reader in a rush and the poem uses second person, with an awareness of French poetry.

"Talking to My Father" is varied and thoughtful, with a wonderful ending. It concerns a father who in some ways was never known to his child, at least not his young self who was a Spitfire pilot. The poem poignantly offers a lot of incisive detail.

Next stage of the winnowing produced the Highly Commended (in alphabetical order):

"Elk Rapids, Lake Michigan" In an ice and snow landscape – something of a contrast to Perth's - a couple walk with their dog out onto a frozen lake. The poem provides wonderful description and an evocation of different worlds, or of different ways to see the world. Its detail includes a wide range of reference, with internal rhyme and intelligent thematic ideas about narrowing and opening, normality and strangeness.

"Homage Marguerite" (I imagine this is meant to be "Homage to Marguerite") It is a delicate dedicatory poem for a mother and its quietness imitates its subject's. The poem is full of lovely, almost whispered detail, "all nuance and subtlety".

"strands of us" This is a counter poem to "Marguerite" in that it is a masculine poem with a wonderful sense of male connection and interweaving across three generations. The work detailed ranges from "axe work" to "cello work" and its sense of masculinity includes "shame ... dug deep, hands ready / to hide".

"The Life of Caves" is an ambitious poem with a sweep of reference that links the personal to the historic and primeval. It skilfully employs stanza form, a strong structure and well-chosen detail.

Given all that you know that the winners must be rather special:

3rd prize. "Barney Embraces Technology" This was the best of the humorous poems and it is funny throughout, helped by some wonderful rhymes, such as "sit in" and "position" plus "Leschenaultia" and "saltier", "practice" and "cactus"! Barney is a farmer confronted with the possibilities provided by self-driving tractors, drones and GPS technology. It's hard to sustain humour across eleven long-lined quatrains but Banjo Paterson would have been proud of this one!

2nd "Coming of age" is a poem dedicated "for my father" and I'm somehow pretty sure that it's written by a woman. The poem maintains a lovely, meditative tone and is full of interesting, apparently sincere detail. Its issues stretch across time, as she comes across the letter her father had written her when she turned 18. Now older and more aware, she writes back to him as well as to her younger self, with heartfelt, beautifully managed, delicate emotion. Simplicity of expression works for this poem, which never seems strained.

That means there is one poem left and it is:

1st. "Busted Piano Man" I don't know the author but I do know the subject, as some of you will. The poem is dedicated "for Ross" and concerns the poet and musician Ross Bolleter. Ross is well known for his fascination with ruined pianos. The poem begins "His teeth clipped, craggy pegs of wood, dried bones", and throughout the alignment of the man and the busted pianos he loves is extremely skilful. The poem is succinct and has a fascinating rhythm which plinks like the pianos' music. There is a beautiful tone to the poem and to the friendship, with inventive adjectives, some excellent alliteration and the most interesting ending to all of the poems in that large ringbacked binder.

My congratulations to the winners and indeed to all the entrants; Joe Furphy would have been proud of you!