

Martha Richardson Memorial Poetry Prize 2020

What a pleasure it was to read this year's entries for the 2020 Martha Richardson Memorial Poetry Prize. One hundred plus entries in all, on a wide variety of subject matter and surprisingly to me, only a few directly referencing COVID-19. Foremost on most peoples' minds, I'd thought it might dominate the selection. Perhaps, as many have noted of the pandemic restrictions, it has pushed us into a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the essential in our lives—people, experiences and creative meaning making. It was pleasing to see a range of poetic forms and genres on display in the pool of entries—concrete/visual poems, ekphrastic poems, lyric poems, ballads and eco poems to note but a few. It was also pleasing to see a number of free verse writers really pushing the bounds of line breaks and spacing, creating not only unusual visual effects on the page, but enlivening the reader to the power of placement—the relationship between form and content, and its ability to make the reader look closer at what is there on the page. Themes were wide ranging, from the deeply personal (fractured relationships and personal loss) to poems grappling with (to varying degrees) broader social issues such as politics, racial injustice and climate change. Reading these poems in the midst of the recent US presidential election, with all its uncertainty, fear mongering and misinformation, I was reminded what a salve poetry can be. What a curative poetry is—reading it, writing it. It is a way to shut out the noise of the world, the din, a way to zero in on what is essential, what is necessary, what is true. Poetry is a centering force. These poets, each in their own individual way, have zeroed in on what is essential, necessary, true and I commend them all for managing to do so in an unprecedented period of collective uncertainty.

1st

Beehives At Night

This poem skilfully takes an incidental seemingly benign moment—happening upon beehives in a forest—and elevates it into a thing of wonder. The poem veritably buzzes, is alive with the unexpected; imagery and insight. It expertly captures not only a moment, but

a moment's passing and the indelible impression it has made. The poem is in a way, a shrine to its indelibility. The poem's imagery constantly delights, there are simply too many quality images to raise one above the rest, but I was personally taken with:

*A camp of short-stack towers billeted in the sticks, derelict
boards glowing somehow as if the hillside turned out its pockets
and said: Here full moon shine your light on these.*

There is real poetic confidence on display in the seeming ease and clarity of the poem's imagery. So too, in the poem's formalistic consistency—composed of tercets—even its break away last line seems highly considered, intentional, literally and visually conscious that 'there is always work to do.'

This poem also manages a delicate balancing act. It takes what is essentially a private moment (witnessed only by the couple in the poem) and publicises it, without it losing its particularity, its sense of intimacy, its sense of individuality or the ephemeral nature of the moment itself. The moment whilst given over to the reader, essentially belongs—if such a thing can belong—to the couple, or by proxy its author, the poet.

2nd

Banksia

A poem written with real poetic skill—economic, deceptively simple, slight and yet deeply affecting. The poem centres itself around a single metaphor—as per its title—for loss, hardiness, resilience that is not only captured in language but also in appearance (on the page). The poem is composed as much of absences as it is of words/language, content reflects form and form reflects content—I couldn't help but conjure both the banksia nut with its hollows or the banksia flower with its sparse filaments. Written in first person, image becomes subject, subject becomes image. The language is haiku-like, observational, of nature, each image seemingly occurring as the eye falls on it,—or rather sees it more

fully, deeply. This is a wonderfully uncluttered poem, it includes only the essential and demonstrates a mastery of not only poetic language but also poetic placement.

3rd

What Time It Is In Auckland

A stand-out feature of this poem is for me, its pace. It is a fast moving poem. It operates at the speed of thought, thoughts happening, thoughts converging, diverging—thoughts running all over. This sense of pace is maintained throughout with clever use of line repetitions, internal rhymes here and there, and assonance. The title of the poem and its repeat/echo in the last line gives the poem a kind of circularity—but overwhelmingly my sense of the poem is that it spirals in and spirals out rather than circles round. There is a kind of stream of consciousness feel to the subject's thought process (mental state) that begins and ends with "what time it is in Auckland.'

The poem is undeniably visual on the page with a combination of flush, but mostly indented lines. I couldn't help but visualise shirt buttons (as per a line in the poem) not yet in their 'proper' holes. The extra spacing in the body of the poem creates a sense of thoughts shifting, or perhaps they point to gaps in thinking, or even memory loss? Like thoughts, the poem can be elusive too. The poem also frustrates time, past and present blur, and while we never quite literally arrive at what time it is in Auckland (it is a metaphor after all) the last two lines seem to suggest the subject's mind will be reaching for it—a memory, the past, 'the missus'— well beyond the poem's end.

Terry Jaensch (November 2020)