

OOTA judge's report

By Amy Lin, September 2020

The poetry entries for the 2020 Spilt Ink competition were of a very high standard, and though I could only choose three winners and three high commendations, I wished I could have chosen many more poems that I was very fond of. The entries were diverse in form and content, and I read concrete poems, experimental poems, lyric poems, villanelles, triptychs, prose poems, and ekphrastic poems. Poems traversed the geography of Perth and other spaces in Australia and the world, painting pictures of Fremantle, Albany, Perth, and going as far as Malta. There was a rich natural imagery and eco-poetic streak amongst submissions, with poets illustrating the flora of WA, the whims of salmon flowing upstream, the presence of birds in our psyches and consciousness, and the psychologies of interior architecture - churches, walls, and rooms. The highs and lows of life were explored, from suicide and loss to the impending birth of a daughter's child. With such an array of forms and subjects, the experience of reading and judging was extremely pleasurable, and I take great pride in acknowledging the quality of writing in our State and beyond. Although I was pleased that the competition is judged anonymously, and that I couldn't be influenced by names of poets, I have now, an intense curiosity of the author of these entries, as I would like to follow their writing in the future. Some poems assumed a lyrical depth and linguistic complexity, and others offered their emotional power in bare, stripped lines, and as judge I took each poem as a whole, endeavouring to be open to each line, and made my decision based on whether, for me, the poem in its entirety delivered an emotional resonance.

Highly commended 1. (No particular order for the highly commended entries)

P6. 'an excerpt from a novel in progress'

Deceptively simple, and unfolding its lines in bare, imagistic units, this poem has an almost cinematic and melancholic quality, holding its reader across line and stanza breaks. The second person point of view addresses its reader calmly, almost prosaically, but there is a haunting and uncanny quality that strikes a particular chord in the imaginative metaphor of the last couplet. This is a final line that will keep me thinking long after I have read the poem.

Highly commended 2.

P24. 'summer lines'

An accomplished prose poem that makes use of space between imagistic grabs, these lines oscillated between painterly phrases, and lines that showcased poetic craft in the way only language can. Exploring the experience of suburban summer, it seems to strike an ambiguous space between poignant anxiety and

wondrous joy. There is highly original imagery that does something very difficult in poetry; that is, to make summer fresh and new.

Highly commended 3.

P22. 'View from Wave Rock (36 Views of Uluru)

A concrete poem simulating the look of Wave Rock on the page, this poem is a visual treat, and the content does not disappoint. The poet weaves ekphrastic response to Hokusai's *Great Wave of Kanagawa* with their response to Uluru, its 'oxide rich and red', 'wheatland grass', and 'rush of stone'. The dual imagery is sophisticated and striking, and readers may feel, as I did, a tactile possibility in being able to 'climb inside each curl', and address Hokusai through the imaginative realm of art that speaks to other art.

Third place

P2 - 'kaat badarbiny'

'Kaat badarbiny' knits Nyungar language with English words of colonialism; punning and splitting words across the line break, whilst conjuring imagery of 'sewing', 'unpicking' and 'bleeding'. In this way, stitching words together, and pulling them apart, becomes comparable to the violence inflicted on language and land. The poem acknowledges trauma but anger is beneath the surface, and the lyric mode is quiet, intelligent, and unassuming in its strength. As the poem's title is Nyungar for 'thinking', and draws upon a 'shared silence', the final stanza delivers plain images with a stillness that is simultaneously peaceful and unsettling.

Second place

P21 'Wolf Moon'

'Wolf Moon' is measured and potent in its spacing of words on the page and its echoes that repeat words in a way that is never a mere restatement. The lyrics are tender and unexpected, depicting a daughter's pregnancy with raw, even primal materiality. The strength of this poem is the way it engages the reader from the start, weaving some magic and holding their attention throughout. In what distinguished the place-getters in this competition, the final line truly delivers, fusing a plaintive cry with that of triumph and celebration, rendering this poem a nuanced picture of pregnancy and motherhood, holding up its spiritual aspects with the physical demands.

First place

P9 'wax and'

Experimental poems can sometimes be carried away with their novelty, or risk gimmickry, but 'wax and' stood out as the winner because it is a stunning piece of poetry. At first cryptic in its interaction between the title and the poem, 'wax

and' opens with the beautiful and original line, 'drowning on the far side of a kleptomaniac's new moon'. The line repeats and is systematically reduced or blocked out, the language dwindling, drowning, or waning as the poem progresses. Each line is a surprise, a delight, or a bittersweet sadness, and the poet explores themes of ownership, being kept, mania, manhood, the act of owing, of being sewn, of wearing, war, and of owing. This is a poem that retains its power on multiple readings, where even more can be found at each revisit. Even the enigmatic lines are profoundly moving in their opacity. The final line spells out 'wane', and completes the title, effecting a theme of undulation that is consistent with the oscillating language and space on the page. Visually, the poem looks like some water that is drizzling down a window pane, the gaps and silences part of the art. Above all, this poem stood out to me as the winner because, on several readings, it gave me the mental thrill that, in the words of Emily Dickinson, 'took the top of my head off'.

Judge bio

Amy Lin is a Perth-based writer who has published poems in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Grieve*, *Verity La*, and other places. She interviews Australian poets regularly for *LA Review of Books*, and has reviewed for *Australian Book Review*. Amy has guest edited for *Westerly* and *Enchanting Verses Literary Review*. She mentors emerging poets through the Centre for Stories, and is working towards a book on mental illness in mid-century Australian poetry, which is based on her doctoral research. Amy currently teaches in the English discipline at the University of Western Australia.