Judges' Report Newcastle Poetry Prize 2024

Over 800 poems were entered in the 2024 Newcastle Poetry Prize. We read all of these poems blind. It was a demanding task but it also gave us the chance to experience many powerful and original poems. Experiencing these poems convinced us of the importance of the Newcastle Poetry Prize, no other prize in Australia allows for such variety of poetry to be considered in a competition. This is largely a feature of the length permitted—up to 200 lines—however we were struck with how the entries ranged widely in length, from three line haiku to poems filling out every one of the 200 lines. A 200 line maximum allows a poet to be ambitious, to try out forms not possible if the allowance was curtailed.

One of the difficult aspects of choosing winners was the comparison of very different kinds of poems. How to rank a long ambitious poem that may have weaknesses at certain points against a far shorter lyric poem? Or how to compare an intensely personal, emotion-charged poem with a poem that works with history or science and has a more purely intellectual appeal? How to place side-by-side poems speaking urgently of the current day, with poems meandering in the currents of history? We wanted to judge each poem on its own terms and not apply any singular aesthetic too rigorously.

The winning poem, 'Dombovar' by Kit Kelen, ranked very high on both our original lists and grew in stature with successive rereads. 'Dombovar' skilfully integrates thoughtful reflection on important issues, humour, inventiveness and an engaging partly colloquial tone. This evocation of small town rural Hungary carries echoes of the moral ambiguities and violence of settler societies like Australia. Throughout the poem there is the suggestion of

a larger, potentially national, narrative, but the reader is left to work through the weave themselves. Sudden transitions between dogs and humans and intertextual asides about fences and neighbours add to the poem's humour. There is also a strong undertone of sadness as the poet subtly creates a self-portrait. With great skill the poem breaks standard idioms and expected word choices to produce a clipped, very tight effect that intensifies the reader's experience. 'Dombovar' uses the form of a poem sequence to powerful effect, shaping a masterful poem that can be read on multiple levels.

The poem we chose in second place, 'Welcome Swallow' by Verity Laughton, is a perfectly crafted short lyric. In its twenty-six lines not a word is wasted. All the dimensions of lyric poetry—sound play, rhythm, shifts in tone, imagery, line breaks—come together to evoke the moment of being fully alive in a small bird. It does this with great brilliance and poise. The suspension created by the repeated 'if ...' structure leads the reader onward through image after image till we see the bird with 'this same/ glee of airy volume, this hump and slap of wild/ invisible ...' To distil so much intensity and beauty in a traditional lyric form, perhaps a little like Hopkins, is a remarkable achievement.

'Tornados and other disasters' by Jenny Pollak is at once a poem about the difficulties of writing poetry and a beautifully crafted reflection on human mortality. The effort to describe in words the light at midday, the sea in autumn or the shifts in one's moods becomes a reflection on the writer's ageing. Sparsely written and beautifully imagined, the poem offers us the woman 'who resurrects the trees by making them/ her apostles' and summons up the world that exists when we don't see it or when it has truly

vanished but continues ‘the way that pangolins exist/ and otters on other continents’. Understatement is a strong element in this poem, evoking the experience of losing one’s beloved. ‘Tornados and other disasters’ is outstanding for the originality of its clear short observations and for the way it joins together realms most often kept apart.

The two poems we chose as Highly Commended, ‘Glass Creek’ by Verity Oswin and ‘The Grasscutters’ by Jo Gardiner, both skilfully shape their material into memorable poems. ‘Glass Creek’ brings together the story of a colonial real estate tycoon in Melbourne and the narrator’s morning jog by the Yarra, asking us the question ‘a colony in the body—how does it feel?’ ‘The Grasscutters’ weaves together intricate descriptions of the natural world with such daily routines as a chat with friends and a swim in the local pool. The poem gives us the beauty of moments intensely perceived as when ‘the grass-/ cutters shred long stems of light/ along the road’.

‘Lake Days’ by Andrew Menken has been awarded the 2024 Harri Jones Memorial Prize. This category was one of the most contested, with many fine poems being submitted by poets 35 and under. What bought us together on ‘Lake Days’ was firstly its humour and then how it, as a poetic sequence, roamed across forms, stanzas and influences. The ultimate result is a deliberately, delightfully, incomplete portrait of pedestrian town life, by, as the name suggests, a lake, where ‘fishes plop’ and ‘the flies have gotten into the dog food’.

The 2024 Member Prize is awarded to Mark Treddinick’s ‘A Godwit Sonnet Cycle’. One of many sonnet cycles submitted amongst the 2024 entries,

Treddinick's poem uses the form well, interrogating the cyclical nature of tides and human lives. The poem avoids veering into sentimentality or the sublime, while still managing to convey whimsy, humour and love, where the poet concludes that 'Self appears/ To be more like a ragged constellation/ Than a star'.

It was striking how many poems had a rural location. If you relied on this sample of Australian writing as a guide to demographics you would conclude that two thirds of Australians live in the country and only a minority in the cities. In part this reflects the large number of poems concerning the natural world, whether as landscape, plants, trees, animals or birds. There were several poems about floods, which occupied a much larger place in this year's poetic imagination than bushfires.

The present danger of climate catastrophe was reflected in many poems addressing directly changes wrought by global warming, or imbued with a sense of climate grief or dread. Many other poems focussed on other urgent domestic and global issues, many questioned, as Auden famously denied, if a poem could in fact make anything happen. But as readers of these poems, we often felt moved by them, and in the situation of a blind reading we truly were being moved by unnamed strangers.

Many poems focussed on personal stories, often very moving, but in many cases the range of personal details were not well integrated into the poem. The problem of finding an aesthetically satisfying conclusion often escaped the writer, leaving something that seemed less than what a short story or prose autobiography might have achieved. Many of the entries suffered from

being recounts of various experiences, whether one's own or another's, whether in teenage years or midlife, that failed to pass through the imaginative distillation required to create a poem. Often the details or personal disclosures evoked a response of 'Why are you telling me this?' rather than building towards a poem. Occasionally poems relating historical stories read like Wikipedia entries with line breaks inserted while many very personal poems felt like rambling conversations that don't reach beyond an implied personal context. That said, there were many strong poems among the entries and only a fraction of these could be included in the Anthology.

It seemed important to us as judges to focus on what the poem achieved, on how successful it was as a poem, regardless of its brevity or length. Tight, well-crafted, shorter imaginative poems to us ranked more highly than longer, overly prose-like pieces that lacked the sharpness or emotional force of the best poetry. In several cases the personal story was all too much like a prose recount with no real music to justify the line breaks and with little daring or originality in language or imagery. A good poem needs to surprise or startle, leading the reader somewhere new rather than remaining within familiar tropes and expected language. It was often a question of finding balance, with many fine musical poems petering out after 150 lines, unable to cohere towards a sense of an ending. And this is what the Newcastle is unique in asking its competitors submitting long poems to do—to be expansive and diversionary, but to return us at the end to enough of a sense of a conclusion to feel sated.

Caitlin Maling and Peter Boyle