

## **Judge's Report**

**Dr Madison Godfrey**

As a previous winner of this award, it is a great honour to return on the other side of this process, as the judge of this year's Tom Collins Poetry Prize.

In 2025, the prize received over 100 entries, with the cohort demonstrating an enthusiastic engagement with the possibilities of contemporary poetry; as an act of preservation, as a site of confession, as an experimental concoction, and as a tribute to the places where our best, or perhaps even, our most slippery memories are made.

In my initial readings, I created a longlist folder that contained over thirty poems, which I reread multiple times to reach the shortlist I'm sharing with you this afternoon. Regardless of whether your poem is announced today - I believe the number of contenders for the shortlist is indicative of the quality of this year's submissions.

Before I announce the winners, I want to share my sincere encouragement for those who are new to submitting their poetry to prizes or publications. Congratulations, to you, for the diligence and courage involved in sharing your words with a stranger (in this case, me). As your poetry journey expands and shifts - I urge you to read widely, write diligently, and advocate for the sustainability of your own creativity. I urge you to stay a little bit stubborn.

When I won this prize, I was 25 - an age which was considered (and even overtly said to my face) by many people, to be too young to have achieved this. Here, I want to take my own stubborn moment to remind you that poets, like poems, are made more brilliant by their multiplicity. If you ever feel too young to submit to a prize, I urge you to believe in your own stubborn ambition, and do it anyway.

In all time period, but specifically in this current period of violence, the act of writing a poem can be understood as a political urge towards reportage – a decisive act of remembering. A poem, inherently, places a frame around a moment.

While a section of the submitted poems were overtly political in their messaging or content, this politicised purpose also struck me vividly in poems that used language and imagery to uphold the significance of community.

Though the specificity of these communities varied - the shortlisted poems all feature a quality of intimacy - they invite the reader into a persona's memory - through family, grief, illness, inheritance, and perhaps even, hope.

Thank you, to the writers, for trusting me with these words. Thank you, also - to FAWWA for inviting me to judge this year's Tom Collins Poetry Prize. Especially thank you to Susan and Soraya for their emails, and to all those who are working behind-the-scenes to make events and prizes such as these happen. Thank you for nurturing this local community of writers.

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In alphabetical order, by title, the three commended poems are ...

- *Life Can* by Libby Sommer
- *Nesting Tables* by Angela Costi
- *The Sign* by Duc Dau

In alphabetical order, by title, the three highly commended poems are ...

- *American Lens* by Kathleen Dzubiel
- *Child in the Lab of Mirrors* by Shey Marque
- *Grief Has Teeth* by Taliesin Don

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And now, the top three placing poems ...

In third place, *Declined* by Sharon Rockman does an interesting job of using a conversational or colloquial tone, and elevating this into a poetic feast. The piece reads like an inner monologue, interrupted by seemingly frantic alliterative moments such as -

*"I rise resourceful"* and

*"I see red reflection. I refute refraction*

*— the splintering and splashing of red*

*red red light beyond Coles, beyond automation."*

Set predominately between a grocery store checkout and the carpark beyond, this is a poem that contributes to a growing tradition of supermarket poetics. The persona of the piece

has a familiarity that makes this piece memorable, as the reader is left remembering the person they encountered here. By admitting the skills of the hair flip and the saunter, this poem resists the shame of silence.

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In second place, *Schwannoma* by Josephine Clarke is a deceptively minimalist reflection on illness and tumultuous hope. Through a carefully extended metaphor, the persona delivers striking images of illness in ways that have stuck with me for weeks.

This is the sort of poem where the final stanza serves as an urge to return to the beginning, so one can read the entire poem again with a new sense of understanding. I have carried around this poem's swan imagery (the beak and wing of "*a swan whispering into my ear*") around with me, and will continue to, since that first reading.

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In first place, *Return Flight* by Miriam Wei Wei Lo moves as though a time lapse. Structured into four deeply evocative sections, the piece poses unanswerable provocations about family, memory and gradual grief.

In the first section, the lines -  
*"faster than the gymnast descending in a double-pike, / hurtling end over end with perfect composure, // faster than a hammer dropped on purpose / from the fifty-third floor of an apartment tower"* hurtle the reader deeper into the poem with the same intentionality of that hammer; the way that time itself tugs the persona deeper into this reckoning with the pace of loss.

Nearing the end of the poem, the persona returns to this sense of descent, writing -  
*"I hate time's gravity, that everything must fall."*

On the afternoon I first read this poem, I called my Mum (who is not a poetry reader nor creative writer) to tell her about it, which serves as a testament to the emotionality and craft of the piece. It's the sort of poem you want to share with the people you love.

*Dr Madison Godfrey, December 2025*