THE REASON-BRISBANE POETRY PRIZE 2009

Compared with last year, there were nearly three times as many entries for the Reason-Brisbane Poetry Prize in 2009. I suspect that this is due to the dropping of the requirement for poems to include a particular word, phrase or theme, which has been a feature of the prize since its inception. This requirement presented poets with an interesting test and resulted in some truly creative outcomes. However, as judge I welcome the bigger pool of entries which (if I am right) the dropping of any condition relating to content has encouraged.

The larger number of entries has meant a larger number of really accomplished poems, but also a bigger batch of distinctive poems which didn't make the final cut. Generally, this tended to be because they seemed unfinished, not sufficiently edited. Maybe the ending let the poem down, or a promising metaphor got out of control and obscured rather than revealed the reality the poem was exploring, or the narrative technique was a bit clunky – all problems which I felt could have been resolved if the redrafting process had continued a bit longer.

In poems which for a wide range of reasons fell by the wayside in the judging process, there are often striking moments which I think should be recognised, and here is a sample of such moments from the 2009 entries (this of course doesn't mean that these lines are the only good things in the poems or that there weren't terrific moments in other poems that remain unmentioned – 'sample' is the operative word here):

> *I stare at his absence,*
> *A slow bubble of wonder*
> *Unspoken on my lips*   'Heron on the roof' by Lyn Sunderland

> *Silent friends are listed in my mind*
> *Slurred as from a slippage of the brain*
> *Blurred as though my inner eye is blind*   'Years end' by Rachel Flynn

> *love's yellow petalled rush*
> *can match any summer sun*   'Dandelion' by Denise Shakespeare

> *They stack their truth*
> *against what is to come*   'Reading old newspapers' by Avril Bradley

> *Time hangs on its hinges*   'Naked on St Kilda Beach' by Camille Nurka

> *Dust depends on the leaves of the olive trees*
> *to give it substance*
>   'Carpe Diem' by Dominique Hecq

>   *I*
> *Sweep the stars back*
> *Into their Jesus-shroud,*
> *Cuff and collar the shrew*
> *In the sickle moon*   'Morning' by Stuart Barnes

> *our van ploughed two furrows*
> *in shining endless flatness*
> *embedded with ducks: dark commas*
> *laid sideways*   'Driving, Western Plains' by Janeen Samuel

Your mother listened to Blue Hills while you dreamed
a future riding across brown ranges

'Brown Cased Bakelite' by Myra King

there's a queer womans walking group
coming to our town
while some walk up, others walk down   'there's a queer womans walking group'
                                                  by Fred Bartlett

In contention for the final cut - the long short list if you like - were 'Black Rock' and 'Wasp' by Stuart Barnes, 'War Game' by Rob Wallis, 'Man in the Shape of Someone's Father' by Sam Byfield, 'Stripping the Rock' and 'The Nocturnal Library' by Charles D'Anastasi, 'White Birds' by Dominique Hecq and 'Daniel McGann' by Des Bennett.

Seven poems are highly commended (there were two in this category last year), which means that they really pressed to be included amongst the prize winners: 'Rain Songs' by Peter Murk, 'Sonofabitch' by Ian C Smith, 'Harbour' by Sam Byfield, 'Ready' by Lorraine McGuigan, 'I Mean To Say Love' by B N Oakman, 'left over moon – a haiku sequence' by Rob Scott, and '"Life" in Chinese' by Jennie Fraine. I like these poems for their uniquely imagined worlds and their consistently evident technical strengths.

Third place, with prize money of $300, goes to 'For the Lesser Light' by Paul Mitchell. This is an eleven line, strongly voiced poem of great intensity in which moon imagery packs a real punch, and which comes to rest in a gesture of beseeching so sharply caught that it has a sort of grandeur to it.

The second prize of $400 has been won by Jillian Pattinson's 'The Horse Latitudes'. This poem displays technical skill of a very high order through gradual, repeating series of rhythmical movements and developing images. It is also that rare thing, a poem about an environmental issue which is non-didactic and utterly original in its use of empirical fact and in its envisioning of the predicament it declares. The final two and a half lines, where the slowly accumulating imagery of pollution reaches its most extended expression, are hauntingly beautiful.

First place, with prize money of $1000, is awarded to Charles D'Anastasi for his poem 'When we came to a clearing in the forest…'. Starting with the title, with its echoes of myth and fairy tale left hanging in the air, this poem is a compelling and mysterious narrative in seven marvellous four-line stanzas. It's not an easy poem – it doesn't offer us narrative content of an historical, domestic or biographical kind that we can recognize. Yet its internal logic is completely convincing – it starts, for example, with a rearranging of moments and ends with a translating of days. It moves from a sense of fracture and cracking towards a final image of broken things being bound together. And every stanza contributes something different and moving to the seven step journey, with touches of mischievousness and humour thrown in for good measure.

This is poetry speaking to us - or for us, in fact - on entirely its own terms, but in a way that has nothing to do with "poetry for poetry's sake". Rather, it sounds as if a new way of speaking about an experience has been discovered: incisive, comprehensive, fully committed to the essential aspects of that experience and therefore in no need of translation or explanation. An extraordinary poem, and - in the context of Australian poetry as I see it at the moment – a truly important one, I suspect.

Ross Gillett
August 2009