

Inverawe *Outdoors* Poetry Competition 2008 – Judge's Report

Judging the strong field of poems entered in the competition this year was once again a pleasurable and challenging responsibility. A total of 240 poems were submitted, representing 145 poets, all of whom are to be congratulated for their commitment to this wonderful, rewarding art form.

Two new categories were added to the adult section this year, a Tasmanian residents' award along with an Emerging writers' award (for a poet who had not received payment for a poem). The Tasmanian residents' section attracted 47 entries and the Emerging category 77. Poems were judged anonymously; I received the poems unmarked in any way, and only when I had selected a longlist of 25 poems was I told which poems fitted these categories. Happily, there were Tasmanian and Emerging entries in the longlist, making those prizes a simple matter to award. I was particularly pleased that poems in the Emerging category made it on their own merits into the top 25.

Like most other readers, I suppose, I come to a poem with certain expectations. I want the poem to give me a memorable surprise, a fresh perception that takes me beyond the conventional or unexamined view. Other important qualities are integrity, by which I mean that the poem feels unique and has a sense of wholeness; emotional power - the poem delights or disturbs, it arouses the emotions and the senses; technical control – there is density and variety in the syntax, the language is working hard, in tension with the lineation, to pull back and slow the pace to give it weight; and musicality, a vitality in rhythm and cadence which satisfies the ear. Finally, and most importantly for this nature writing competition, the poem must have its origins in a genuinely-experienced observation or insight into some aspect of the natural world.

The poems that didn't make the shortlist suffered from some common problems. Some were dulled by cumbersome or formulaic syntax, some espoused rather grand ideas, many of these not new, failing to realize, perhaps, the impact of the world in a grain of sand and that both the devil and the gods are to be found in the detail. Titles and endings sometimes missed the mark – some titles were so tangential as to seem unconnected with the rest of the poem. The best titles are a clue (but not the solution) to the puzzle that the poem represents. A weak, over-explicit or didactic ending can also spoil an otherwise interesting poem. As John Hartley Williams and Matthew Sweeney say in their *Writing Poetry* guide, 'A good ending should flash a light back up on the poem so the reader wants to start again'.

The top six poems in the Open Section were agonizingly difficult to separate. Any of them would have made a worthy winner, and all of them displayed the qualities I was seeking. The poems I found strongest created, in Edwin Morgan's words, 'a brilliant vibrating interface between the human and the non-human'.

Open Section

First prize

'Waiting for Trout' – Debbie Lim

The layers of meaning and emotional power of this poem had an immediate impact on me and brought it to the top of the pile. The lakeside scene is closely observed and evocatively rendered, but its periphery possesses another dimension, a more dark and difficult one that gives this poem depth and poignancy. There is a sense that everything is suspended in the waiting, not simply for trout, but for 'love's season'. Imagery works beautifully to create a hovering sense of longing and isolation – the crow's call 'invites surrender' and 'land and water' are 'that thin peninsula of the living'. The poem also has a circular structure, beginning and ending with the sound of crows, that gives it a satisfying unity.

Second Prize

'from Field Notes for Birds' – Mark Miller

A series of deftly realized haiku, each dealing with a different species of bird. The series is intricately and beautifully worked - images often echo in subsequent lines: 'branches of the plum trees/ fruited with finches'. It has a crystalline sharpness that is the result of painstaking attention to every word and is deeply aesthetically pleasing.

Highly Commended

'The Horse' – Sarah Day (also winner of the Tasmanian residents section)

A horse stands quietly, apparently untethered, behind a low garden fence in the inner city. Here, an unremarkable creature is made extraordinary by its appearance in an unusual context, where it appears 'other-worldly' and 'sublime and hilarious at once'. The poem is whimsical, gentle and technically surefooted. It rose steadily through the pile, increasingly rewarding re-readings.

'Chekhov tells a lady admirer to write *The Wounded Doe*' – LK Holt

This surreal prose poem makes a breathtaking leap from Chekhov's female deer to the female wallaby in the setting of an army training camp in Victoria. Beginning with an epigraph that counsels against sentimentality, it captures the shooting of the wallaby from the animal's point of view. The poem catalogues the final living moments of the animal and satirises war. An astonishingly original and confronting poem, in both concept and language.

'Crimson Rosellas' – Genevieve Osborne

Here bird and bushfire become one phenomenon in a cleverly-managed conflation of the creature with its environment. The poem is immediately arresting from the opening: 'A bushfire has let its embers fall/ onto your back'. It displays fine control of linguistic resources; it is a pleasingly spare poem, with spaces rather than punctuation employed to good effect.

'The Chase' – Michelle Cahill

A poem in which run-on lines and a prosaic style contribute to a sense of urgency to find peace and wholeness in the landscape, through a narrative which reveals itself as a wider environmental allegory. The poem reaches a climax when the sound of the waterfall becomes unbearable, drowning out everything, including 'this/ partita where water, light and leaf are blurred into the same green' - a particularly satisfying final line.

Tasmanian Residents Award

First prize

The Horse – Sarah Day (see above)

Highly Commended

'The way of an able-bodied man with a maiden' – Esther Ottaway

This is a love poem in which a couple return to the place of the man's childhood, where his past is alien to his lover. She regrets not having understood, or understanding this past. The flower he picks for her as they walk around his childhood home becomes the symbol of their journey into love, and into the other's impenetrable past. A tender poem, with its imagery of fertility, seeds and flowers working seamlessly with the subject-matter.

Commended

'Tristania' – Gina Mercer

A poem which evokes one of the sensuous and secret pleasures of childhood escape – climbing a favourite tree, where one is exhilarated yet protected, where there is mystery and wonder in safe solitude in 'the mother-depths'. It takes the reader right into the canopy with skill and immediacy.

Emerging Poet's Award

First prize

'Cormorant' – Marita Hastings

A memorable poem in admiration of the effortless skill and beauty of the hunting cormorant, observed with a touching sense of awe and with evocative imagery that seems perfectly apt: 'Briefly/ bird, his head glistens as though

doused/ in dark syrup'. This poem earned its place among the open section finalists. It is not only well-crafted but aesthetically and emotionally pleasing, and thus bodes well for this poet's future success.

Highly Commended

'Turranburra winter morning' – *Gillian Coote*

A very close second in this category and, like the winner, made the longlist in the open section. A poem with wonderful atmosphere, achieved by the employment of restrained, short lines in which there is a heightened sense of stillness, of whiteness and silence, and an interesting turn from the view from the window to the interior where the observer sits with tea.

Highly Commended

'Fruit Gathering' – *Marita Hastings*

Under this tree is 'a universe of birds' into which the speaker crawls to collect fallen fruit with their promise of sweet jam. The pleasure of this moment, with its sharp sensory detail, and the anticipation of preserving the fruit for the future make this a satisfying and gentle poem.

Once again, congratulations to all the entrants, particularly to the winners, and thanks to Margaret and Bill Chestnut for their hard work and enthusiasm in organising the Inverawe Outdoors Nature Writing Prize 2008.

Louise Oxley