

2010 *ABR* Poetry Prize

THE SHORTLISTED POEMS

Taken as Required

An age ago, ill-matched,
ignorant but willing,
we set the rules.
'Step by Step', we said. 'No Bullshit.'
Today, thinking of something else
I stumbled across the grey metal bracelet
you looped over that stick of a wrist
where your thin blood stained the skin
to resemble an antique map or a bad tattoo
(like the one they inked on for that photo shoot in the '50s).
'Irregular heartbeat' it read, in case some Samaritan,
finding you slumped, might wonder,
'Hypertension',
'Allergic to Aspirin',
'Leaky heart valve',
the medal-like plaque only so big,
the caduceus taking up space.
'Once handsome', it might have added,
or 'Into Tiffany bronze in a big way',
'Prefers his nurses sparky, his doctor's humour dry
like his Manhattans'.
Nor was there room on this half-assed amulet
to list the antidotes and proven remedies:
'For fear at three a.m. a sip of cocoa and a steadying hand',
'In grief a nudging dog is beneficial',
'For sluggish blood settle in morning sunlight',
'In depression, as above, plus a splash of Black-Eyed Susan'
(or maybe the confetti mess of annuals,
like the thousands you planted out, year by year).
And where to list the other necessities?
Tea strong enough to stand a spoon.
Regularity. Fingerless woollen gloves.
And if, now, given that we were neither of us angels,
I could ask what you would have my wristband say,
to guide a passing stranger
bending over me, crumpled, still here,
I guess that you might catch my eye,
and pause to rub your rough-shaved cheek,
then scythe a hand through
the darkening air and grinning, growl
'Hypersensitive',
'Allergic to bullshit',
'Talks to herself'.

Ynes Sanz

The Hummingbird Suite

Hummingbirds
Hummingbird colours
Hummingbird statistics
Hummingbird feathers
Hummingbird mysteries
Albino hummingbirds
Male swordbilled hummingbirds
The mating of hummingbirds
Hummingbird dreams
Sustenance
Bee hummingbird
Hummingbird questions
Hummingbird souls
Humming

Hummingbirds

Surgeon's-probe beak, wings
bolstered by their own down draught;
on ghostly whirrs of
speed they hover, shunt backwards,
sideways, drinking throat to throat.

Hummingbird colours

A moneyed sparkle
on emerald-indigo;
violet ears; throats
of ruby, cobalt. Their blooms
of choice: red, sun-orange, pink.

Hummingbird statistics

Some near-weightless with
three hundred breaths, one thousand
heart-beats, per minute;
eighty wing-beats per second;
nest, small as a halved walnut.

Hummingbird feathers

On a shaman's cloak
their power lives on: myriad
wings pollinating
bee balm and *mariposa*
in sunlit, vanished forests.

Hummingbird mysteries

Torpor occurs nocturnally for most hummingbird species.

They glow at will, die
temporarily each night.
Resurrection takes
an hour, transfiguration's
glory a nanosecond.

Albino hummingbirds

Moth-like, sunlit wraiths
poised high in air, or sipping
from voluble flowers
among shouting choirs of leaves,
their wing-sound a muted breath.

Male swordbilled hummingbirds

With bills longer than
their bodies – the Cyrano
de Bergerac of
hummers – they clash, parry, thrust:
rapiers propelled by wings.

The mating of hummingbirds

– more a matter of
spirit than body; swifter
than time; a brilliant
but not quite plausible trope
penned by a spellbound poet.

Hummingbird dreams

To be held aloft
while drinking the world's nectar.
To be on the wing
yet still. To create phantom
wing-shapes in air, that hum, sing.

Sustenance

Tiny winds scatter
glorioles of gnats ... Always
hours away from death
they drink their own weight daily
with grooved, lascivious tongues.

Bee hummingbird

At two grams, the smallest hummingbird.

Hard to imagine:
the tongue-tip hairs that assist
the theft of nectar
from bells, trumpets, chandeliers –
beyond a thousand each day.

Hummingbird questions

His Speech was like the Push
Of numerous Humming Birds at once
From a superior Bush –
‘The Wind – tapped like a tired Man’
Emily Dickinson

Each hushed syllable
of wind equals how many
hummingbirds, rising
from how many siphoned blooms?
(A vocal ambrosia.)

Hummingbird souls

As for death
I can't wait to be the hummingbird,
can you?
‘Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little
Sister Pond’
Mary Oliver

Invulnerable
at last; every cell nourished
from wells of sweetness;
uplifted by the dazzle
of vividly witty wings.

Humming

A meadow of bees;
mother with child; musician
in thrall to silence;
and these veiled wings blurring
hearts of flowers – work-song, love-song.

Diane Fahey

Here Come the Missionaries

Now when the bike-clip missionaries arrive
I turn them away fast. But for years
my head replayed their early visits to the farm:
they'd ridden miles of shocking gravel,
they had you by a sense of decency
to hear their hope, knowing endurance
seemed right in matters of belief.

Once, because I was alone perhaps,
I asked how mind could survive a span
of light years, say, how the Universe was
trillions times further out than Timothy Leary
yet a nucleus inside an atom stood
as we stood on the bustling kikuyu lawn
and electrons spun everywhere at once
in mother-of-pearl blur as far away as Africa.

It's in the Bible somewhere, one of them said,
fanning pages like someone counting notes
all fingerwork and that long *vrip* sound,
as they stood in a mat of fallen mulberries.
I told them of the span my father bridged
with three long stringers big as power-poles
dropped across the river, planked over
and joining both halves of the farm.

In the war the Public Works Department
burnt it down, then blankly ignored him
from their desks. As a returnee, penniless,
reduced by dengue fever and malaria,
floored by a cover-up when he saw one –
it's not abstracts we die of, but details –
he slipped under logs he used re-building it
and landed in hospital with back injuries.

I asked how you live with constant pain
when *every* day is a back-breaking day.
I was getting emotional. The sky was hot.
I could hear silver eyes rioting in the tree
like a thousand *buts*. They wanted to go.
But if it was about belief, and faith and
the biggest bogey of the lot, justice, God
had that to answer, didn't they think?

I began in jest but something else cut in.
I stood there, querulous and very young.
I saw our mulberries staining their shoes.
So my arms spread wider as if to span
the aching weight of it all: the empty
place between the world and heaven.

But now when I find them at the door
I think of their mulberry-stained shoes
and words which can't explain conundrums
swept in very distant orbits. Now I
say I'm just not interested in God and
justice and bridges. I mean, unable
to bear their eagerness, I lie to them.

Philip Salom

Estuary

The river is within us, the sea is all about us
T.S. Eliot

Just now a man – name unknown,
no permanent home – steps shin deep into a river
and holds his breath.
Shallowest skin shiver,
as of the water level rising – listen.

Small, crabbed man – very troubled garbled,
all but incoherent – steps into an estuarine river
holding his breath, distant
gasp whisper as of the water level,
rising (listen).

Stumbling, shy-away man – no neighbours or family
to speak of – wades up to his thighs in an estuary
not quite holding its own against the tide –
sheerest rasp shudder, as of the water level rising.
Listen.

Skint, shadow-thin man – dreams stowed
in doubled plastic bags stands
chest deep amid a river running inward – almost
imperceptible shift, as of the water level rising listen.

Stooped no-name man – up to his neck
in worry – wades deeper into a deepening river
no longer certain of his footing. Sand-sifting hush
hurry of the water level rising, listen.

Fretted, sodden-shoed man well out of his depth
now, both feet lifting with the tide's turn –
swelling, souging heft
of the water level rising (listen).

Swamped sunken man, now quite out of breath –
no longer holding his own in the river, unsure
where the sea begins – rip break brash of the water
level rising. Listen.

No longer audible, all but invisible man –
plastic bags afloat in floating hands – washes out
to sea (darkling dreaming of the water level
rising, listen).

Swiftly out-of-sight quite forgotten man, quick
swallowed by the bellying ocean, lungs softly hush
humming along with the water level rising
(listen).

No longer stuck struggling slip of a man – eyes open,
brimming with light – all awash now and wavering
in water rising more than falling. Listen.

Jillian Pattinson

Domestic Emergencies

You're opening a packet of star anise with a knife designed for taking the sides from fish, when two things happen simultaneously: the muscle below your thumb some call the mound of Venus opens to reveal what surgeons know as the substrata of linkages, root systems, cable ties, the red wetlands of a wound in need of closure – and before shock can set its timer for the ride to emergency, a scattering of star anise, like upturned garden spiders feigning death, demand your attention. Holding your own hand, you glaze them with the claret you've been pollocking over the bench and floor. They look like the main ingredients for a meal some fiend, in need of sustenance, had been planning to make on returning from a kill.



Before the blackout, he lowered a needle into a groove on Leonard Cohen's *Various Positions*. When the music stopped and the room was dark, he lit a candle. On his knees, he outstared the wall socket, then played with chance by feeding it a length of wire he keeps for when locking his keys in the car. The music returned, the lights came on with a flash and flicker, then went out again to the sound of a song winding down like a pulse of bad timing in the heart of a gambling man.



Each time his voice breaks she gets it wrong. Having an empathetic disposition, she feels in tune with his every mood and word. When he tells her he needs less intuition and more unfiltered communication, she turns away to turn the television down.



Whenever they're out and he takes too long introducing her to someone from work, or a friend he hasn't seen in years, she'll move from foot to foot, or cough and look at him, though not in the way she used to, back when they were in love and dying for it. Even a hand on my neck or shoulder would have been a start, she says, as they drive away from wherever they were and from each other.



Knowing how it's the simple things that matter, I take you to the tree I used to climb – the one with a single board nailed high into its limbs.

The board's no longer there, the tree is low
to the ground, I'm sentimental, and things
haven't been too good of late, but listen –
if you close your eyes and pretend, I'll hammer
something fine from what we used to have,
and take you there.



A bottle of eighty year old, single malt scotch
redolent of the ghost print of driftwoodsmoke and kelp
is no match for the glass of water she brings to him
out in the garden, where he's been ripping
the frayed runners of bamboo from her lawn.
Soon he'll have to return to his wife with a story
of how, while playing golf, a wallaby stopped
to rearrange the warm weight of what it was carrying
before deciding it was safe, and moving on.



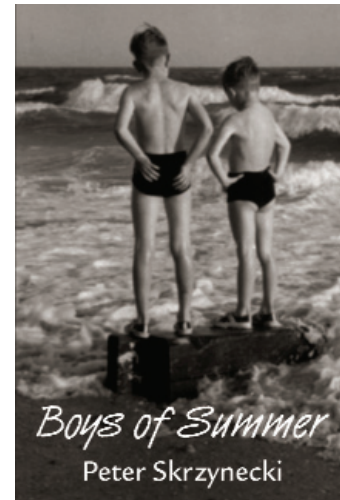
The clock is an owl. Its eyes used to move
from side to side with the seconds
and it hooted on the hour. To wind it,
there's a pinecone on a chain, but no one's
here to draw it down. It's collecting dust
above the fireplace in a room with books
stacked on the floor, and antique furniture
covered by sheets. What happened is open
to conjecture. Some say the end of love
is to blame, others that it's just a natural
conclusion to a life of hurt. On leaving,
you might notice a shape on the wall
like a map of New South Wales: rising damp
or a stain of blood, whatever the story,
this is the room and this is not the time
for explanation.



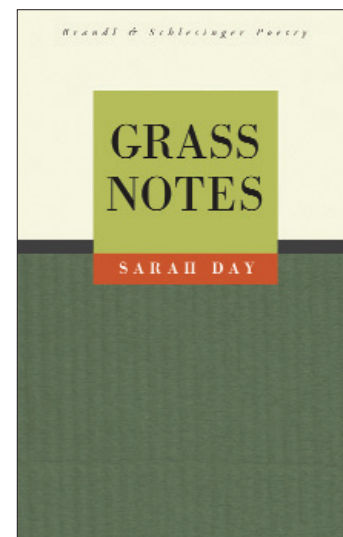
Two eggs in a well in a mound of flour
on a rough wood table. It's after dusk,
the hour before dinner in a farmhouse
on a windy hill. Someone has come
to harm. Who knows? Who will tell
that a working dog is dead? It lies in
shadow beside a disused tractor shed.
The door of a four wheel drive is open,
the radio leaking talkback talk.
A witnessing wind blows down the road,
with chalk-like dust in its wake.
A kitchen light burns, all else is cold
and dark. Absence is memorial
enough, and silence stakes a claim
on house and yard. News of this will
break and travel, word by word
until the facts are known or distorted
faithfully: a farmer, losing his farm,
farewelled himself and his family.

Anthony Lawrence

**Innocence
Loneliness
Lust
Death**



**A new novel by
Peter Skrzynecki**



"A scrupulous eye
and a true ear; Sarah Day's
Grass Notes contains some of
the finest examples of
Australian poetry I have read."

Alex Miller

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