

FIVE ISLANDS PRIZE 2022, JUDGES REPORT

Judges' Report 5 Islands Poetry Prize – for a first book of poetry

The inaugural Five Islands Prize drew entries from across the country, from established and new presses, from capital and regional areas. All twenty-nine entries dealt with substantial content and themes. Across a great spectrum of form, language and structure, the books engaged with the vagaries and nuances of existence. High production values contributed to a sense that these first collections warrant consideration as additions to a thriving poetic culture.

It's worth noting that a significant number of books were by poets with a proven track record of publication, prizes or other accomplishments in the arts. Perhaps this shows that a collection of poetry is not a quick process, requiring a regular practice accompanied with time, experience and diligence. The books that stood out knew how to enter and leave a poem, how to grab and sustain attention with story, image, and rhythm, providing strong visual pictures, and new ways of portraying daily occurrences.

Judges' deliberations were marked by rigorous discourse, leading to the highlighting of certain books. These books build momentum from first poem to last, have unique ways with words, daring use of punctuation and page presence, and deal with riveting, significant subject matter. For example, portraying a lyrical theatre of addiction, a haunting of colonial abuse using visual art and oral truth-telling, pushing the literary limits of prose poetry to speak of inhabitations, a cascading reverie of living with sea at threshold, and creating lino-cut moments to evoke refuge from a war-torn homeland. There was much to be said about a deftly rendered account of pregnancy during a pandemic. Another book offers enduring, finely crafted empathic observations of the experience of animals, and threatened or destroyed natural ecologies.

Finally, after much analysis, it's Ron Pretty (the founder of *Five Islands Press*) who provides some insight into the reverberating quality of the winning book:

This I think is what Eliot was referring to in his article, 'The Music of Poetry', where he wrote that 'Every revolution in poetry is apt to be... a return to common speech.' In other words, what poets are trying to do is to distil the music of their verse from the language that they hear all around them.

[Creating Poetry, revised edition, Ron Pretty, Five Islands Press, 1987, 2001, p. 95]

WINNING ENTRY: DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING LESS DOMESTIC?

Author: Collyer, Emilie. Publisher: Vagabond Press

What sets the winning book apart is its depth of effects and the frequency of astonishing, breathtaking turns, insights, and denouements. This book is quick to earn the reader's ear, as the wit and wisdom of the opening poems establishes a contract between speaker and reader that is warmly conspiratorial: '*Not a joke, it's just what happens*'.

This deceptively light tone is beguiling. The book's five sections delineate the domestic, the family, the body, sexual and feminist politics, and interrogate the ways that these dimensions of lived experience are difficult to unravel or to parse. The phrases used as section headings (*Do you have anything less domestic?; Don't write about your family, nobody cares; It's important to*

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keep up weight bearing exercise; You have a nice smile, you should use it more; I hope I won't put anyone off by saying this is genuinely feminist) have at one time or another been said to or about the author, who, in ironically repurposing such counsel, thumbs her nose at it.

A lot happens: stepfamily dynamics, sickness, death, birth, takeaway food and reality tv. Employing a poetics that might be described as Personalism with a point, the book describes a pervasive disconnection, a human vulnerability to which words can only point.

The speaker of these poems is reliable, but alert to the ways memory can mislead, like *'sepia photos from the 70s / they look romantic but it's all chemical'*. Often spoken from the 'mid point' between the past (nostalgia/ trauma) and futures lost or unknown, these poems are an attempt at intergenerational understanding, and social and political reckoning, the work of an invested mind, never naive, never foreclosing hope.

We encounter a sociolinguistic poetics with overheard speech as concentrated ideology. Borrowed colloquialisms and small talk belie vexed tenets, accounting for many instances in which cultural critique and humour coalesce. With a deft flair for plot in miniature, for pace, and for what can be left out, *Do you Have Anything Less Domestic?*² shows a willingness to elide, to trust the reader to do imaginative work. The poem *'Instructions for Colour'* doesn't include the word 'hair', and yet we are led to extrapolate the problematic and futile fetishization of colour against a background of existential grey.

The poems extend their central and juxtaposing metaphors in thoroughgoing and poetically satisfying ways, interrogating their subject matter with a wide range of poetic effects, employing the page and punctuation in novel and subtle ways. Take the central poem, *'What you Learn (TV Lessons)'*, which uses two parallel columns and incremental repetition to deliver a propulsive jeremiad against cultural messaging around beauty and sexual violence.

The final poems employ Norse and Greek mythology to show powerful correlatives with the contemporary experiences of women. Even at their most staunch, the poems favour straight-shooting over finger-wagging; rage is counterbalanced by wit.

Throughout, *Do you Have Anything Less Domestic?*² demonstrates that the best personal writing illuminates a more universal experience, in forms capable of encompassing their particular historical moment, yielding works of art that will endure in our literature.

Congratulations to the author, Emilie Collyer, and the publisher, Vagabond Press.