

## Five Islands Prize Judges Report 2024

### Introduction

Reading the twenty four books submitted for this third year of the prize was a privilege and a pleasure. Each book offered its own vigorous engagement with language, form and theme. It is a particular honour to read first collections and witness the emergence of poetic voices, hear their distinct music and feel the excitement of a new perspective. Among these books were some unforgettable reading experiences of truth telling, deep reflection and poetic experimentation.

As judges we enjoyed immersing ourselves in these books and then coming together for a series of lively and fruitful discussions. Working in collaboration to select a shortlist took time and care as so many books submitted were ones we admired. Ultimately, our decision making came down to the books we kept returning to, that would not let us go, that brought together confidence in craft along with the capacity to surprise and move us. They were books that were doing something different and took us to places we didn't expect.

Thank you to all the poets and publishers who worked to bring these first collections to the world. We hope they all find wide and deep readerships and we look forward to what is to come for all of these poets. The results are as follows:

### Winner

<b>Reliefs</b>	<b>Jarad Bruinstroop</b>	<b>UQP</b>
----------------	--------------------------	------------

*Reliefs* is a groundbreaking, deeply resonant collection of disarming intensity, tenderness and lyrical courage. Meticulously crafted, yet always spacious and accessibly complex, these poems capture queer experience, history and art in a voice that always feels trustworthy and lucid. These small capsules could be described as minimal, but they are also vast - they trust in the potency of implication, in the reader's capacity for empathy and thought, embodying a poetics of connection and desire.

Bruinstroop invites us into his world with clean yet powerful lines. From snapshots of adolescence like 'Scout Night' to intimate vignettes to ekphrasis poems of range and tone, which dive into stories of the male figures in Francis Bacon's and David Hockney's artworks, we watch Bruinstroop navigate a hetero-normative landscape and subtly interrogate masculinity.

Poems like 'State of California' and 'Black Throated Finch' portray the insidiousness of capitalism and social media, a natural progression in a book that begins with an outward conforming to the mainstream and ends with a final lyric essay on pain and mortality. In all this, Bruinstroop is able to meld the personal and the political without a trace of didacticism.

*Reliefs* is a consummate collection, put together with an immense amount of care. The book is underpinned by what feels like many years of research and attention. While there is an overall

sense of polish, there is an inherent resistance to perfection. The collection pops with surprise. Poems are moving and small and strange at times. Bruinstoop's poetic voice is mercurial, switching between confessional and wry, awed and authoritative. Everything that is personal is also universal. More than anything, *Reliefs* provides pleasure. It is a delight to read and each reading brings new rewards.

### Highly commended (joint)

<b>Polyp</b>	<b>Ashley Haywood</b>	<b>Vagabond Press</b>
--------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

---

There is a profound integrity to the ecological voice evident in *Polyp*. Meticulously researched, these compressed yet expansive poems respond to the archives of paleologist and geologist Dorothy Hill with an intuitive, radical approach to language that allows the non-human world to speak, to resonate within the reader in profound ways. *Polyp* is science-based poetry that resonates with feeling and does so the more it is re-read.

Haywood breaks the poetic line mid-word, turns phrases into sculptures or rock formations, makes the white space of the page stutter and breathe. The poetry enters vivid and thrilling conversation with other art forms. It is filled with questions, exclamations, dashes, ellipses and flashes of aphoristic insight and humour, and yet achieves a collection of coherence.

The poems are finely crafted and as sparse as a coral reef or the remains of a forest. Haywood takes us out of our human ego into the vastness and connectedness of the natural world in the anthropocene. The poems reach for survival and call through time, imploring *Where do I go? Who do I tell? Can you hear me?* This collection is a new kind of ecopoetry and a testament to the power of very few words to express an immense amount.

*Polyp* provides a fresh reading experience and proposes a new ecology of how language works. The collection is playful in form and deeply serious in how it offers us pause to feel and see the world anew. Though minimal in length, this collection swells with deep echoes of resonance. The reading experience is akin to wandering through an art exhibition or immersion in music. It acts as an artful field guide as to how we might attend differently to the relationship between the human and more than human world.

### Highly commended (joint)

<b>Potty Mouth Potty Mouth</b>	<b>Alex Creece</b>	<b>Cordite</b>
--------------------------------	--------------------	----------------

---

*Potty Mouth Potty Mouth* is a riotous, visceral, wildly associative and intelligent collection. Uncompromising in their subject matter, disarmingly intimate in voice, the poems burst onto the page in a collision of pop-culture references, queer literary provocation, and cathartic self-expression. The results are unsettling, hilarious and illuminating.

Creece's poetry is a subversion of societal expectations of what it is to be feminine and polite; it is a loud expression of misfit. Capitalist systems and digital memes crowd into the poem, but

these influences are turned against themselves in a bravura insubordination. The poems celebrate “bad skin” and care not for being “fuckable”, causing the reader to inevitably question their own points of conformity.

*Potty Mouth Potty Mouth* also includes experiments with visual form through concrete poems that are fun as well as beautifully disorienting - poems that broaden out like a volume switch to poems that are suspended on the page or exist in dense blocks of text.

Creece explores the relationship between writer and reader with brilliant vigour and sass. The poetic voice is strident and rebellious, bringing the private into the public and insisting on remaining outside of all boxes. These poems perch right on the cusp of invitation and provocation. A game of complicity emerges between affect and meaning, with the reader asked for their full engagement, and amply rewarded.

These poems shake the reader out of any preconceived notions of what gender looks like and what poetry looks like. This liberating debut collection shouts enthusiasm and rebellion in equal measure and is a life affirming call to arms.

### **Commended**

#### **The Flirtation of Girls**

**Sara M Saleh**

**UQP**

---

*The Flirtation of Girls* is urgent, ambitious and transformative. From essayistic prose poems to broken ghazals, Saleh turns poetic forms to her own purposes, and invents new forms. She uses anaphora, dialectics, assonance and refrain in order to immerse the reader in the insights, grief, pleasure and complexity of Arab-Australian experience.

The poems in this compassionate and uncompromisingly fierce collection range from the frank and intimate to unapologetic treatises, from tender family portraits to rigorous political deconstructions. Saleh brings us right to the heart of difficult injustices with long histories - sexual assault, war, racism and injustice (‘Bad Immigrant’ and ‘All the Places my Father Lost His Faith’, to name just two). Poems such as ‘Border Control: Meditations’, ‘Palindrome for a Good Girl’ and ‘The day home didn’t change’ expose and challenge colonial-settler narratives.

The world of girls and women that Saleh depicts is multi-faceted and fully captured, and the stories she tells are timely and plain speaking. These poems lure and drag the reader into the sights, sounds and realities of war and displacement, solidarity and mutual support.

She explores form with a ferocious sophistication and explodes notions of uniformity, instead constructing a poetics that understands the urgency of tearing up the rule books. *The Flirtation of Girls* is a generous, open-hearted book that invites the reader to question place, time, power and history. Saleh is well aware of the complexities of language, how it can be wielded for violence, yet how it can also offer solace, moments of contemplation and utter beauty.

*The Flirtation of Girls* is a rich collection, deeply compelling, achingly human.