

Inverawe Poetry Prize 2009 – Adrienne Eberhard

There were 294 poems in the Adult section of the 2009 Inverawe Poetry Prize. Of these, many poems were about birds, many were about memories to do with particular places, and many were about forests or individual trees. This is not surprising. Robert Adamson, in his introduction to *Best Australian Poems 2009*, says about our fascination with birds: ‘we miss having poets among us who can imagine that a soul can “clap its hands and sing, and louder sing”, that we need to acknowledge visitations by intense psychological presences, and that birds are the closest things we have, more or less, to angels’. I think Adamson is right: birds speak to us about our connections with something greater than ourselves; they are our link with the realm of air and breath and myth. So, too, do forests/trees speak to us about our place in the world. Forests have a cathedral quality. Their height, colour, movement, mass and shape have the capacity to both humble and move us. They are a link between the earth and the sky; despite their physical presence they are profoundly of the spirit. In childhood, our personalities are formed, but so too are our bonds with place. Seamus Heaney writes about this in his early essays: the ways in which green places shape us as children and how we never lose this if only we are prepared to keep living through our senses.

I made a long-list of 59 poems and then whittled this to 24 poems. These 24 included poems about parents and children in relation to place, creatures or particular moments; birds; trees; insects; seals; wombats; rivers; the sea; the wind; and pet dogs. All of them offered a new way of looking at things that we too often take for granted. All of them used language in exciting and unexpected ways. In the end, 8 of these poems formed my ‘best’ poems list. The titles say it all: ‘Swallows’; ‘Cicada’; ‘rich’; ‘Denials’; ‘Black loving’; ‘What we get up to, Warrumbungles Creek’; ‘give me wombat shoes’; ‘Lifenotes: Silkworm’.

First prize of \$1000 goes to ‘Lifenotes: Silkworm’. This is a deceptively simple poem about silkworms in a box. The use of the parent-daughter relationship, the descriptions of the silkworms themselves, and the claim ‘they had nothing to look forward to, as far as I could tell’ which is so cleverly negated by the creatures’ obvious hunger for living, raise all sorts of questions about how we learn to value life, both human and non-human. The description of the silkworms’ eating habits sums this up:

Just this morning
They had lain their armoured heads back
Like laughter, or a shout, and
Devoured those leaves in precise, wild, savage, delicate curves

The use of the word 'gusto' – one we normally reserve for children rather than adults – is at the heart of this poem. The silkworms' 'gusto' for 'munching' and 'spinning' happens regardless of where they find themselves or their precarious future. The notion, implicit in this poem, that we must strive not to create hierarchies of purpose and value where human beings are at the top and creatures such as insects as well as non-sentient beings at the bottom, is fundamental to the world's survival as we hurtle into the 21st century.

The minor prize of \$300 is awarded to 'give me wombat shoes'. This brief poem honours the industry of the wombat and asks us, like the winning poem, to re-evaluate traditional hierarchies of human and animal. Wonderful images are used throughout this brief poem, for example, 'the earth's pale underskin laid out/like a revelation'.

The poem uses the trope of digging as writing (reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Digging'), beginning with the image of the 'freshly dug/. . . dirt reads/*while I dig I hope*'. The speaker describes this digging as a 'muscular motto', as 'hieroglyphs/clawed in the entry wall'. The speaker claims:

written in layers of blown river sand
is a history of winds endured
a digest of iron grass eaten.

The poem concludes with the metaphor of the wombat as vessel for all that digging/ writing: 'what I'd give for a hide like his/that body of knowledge' and culminates with the humorous homage, 'my skull thickens in admiration'.

Highly Commended:

'What We Get Up To' is written in couplets about two people occupied at the Warrumbungles Creek, one practicing balancing on a log, the other building dams. Through descriptions of the creek itself, and the activities of the people, the poet explores how we learn to live, and give, in the world:

Balance is an act of faith I practice,

Wondering if taking risks here will teach me other trusts;
in myself, you, the whole wide, worrying world.

Upstream, you make happy industry, damming
and undamming water, aiming to turn what is multiple

and dispersed, into singular and strong.

'Swallows' focuses on a dog and its innate, if misguided, understanding of its role in the world:

"You're a terrier,"
I told her, "a thing of earth
made to dig and delve
and snuffle in the dust."

...
but she aspired to swallows.

The poem concludes with proof of Adamson's claim for birds as angels:

... Now sometimes I dream
about slow angels – a mouthful
of sky-scented feathers, a harp-string maybe
between her teeth.

'Denials' is a tightly structured poem of seven quatrains about the rising moon. It has a quiet humour and grace that culminate in its final lines:

What do you see? I see it coming
up out of Henry's orchard, a gentling
wash of otherness
absolving men, trees, birds, boots.

'Black loving' is an 11 line poem about mating ravens. The poem is focused and the language evocative, and the poem ends with a fantastic image of union and possibility:

... coal-dark Raven power,
wings spread as if in flight, yearning for the wind
for everything new in open fields.

'Cicada' uses the focus and intensity of one sentence to evoke the otherness of this creature and its ability to provoke wonder. Simple language and lovely images such as 'thread legs' and 'glass wing' create a sense of magic.

'Rich' is a brief, sweep of a poem. It captures the other-worldly qualities of a bird as it visits a suburban garden, creating a strong sense of delight and connection for both the speaker and reader, reiterating Adamson's claim that birds 'are the closest thing we have ... to angels'.