

## FIVE ISLANDS PRIZE: For a first book of poetry 2023 – Judges' Report

An exciting range of books entered the second year of this Prize. All twenty-five entries tackled or engaged with sequence, play, discord and emotion. Every poet and their publisher need to be thanked for providing page after page of generous endeavour with the poetic form. It's heartening to read an unwavering devotion to what is an ancient practice, being elevated to contemporary purview.

After a period of separate reading and note taking, the Judges collaborated wholeheartedly over a series of meetings to finally select a shortlist and then the winner. Some books reverberated above others and diverged to new and unexpected fields of vision. These were books in which no poem was expendable. There were four books that we continued to revisit as they provided sustainable intrigue using language, form, themes and imagery in revitalised and bold ways, each poem describing trajectories with striking intersections, juxtapositions and transitions. These books are placed as follows:

### **The Winner:**

**SECRET THIRD THING**

**Dan Hogan**

**Cordite Publishing Inc.**

*Secret Third Thing* resists adjudication and the clichés of literary appraisal. It is, however, a breathtaking first book of poetry that resuscitates class struggle and sketches a notion of 'non-binary as in my interior world doesn't match the interests of capital'. Intentional as these lines are, *Secret Third Thing* is more than a restating of cultural theory, or iteration of experimental poetry, as both practices are exponentially enlivened by the encounter.

Linguistically charged and digressive, this book dramatises the sense of imminent distraction that is built into experiences of late capital and life online. Junctures between sense and non-sense are especially generative, relishing potentialities at the site where language deviates from ordinary signification. The rare skill with which polemic and comedic effects are deployed, each complimenting the other, animates the core themes of alienation and lost futures.

Poems such as 'Old Growth / High Definition' are grounded in central tensions and dichotomies — 'we push the heavy nonflatscreen television inside a hollow tree'.

Likewise in the poem, 'Blade of Grass, Meadow of Knives' — 'hurtling birthdaytowardbirthday toward your tenth coffee is free'.

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Utterances redolent of the memes and quips of hyperreality also expose the mark-ups, hypertext and file extensions of word processing. The shorthand grammar of social media is appropriated to great comic effect. In tones suggesting mock-dramedy, actual despair and pessimism are ironically reconfigured into a kind of dejected zeal — ‘time to polevault over this sewerage farm’ into an ‘email from human resources’. In this perverse enclosure no amount of ‘hi-octane Blu Tack’ or text boxes can fully contain the desire to leave work on time — ‘my insides become outside in a pop-up book/ kind of way’. Neoliberalism’s knack of sublimating and re-packaging the diminished self is on full display — ‘[Slide 9]Who would’ve guessed the best worker in the world was a spinoff/ series of injuries.’

Recurring motifs like late night shopping, food courts, and bin night, form a demotic constellation or stage for the ramblings of Hogan’s poemtagonists. We meet Foiseach, Aduantas, Cluain, and a cast of minor characters, memorably sketched and defiantly scattered throughout the collection. The speaker finds a futile interlocuter in a Centrelink chatbot and, in a recurring sequence consisting of bite-sized chapters, embarks on a Beckettian quest to sell a secondhand suitcase —

‘We pass many shops, all of them selling various incarnations of proteins or pianos or self-care products for psychopomps.’

Although ‘we know who wins in the end’, *Secret Third Thing* is a worthy adversary to the quicksilver essence of late capitalism. As if in response to C. Wright Mills’ remark from 1960: ‘we now witness the rise of the cheerful robot’, Hogan writes, ‘I’m/ already/ not a robot’. Their ‘argot against the radiation of immobility emitted by capital’ moves with brash and unpredictable gestures. This book is exhilarating in its irreverence, its sense of play and inventiveness, and it coheres and sustains its vitality to the end.

### **Highly commended:**

**TIME MACHINES**

**Caroline Williamson**

**Vagabond Press**

Caroline Williamson’s *Time Machines* is a book for our times where the personal and political meet in unexpected ways, deeply thoughtful and relatable ways. The predominant mode is essayistic, creative non-fiction poetry, containing long poems infused with a charm and wisdom borne of intense attention and contemplation.

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From COVID-19 to climate change to recollections of love and loss, we encounter conversational and intricate narratives that take a swipe at the status quo while retaining feeling. The concerns are serious and tinged with wry humour and irony. The poems traverse intergenerational, cross-cultural understanding, recapitulations of class struggle and fading legacies of the old left ('Merthur', 'Tydfil', 'China'). We are also given an insightful poetic record of migrant life.

Williamson's observations are sharp, philosophical and emotionally present. We are invited into a sensory world, weaving through personal history with the nostalgic power of olfactory memory ('Vent Vert'). We encounter images of youth and early adulthood – 'still bright after the busy decades of forgetting' and penetrating elegies – 'The dead stay dead, though I would have welcomed your hauntings'.

While this collection makes a statement about a poetics of commitment, it eschews any neat ideological fixes. A stylistically unique collection on time and retrospection, exploring and questioning the systems we live and operate in.

### **Commended:**

**MOON WRASSE**

**Willo Drummond**

**Puncher & Wattmann**

Willo Drummond's *Moon Wrasse* is a fluid and tender book about transformation across identity, grief, gender and relationship. The poems reach beyond any subject matter a reader may impose. The title poem and image of the 'Moon Wrasse', a protogynous hermaphrodite that is born female and changes to male, implies the transformation of a trans-partner and is infinitely relatable with its lyrical ascendancy from 'Back and forth' to 'Here / you are' to 'All is calm and comfort'. Likewise, the multi-faceted 'Ways of seeing' that seemingly refers to pregnancy loss, transcends to all kinds of grief or idea of transience.

Drummond's poems invite the reader into challenging subjects with gentleness and lyricism. The poems breathe and allow space for the reader to enter. While the collection is constantly interwoven and in conversation with other writers – Rilke, Pound, Neruda and Mary Oliver, among others – these frequent references do not define or detract from the newness of the work, being ever-expansive and explorative.

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The poems of *Moon Wrasse* are tuned into the natural process of evolution and engage constantly with nature during a time of climate crisis, from the first poem ‘Seed’ and throughout the reader’s journey, we are immersed in colourful waterways, mangroves and night birds. The separation between human and nature is non-existent, with the poems transporting us to an original, less encumbered state. The notion of constant change and flux, inherent in the natural environment and therefore in the human, is what elevates this collection.

### **Commended:**

#### **GREATEST HIT**

**Holly Isemonger**

**Vagabond Press**

The poetry in *Greatest Hit* exalts the ‘I’ to omniscient as the private is resized, reframed, rephrased into increments of the familiar. The poet reminds us how the personal with all of its adjusted repetitions is made public in our attempts to connect on social media, through art, and in bedrooms. There is a meticulous devotion to the non-linear, to collapse the end into the beginning, to mutate the moment into tentacles and tails of some notion of memory, and to write reality as dream. There are poems about how woman as ‘I’ or ‘she’ intersects with ‘Genesis’, ‘Walt Whitman’, ‘Ted Hughes’, ‘Picasso’, ‘Peter Fonda’ ‘Tom Waits’, ‘Lars von Trier’.

Isemonger employs a diversity of forms, including mock screenplay, dream poem, found poem, prose poem, and poem through the grinder of recombinatory poetics (‘My Life as an Artist’, ‘Free Online Translation Service’, ‘Aesthetics’), yielding an accretion of associative possibilities and producing some beautiful and disturbing images. The poem ‘Barrel Knot’ pits the ravage of old age beside ‘watching *The Bachelorette*’ on laptop. Her work encompasses a great spectrum, from the banal to what it means to be an artist at the intersections of gender, history, culture, and geography. She is at once serious and entertaining, not afraid to be plainspoken, conversational, and to lean into a more disjunctive grammar in order to render experience in language at a different angle. *Greatest Hit* is linguistically and formally inventive, and of this world.

Congratulations to the author, Dan Hogan, and their publisher, Cordite Books, and to the highly commended and commended authors and publishers.

