Tom Collins Poetry Prize, judge’s report by Lisa Collyer, 2024.

*I acknowledge that we are meeting tonight on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk People of the Nyoongar Nation in Boorloo where sovereignty was never ceded. I pay my respects to elders; past, present and emerging.*

Thank you to the dedicated volunteers at Fellowship of Australian Writers WA, Annie Fursland, for inviting me to judge this prestigious national award, and to Annie Wilson for her handling the four hundred and four submissions (and the IT difficulties that came with that).

It was a delight, and at times disturbing, reading poems from around the country on the pressing themes of our era, and the enduring themes of the human condition. There were distinct clusters of poems that dealt with family violence, motherhood, religion, global conflict, the rural landscape and love. At times, I felt the poems were speaking directly to me, thus demonstrating the skill of the poet to make the personal, universal.

My mind was open to all possibilities when narrowing down to the top twenty poems for the longlist, and then the shortlist. What stood out to me, in the shortlisted poems, were their fresh perspectives on familiar topics, concrete and surprising poetic imagery, and above all, their atmospheric qualities.

Congratulations to the three **commended poems**, that I’ll introduce in alphabetical order, and invite them to read their stunning works.

**‘Dissociation 1: a love to be forgotten’ by Bron Bateman**, who uses the distant third person point of view to trace the survival technique of detachment as a trauma response. The poem uses temporal distortion, repetition and the extended metaphor of fire, that which smokescreens the trauma, and in the speaker’s words ‘render the people she loves/ as scraps to be burnt.’ The fragmentation and whimsical tone that attempts to fix time and memory is violently disrupted by a memory of trauma, and returns the speaker to detachment, in a visceral rendering of dissociation.

**‘Shoplifting Contrapuntal’ by Alan Fyfe**, who uses a double column form where the poem can be read down and across and captures the struggles between (in the speaker’s word) ‘the clerk, myself, a man in hi-vis’ or across with, the ‘three of us wrestling: with the delinquent angel’. This poem is grounded in the domestic scene of a shopping centre (speaking to the cost-of-living crisis), where the repetition and visual imagery of ‘flesh’ ‘gorgeous ruby-pink chops/’ and ‘fat, filling sausages’ is the coveted item, but also, the metaphysical, where the counterpoint is the god given right to eat.

**‘Dog Beach’, after the gale by Jennifer Kornberger** was the most joyful poem I read, with its organic imagery thrown up by the Indian Ocean. The personification of the ocean’s depths, with its ‘salt-felted colon,/ orange livers, crimson bladders leaking’ in a vivid inventory of what’s washed up on the beach after a storm. The dogs, being first on the scene, are reminiscent of paramedics, and their exhilarated return with ‘mounds of brown strap-weed’ was a delight, and will rework, the way in which, I will view my morning coastal walk.

Congratulations to the three **highly commended** poets, which I’ll read in alphabetical order, and invite them to read their thrilling poems.

**‘Driving to Shark’ Bay by Ross Belton** is a rollicking road trip, as a narrative poem with its abject imagery, witty yet empathetic characterisation, and new representations. The road trip lurches from site to site in a kombi van with its ageing inhabitants, who are flawed and whose lives are finite, with ‘her morning dose/ medication rattling like bones in a small plastic coffin’. The poem juxtaposes romantic endearments with bodily failures in Australian vernacular, and the beauty and peril of flesh and landscape.

**‘Afterwords’ by Jaye Kranz** is an atmospheric poem, which places the speaker and reader in a place of absence, in the speaker’s words ‘To return to a place, lie in the self-same grass,/’ and in conversation with the absentee. Instead, the speaker engages with the horses, still there, ‘I walk to where the horses sleep,/ apple pieces flat to my palm’ to find they are not ‘waking’ but are ‘waiting’ for someone who will never return, in a stunning rendering of what’s gone and what remains.

**‘Landing Lights’ by Isi Unikowski** is a quiet meditation in a domestic setting, that blurs the lines between this world and another, where loves that may have crossed over, still linger in the speaker’s periphery ‘a bright light that appears from time to time’. The reference to Navajo tradition, to represent the return of a lost soul to the world in ‘a tiny (stitched) line into their rugs’, captures the to-and-fro of the living and the dead.

And now, congratulations in **third place for ‘Menstrual health-no data, no cycles logged’ to Shey Marque**. This poem is complex, in its juxtaposition of hormonal change, with Indigenous Voice, and the winds of the disappointing ‘no change’ with the resistant No vote represented in the speaker’s words ‘Sort-of friend/ does not unfold her arms’ and the biting refrain ‘it feels like hate’. Allusion to Bruce Elder’s ‘Blood on the wattle’ and to Billie Holiday’s, ‘Strange Fruit’ is a provocative and moving account of the division in Australia over the voice to parliament.

Congratulations to **Ellen Shelley in second place for ‘Levelling the Storm’** whose imagery stayed with me into my sleep in a chilling account of family violence. The fragile atmosphere of the home and childhood (in the speaker’s words) ‘with its join down the middle,/ and its seam of a too thin wall’ take the reader to the site of trauma, the home, a place that should be a safe space. The desperate child’s voice ‘How small could we get./ How clean could we wipe’ haunts you, and then shifts back to the survivor’s voice in the final two stanzas with scabs over old wounds with a demonstration of resilience.

Congratulations to **Shoshanna Rockman in first place and the winner of the Tom Collins Prize for her poem, ‘Ice cream’**. Not a word is wasted in this too familiar stalemate of a woman and children attempting to leave a domestic violence situation, only to be stalled by the police, over rego and an unlicensed vehicle, in the speaker’s words ‘But Big Blue wasn’t disarmed by extenuating circumstances. DV fell beyond his boots, careened past traffic controls, dodged his department.’ The vulnerability and the violence are captured in homophones, metaphor and symbolism and the innocence of the children in tow, in the speaker’s voice ‘for the sake of ears. Such small sets.’ an image hard to forget, and a poem, that captures the injustice and failures of the legal system, that is supposed to be there to protect.