

Judge's Report for The Kathryn Purnell Poetry Prize 2023

I acknowledge that my reading, scoring, selecting and reporting for the highly anticipated, national poetry prize by the Society of Women Writers Victoria (SWWV) took place on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. I also acknowledge that First Nations peoples are the first storytellers of this country, and I pay my respect to their elders, past and present, and to their descendants.

The process of judging the entries was enthralling and rigorous as each poem I read and re-read revealed an additional aspect to consider, analyse and assess. The poems traversed a wide breadth of subject, form and imagery. They used various poetic tropes, word patterns and rhyming schemes to engage emotionally and intellectually. There were some common themes though that came through, such as loss and associated grief, the significance of nature, women's stories reclaimed and our precious planet. In many of the poems, the personal experience was revisited, and in turn, the human condition was examined.

The poems that were shortlisted were able to involve the heart, mind and body – when these three fundamentals are in accord with the emotional truth or the evocative charge of the poem a special relationship is created with the reader. In addition, the prize winning and highly commended poems not only provided a harmony of succinct language and deft sequencing, but awakened us to 'something more, something hidden'. As the acclaimed poet Jane Hirshfield stated in an interview:

Poems are instruments of perception, seeking just that, the way microscopes, telescopes, X-rays, and CAT scans are instruments of perception. A poem extends our capacity to see and know beyond the perimeter, to glimpse, for a radiant moment, *the* radiant moment.¹

The first placed poem, *Suitable – UK 1950's*, was able to reclaim a secondary college experience with all the radiant qualities of perception. The poem provided a unique unravelling of a teaching era, referencing the fabric, style and fashion of clothing of that time to depict the various teachers, their respective disciplines and how they conducted their lessons. Humour and irony were balanced with acute recreation of classroom antics and attitude. The seven, five-line stanzas were perfectly formed akin to the poem's narrator being a curious, inquisitive and intelligent student. The following is a stand-out stanza, showing how the poem builds momentum:

Sardonic 'History', something rakish about her style,
box pleats flaring, as she swung to the blackboard. Or
mild-mannered 'French' who charmed us all, scarf tied
à la mode. Senior 'English', dove-grey skirted, white hair
wispy, sharing her life-long passion for Shakespeare.

The second placed poem, *Ngarigo Country*, is accomplished lyrically – it's both a joy to read out loud and to view on the page. Each stanza is comprised of five crisp lines taking us on a vivid journey through First Nations country. The poem enjoins us to learn and to use the first name given to the particular land by way of carefully threaded Aboriginal language. We are

¹ *The Writer's Library* Pearl N & Schwager J, an interview with Jane Hirshfield, p. 248

part of the visceral cycling experience as we take in the vista of mountains and the smaller, yet powerful offerings of Cowombat ridge, including:

An orange beetle chews on a grey-green gum leaf
life feeding on life amongst a cluster
of dead trees so long ago burnt
that wisps of bearded moss
stubble the bleached trunks.

The third placed poem, *The National Air and Space Museum*, utilised enjambment masterfully to drill down to the essence of an experience. The narrator is a tourist visiting the museum which houses the Enola Gay, the first aircraft to drop an atomic bomb. The poem lists micro details of the before and after impact of the war to create a reverberating shock that this plane is indeed the 'horror capsule', even though:

the enola gay
sits. her pristine wings poised
(her! I say, giving life
to metal)
and I, mere tourist, think distantly
of where the children's diaries
lie
behind acrylic windows

Two poems were highly commended. The first highly commended is an evocative prose poem, *Storyteller*. It's a difficult task to weave both love and grief into the one piece, however, this is done with outstanding lines such as:

I would spend the night gazing at the planes of her face, the bumps and scars and fine lines, the markings of her stories. I knew her face better than my own, knew the contours of her by touch. If I ran my fingers gently enough over the corner of her jaw, she would smile. If I traced the space between her eyebrows, I could comfort her from her nightmares.

The second highly commended, *Streets of Elysium*, is a short poem worthy of memorising as a salve for life. It performs an exceptional marriage between title and its one stanza, which begins:

I wish we could see,
the colour and vibrancy of souls,
of all the people we meet.

With respect to the shortlisted poems, I would like to note what I found special about each of them:

she writes

Acerbic wit combined with exceptional line breaks.

Silver Birch

A heart-felt ode to what has become a member of a family, signifying the precariousness of nature.

Regent Honeyeater

A gentle rendition of a dying life with dialogue used to strengthen character and mood.

Seeking Yvonne

Well-crafted quatrains with questions throughout beseeching the unknown.

Green Dream

A cascading quatrain form, providing an authentic and intense recounting.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the organisational work of the receiving officer, Tracee Spiby, and the collaborative work of the reading committee for this prize. The SWWV's administration of this prize is smooth and efficient, which added to the enjoyment of judging this year's poetry prize.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Angela Costi', written in a cursive style.

Angela Costi