

ZINEWEST 2019 JUDGE'S REVIEW BY LUKE CARMAN
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It is as easy to judge this competition as it rank a series of dreams: how to pick the dream that means the most? Which has the richest depths and which the deepest riches? Impossible, in other words – though somehow it gets done, and I try to stay true to the principle of treading softly on them as I go.

To give you a sense of how I read this year's entries, so you might at least see what the judge's dodgy logic contained, I will take you through my encounters with them, one by dreamy one.

It all began for me with **Abdullah Noman's** 'Awakening', a fittingly hallucinatory introduction to this year's entries, with its psychedelic rush of sensations, paradoxes, and epiphanies: we see a series of road-signs along the highway of life, flashes of the lives we pass and touch. We collect hypnotic visions of blood-red tribal lovers, listen to symphonies of secret wisdoms recorded in folded sheets, we see the reflections of poets who dance like mad shaman in the street, until the sounds of sirens, like wailing angels, wake us, and we come back to this place we call the world.

Next I came upon a civil war. Had it announced itself beforehand, Bilqees, the protagonist of 'Failed Job Interview', by **Naima Ibrahim**, might have stayed home. Instead, she goes through the indignity of being warned about being a woman in a man's world, as if she didn't know - she's the butcher's daughter, about whom it is said she struts around in her tight dresses, the curls of her hair spilling out from her hijab. She has heard these whispers all her life, and can take the insinuations in her stride, but today's insults are interrupted by the blasts of shells and gunfire in the distance, and the shock and awe of bodies lying in the street.

From there I arrived at **Peter Cartwright's** poem 'The Bed', the final resting place, where dead eyes sit in sombre faces, and empty speech flows out from ash-filled heads hovering at our bedside. A paper-thin figure beneath the sheets reminds the world he is alive by begging to be taken to the toilet. But a voice from his side tells the squirming body it is better to soil yourself than rise – go in the nappy you wear – with apologies for the pungent stench, while we wait in silent hours for the dead eyes to converge on the final, lonesome dying.

After this last sleep was a triptych of dreams by **Dianne Cikusa** called the 'Classroom': A teacher in personified boots watches a subdivided child ride an idling carousel. From the child's point of view, grandiloquent ideals appear in a bubble of speech, obscuring heart-strings and entry-points to some vast, forbidden hinterland. At last there is the caretaker, who, like a poet, watches from without the plot, as newcomers lay their gimmicks on old structures.

It might be the same night in which **Lindy Courtney's** poem, 'Three AM Venus', is set: though it is too early to find her, that heavenly goddess. She will take her place on the stage, just, we are told, when the time is right. In some depth of night when the cats are asleep and the house is filled with dreams of dentists, that's when the cosmic expanse blooms with deep warm waves of female desire. For now, the lonely watcher on the deck must make do with the shameless moon, and visions of loved-ones far away beneath the slanted night.

In **Kate Brown's** 'Handmade' we hear the verse of a subject stitched together, one who knows that the observer who sees the patchwork motley that makes her up will circle down onto the loose threads, and pulling there, innocent as you like, will unveil the imperfect whole beneath, barely concealed, with all its naked regrets laid bare for open eyes to fix them with their formulating phrase.

There is the night before in **Rhonda W. Rice's** 'the Funeral', a night steeped in memories and desire, where shadows in the empty room play with your periphery like ghosts, and the scent of funereal flowers mingle with the lingering perfume from open mouths of wardrobes. The clocks in the house whirr and chime, and pull you toward the woeful chasm of morning, where protocol brings you to the edge of the open earth, to toss clods of dirt down on a cedar box.

From that dark fever of anticipation we awaken at **James Spring's** 'The Academy'. The story begins as a science-fiction survivalist speculation, a kind of Bear Grylls in outer-space, with a three-legged guide taking us through the strange terrain. But before you can set your camp under the unfamiliar stars, and dream of eating steaks carved out of three-legged friends, the script has flipped, and you're now in an intergalactic psychological thriller, where the ghosts of victims teach their killer a lesson in the interplanetary nature of karmic law.

Back in a more familiar world, **Danielle Catherine's** 'Good Friday' presents us with a series of vignettes borrowing their hybrid form from a recipe collection. In these culinary reflections, McCoffees become part of religious observance, 'My Kitchen Rules' and Gordon Ramsay are interrupted by Tayta's poltergeist, and a Foxtel subscription is transubstantiated into an Easter Miracle that serves four, best garnished with a small sprig of guilt.

Nearby, **Alexander Donoghues'** 'Blue Literature' presents a referential heterogloss of local letters, a stream of intertextual connection, augmenting a portrait of the excremental flow of Parramatta River beneath an expanse of melancholy sky. The eye of the author is watching all from his balcony, and he sees a young man stagger and spew in the ugly waters, wiping his lips and marching off toward the bars and lanes below. The author stands as watchman over all this minutiae, until the sun begins to sink and thoughts of long dead forbears, they too must have breathed beneath the same sky in their enigmatic way.

Jo Mularczyk's 'The Decision' is a different speculation altogether – here a loving couple greet the opportunity to be deemed worthy by the state to give birth to a child with an anxious trepidation. They must earn this right from 'The Department of Personal Approvals.'

The right to marry, to bear children, to work, to relocate, to love – all perfectly reasonable realms of life to leave to the supreme authority's discretion. But an old woman on the doorsteps of the department interrupts the lovers with her talk of a time when Freedom wasn't only bold black print on the back of card.

In a world closer to home but perhaps no less unjust, another family goes about its business in **Marie Dustmann's** 'An Afternoon Walk', where a father, a mother and their two little children, their thoughts on the simple pleasures promised by a crest of hill – the wattle flowers and the birds in the trees – are caught up in the cruel spectacle of a state eager to orchestrate its lessons on innocent bodies, and to spread its weaponised message of bombs and bodies in cameras and raids.

In **Laila Nawsheen's** 'Never Left the Iron on Again' an act of violence, resonates with a ringing love, and a whole life is remembered. A child with their head in the clouds, who leaves an iron smouldering a rust-coloured burn into the fabric of a board, is hit by a mother who not long after, with innocent adoration in her eyes, farewells her husband in her final bed. The child becomes an adult who tries to swallow the world the away with a handful of oxycotin, until that same stinging strike brings them back to being.

In **Michael Chirgwin's** 'The tunnel and the Stage' a battered little runt with a torn shirt and a wounded shoulder retreats from the indifferent gloom of the real and into the redeeming spaces of a dusty stage – that worn down transcendental chamber where the world can be more than rough surfaces. The runt stands before the wall of mirrors that reflect what isn't there, and in the darkness of this magic room, the possibility of becoming what you are not weaves its bare enchantments.

Myra Koch's 'Holding a Stranger's Hand' opens with our hero, Fran, crouching by the side of the road, repeating reassuring words to the stranger whose big belly rises and falls in a struggling labour, the asphalt burning under them while they wait for the sirens to silence the questions running through a busy mind. Moments before there had only been the serene simplicity of a clear blue sky and the songs on the radio, and the vision of a favourite beach. All this peace of mind is thrown out the open window by an interjection of the full force of our mortal drama.

Meanwhile, in **Dorian Stoilescu's** 'In a New Country', we are reminded of the awkward character of a migrant country, where nobody wants to know much about the other, and every new arrival is afraid of the last. Here fears are quelled with exchanges of empty phrases – an eternal trade of one empty matchbox for another – and an investment of thoughts and feelings in meaningless entertainment rushes upon us like a cool flood, quenching that thermal point of absolute unicity.

As Chekov said, any fool can survive a crisis, but it's the day to day that gets you down in **Denise Newton's** 'Straws', where Western Sydney's morning traffic crawl becomes a circle of hell, and the torturous mantra of 'New Wife, New Life' from an Ex's email, repeats in a

single mother's mind. The children nag for McDonald's slushies - tiny impish tormentors in purple pants and 'Peppa Pig' shirts. But it's also in their little ways and gestures that the day-to-day revolves, and any parent knows how much of the world they hold in their small hands – enough consolation to bear those infinite knocks of the everyday.

Belinda Curby's 'The Goddess of Technology' tells the tale of a truly modern torture. A young carer sits at a table across from her charge, so absorbed by the manic abyss of her phone, upon which her acrylic nails tap like mad dancers stirring up the flashing lights that glow on the screen as it simulates the image of a casino reel, that she might as well be on the other side of the world. All her consciousness seems sucked into the low glitter of that light, while the forgotten poet waits across the table, caught in the invisible prison of her humanity.

Alexandria Jones' 'Universe Calling' begins as a child's reminiscence of climbing trees, and a deep communion with the universal spirit, overlooking the vast green fields – but then comes a sudden narrative leap into the territory of Robinson Crusoe, where a deserted island odd-couple prove Sartre's maxim about hell and other people, especially those blondes in hot-pink workout pants who happen to wash up on your shore.

A happier match of odd bods appear in **Nic Lesley's** 'Run to Parra-dise', where we are witness to an intergenerational tour of 21st century Parramatta, our aged interlocutor indicating the ghost of nightclubs and the ash of burning grandstands – his restless youth – all of which accumulates in a kind of delighted incredulity for the youngster who accompanies him, in a dignified awe at the wonder of a world lost to the glass and steel of the city's new high-rise impassiveness.

Maria Nguyen's 'Mother of the Night' sees a young widow, marked with the freckles of bed-time stories told to warm children in their cold beds. She labours through the night, stitching large hopes to little pay with her lotus-soft palms, her weathered fingers busy under the grinding brightness of the fluorescent light that draws shadows from the half-moons under her tired eyes.

Nicole Lenoir-Jourdan's 'Of Fish and Fins and Spouts' is a paean to the kooks, brazos, and seppos, and the mystical energy that radiates from the perfect A-frame of a wave on which a 6'6" triple-fin can perform its cutbacks, floats, rip sprays, switch foots and pull-ins. All testament, too, to the way a person can transform the meaning of the world around them, until they are waking every morning looking out at the beauty of the sea for those floats and changes which keep us sane.

'LOTICRUS', by **Christopher Sammut**, is another tale of what it takes to keep sane. Here the portrait is of working life in contemporary Australia, where a dry and subdued sense of humour authenticate the kind of character you might encounter in the factories and welfare centres of the country – a character whose lust for life might best be testified by a number

plate, and whose reason for being is burning rubber for a crowd of former co-workers while you hold your arm out the driver's side and wave goodbye to the world.

Hamish Sparks' 'A Brief Review', meanwhile, is a meta-parody of postmodern prose which plays havoc with the paradoxes of non-linear influence, gaming Derrida and Matthew Arnold into a deconstruction of genres and forms in a display of luxurious virtuosic joy. Here we rewire William Burroughs, misread Harold Bloom, detour the Deuteronomists, make mock of Marcus Aurelius, and raise J.K. Rowling to genius, all for the teleological hell of it.

On a trip of another kind, 'The New Acquaintance' by **Danny Draper** sees a commuter moving through the striated flesh of public transport's social tensions – where sudden fissures break through the psychic skin. Toxic behaviour congeals into a shield of thoughts written in a code meant to deflect rejection, while the carriage rocks and rumbles down the line. The delinquent acquaintance makes a normalising gesture - he asks for the time, and the silent pain of being on-board with other strangers bleeds and heals between the stations, and the rumbling social organism of the train moves on with all of us in its gory belly.

I'm not sure where that train was going, but no train can take us to the alternate history contained in **Norm Fairbairn's** 'Single Cream Pie Theory'. To go there, you have to take the plunge into a speculative account of the conspiracy theories surrounding the infamous pie-ing of an American President in Dallas, November 22nd, 1963. Dolloped with some suspiciously Australian improvisations, and the awkward insertion of a suppository factory, this otherwise sombre account of a tragic moment in some other world's history, we conclude with a titillating reassurance that DNA tests on tin foil trays, and the questioning of Russian bakers, might soon offer new revelations.

In the meantime, there is 'Today on the Floor', by **Chris Winspear**, a poetic guide to the smelting of despair, which as everyone knows can be sourced from the ear-hair of an old Bangladeshi. Here we are in the midst of a back and forth on the needs of a society which has never heard of humility, and has no measure for love. If you want to dispense with the ear-hair you can, though without that you'll need to start with dreams born of idleness on trains and in cinemas across the globe, dangle hope before the helpless, and then burn it all down. After the coffee cups, the Chinese newspapers – after the concrete settles and the cigarette butts – there's still the ghost that goes whistling through the narrow streets at dusk, and a frying pan for the fire of the morning.

From there we jump into the whirlwind account of the **C.A. Broadribb's** 'Police Informant'. That unlucky man the enormous copper with the putty-clumped face calls a boy – though he's 20 now – has learned to live on his wits. That hasn't kept him from his usual position between the rock of the law and the hard-place of disorder. Like all good crime drama this is a world of tough lines of dialogue delivered by characters as jagged and colourful as the lives they lead, who run the risk of finding themselves in darkened alleys, bleeding out as the red lights and sirens flash over the gutters.

At last we come to the fabled 'City of Endurable Dreams', by **Paul O'Loughlin**. Here are the seven wise men, the world of art arranged around them, and you stand about the paintings and the sculptures with your thoughts on memories of a time before you turned into an old and empty tea pot. This is an impressionist's study of fascination: a gaze settled like an annoying fly on some green-tea drinker, who can read the movements of the river's ripples and currents, and who slides eel-like into the mutual surrender of the enduring daylight dreams, like ribbons of light playing on its surface.

In a sense it is fitting to end with this vision of looking at dreams, and on the recurrent thematic of rivers flowing from point to point. The life that teems in this moving current, the reflections of light on its body, the rhythms and flow of the prose here – all sound to me like a fine way of imagining this little anthology you've created. Henry James once imagined he could see a blue river of truth flowing through the firm ground of all fiction, and reading these works, I fancy I can see it too, in all its rolling, displacing complexity. Today I've tried to share some of the sights I encounter on that crossing, and I hope that many more readers have the chance to greet them too.