

# LITERARY

## NIL LUMBIK

ANTHOLOGY  
of WRITING 2016

# FOREWARD }



The Literary Nillumbik Anthology celebrates excellence in writing by Australian writers and poets. Literature provides unique insights into other perspectives, potentially amplifying, twisting or even imploding previously conceived ideas about how we understand the world. As our understanding increases so does our capacity to connect deeply with others, making us more resilient.

Nillumbik Shire Council is committed to preserving community values that are invested in artistic expression and creative exchange so as to share and continue our rich cultural heritage.

The Alan Marshall Short Story Award has long been the highlight of the Shire's literary calendar. For the past five years the Nillumbik Ekphrasis Poetry Award has inspired poets. I am delighted to bring together the winning stories and poems from 2016 in this anthology.

Particular thanks to judges Myfanwy Jones, Helen Lucas, Steve Smart and Karen Throssell for undertaking the difficult but enjoyable task of selecting this year's winning stories and poems. Congratulations to all of the winning writers and poets and also everyone who took up the challenge and entered the awards.

I encourage everyone to read, re-read and savour these stories and poems.

Happy reading!

Mayor, Cr Bronnie Hattam

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The Alan Marshall Short Story Award was created in 1985 to celebrate excellence in the art of short story writing. The Award honours the life and work of Australian literary icon and former Eltham resident, Alan Marshall.

Each year Australian authors are invited to submit stories up to 2,500 words in length. The Award is presented by Nillumbik Shire Council in partnership with the Yarra Plenty Regional Library.

## JUDGE'S REPORT

by Myfanwy Jones

What a privilege – and pleasure – to have read and selected the winning entries for this year's Alan Marshall Short Story Award. My own writing journey began with entering competitions like this one; having stories placed or highly commended gave me the confidence to keep writing and now, 20 years on, I find myself in the rarefied position of judge. I cannot emphasise enough how important these opportunities are for emerging writers.

The 'shortlist' for this year's award, couriered over in hard copy one midweek afternoon, came in at a whopping 49 stories. Holding that large pile of little worlds in my hands was thrilling and daunting in equal measure. My first read-through took about a week, interspersed with small mindless jobs to allow the stories to settle, like wafers between tastes of wine. It was an immersive experience. Common themes quickly emerged. Trauma and loss are the bread and butter of short story – suicide, stillbirth, dementia, cancer, loneliness and madness all played out here. Within these bleak tableaux, however, were characters in states of transition – moments of revelation, of expansion; ripples of movement. Not all of course – some stories took their power from a world less relenting, and others were buoyant in both theme and treatment.

Once I'd whittled down to my own shortlist of nine, what I realised – with a heavy heart, to be honest – was that there could be no correct decision. Each story operates according to its own intrinsic set of rules. To resort to cliché, how to compare an apple and a pear? Some seduced with a cracking voice or true and surprising character; others worked their

magic through the creation of palpable atmosphere. A satisfying shape is perhaps the hardest thing to pull off in the short story form, and endings, in particular, are notoriously difficult. A few of my favourite stories were let down by overly abrupt closes or, conversely, too much wrapping up.

I read and reread and reread again and in the end pulled out the stories that took me to unexpected places; that were subtle and nuanced, leaving ample room for the reader to feel and to think. Stories that in their very openness left the strongest trace. Judging is a human process and any other judge would have selected differently. I salute all of the 49 stories on that very long shortlist, and wholeheartedly applaud each of the winning and commended stories. I have no doubt I'll be reading more from these writers in years to come.

## OPEN PRIZE

### *Under the skin of things* by Keren Heenan

This is a sharp, beautifully wrought story about texts and subtexts, the insides and outsides of things. An artist cannot mark her bare canvas, cannot write in her journal, because she is afraid of what is pressing up from beneath – a growing disconnect and discontent in her core relationship that she is not yet prepared to overt. She and her partner are skating the surfaces, aware of what is not being said and hoping that by ignoring it the threat will pass. The dangers inherent in speaking up, however, are increasingly counterbalanced by the anxiety generated by staying quiet.

*Under the skin of things* is at once meticulous and delicate, the dialogue pitch-perfect. The gap in which the story sits, a place of instability and ambivalence, is not easy, and all the more powerful for this.

## LOCAL PRIZE

### *Earth Orbit* by Michelle Wright

This is a hugely heart-warming love letter from an adult to their mother – rich both in tone and theme. *Earth Orbit* is a story that creeps up on you. In the opening paragraphs, the imagery is deceptively naïve and the child's voice almost cloying, but what we come quickly to appreciate is that the spaceship we have entered is in fact a Datsun 120Y the child's homeless mother has decorated with blue cellophane, pricked through with starry holes, in an act of maternal love and protection that borders on the heroic.

The redemptive power of story and the imagination underpins this moving narrative, as ongoing hardship is reshaped and so endured, the importance of what is real or not becoming less crucial than the fierce, joyful love between a mother and child.

## OPEN HIGHLY COMMENDED

### *Matchwood* by G. Osborne

### *Killing him softly* by Julie Kearney

## LOCAL HIGHLY COMMENDED

### *Sunshine on my shoulders* by Catherine Padmore

## OPEN PRIZE

### UNDER THE SKIN OF THINGS

by Keren Heenan

The girl in a dress the colour of pomegranates dances across the salt-pans. Effortlessly. So full of grace she makes time appear to float. Tess fills the kettle with water and imagines sand, or salt, sifting slowly through her fingers. On the television the girl twirls across the white surface, her head and shoulders in the bright, bright blue of the cloudless sky. The sound is on mute. Outside, a truck screeches to a stop, horn honking, a discordance of sound and vision. The girl dances on. As easy as poured liquid.

Tess looks at the time – two hours before Hayden is home. He'll expect her to have done something. Still time to get started, on something. Anything. The fashion shoot is over, but the vibrancy of colour – the red and blue – still wheels around in her head, the flared hem of the girl's dress etched in her memory, the white cracked salt-flats, electric blue sky. She ought to be able to do something with that.

The kettle boils and she welcomes the chance to walk away. She spoons in the coffee grounds, pours in the water, stirs, and stands with her palm on the plunger.

Can she arrange white and red and blue in some unfettered form across the canvas – crack the white to a bleached bone landscape, whirl the pomegranate red form in a series of arcs across the sky. Now, she thinks, now something is moving inside her head, the patterns making themselves known.

She takes the coffee back to the canvas, turns off the television, puts on music – the harp, she wants something with the lightness of air. She turns to the canvas, pencil poised. The music rises and her hand rises with it towards

the white rectangle. She thinks, *just start. Just make a mark. Any mark.* But nothing comes. Just as quickly as it had sprung into life, it has gone. There is still an echo of the way she wanted it to look, but the path there is blocked, or perhaps was never really there after all.

She drinks the coffee, walks the room, then sits on the sofa. Looks out through the open glass doors to the balcony – the potted herbs, lemon tree. Nothing inspires her today. She is sitting drinking coffee. That is all. And she could sit here for two more hours and she would be nothing except two hours older. She drinks the coffee. Thoughts dart about like small finches; she can't see where they start or where they stop.

Hayden had left this morning in his usual flurry of lateness; jacket hanging off one shoulder while he reached for his briefcase and drank the last of his tea. 'We should go to the Aquarium this weekend, there's a performance – some underwater symphony written by a young composer. Meant to be amazing.'

She imagines the fish all moving in symphony with the music – shiver of violin, fish tail swishing – and she wonders if they will actually go, or is this another of Hayden's *we should* ... yet it's seldom mentioned again. 'We should get a dog ...' 'We should go to Spain ...' 'We should do a language course ...' And one that he does mention again – 'We should get pregnant ...'

The coffee tastes bitter, and it's cold now. She leaves the cup on the table and slips into her runners. She has an image in her mind of walking by the river, perhaps sitting and writing, thoughts, notes – what, what could she write? She hasn't written in ages. She leaves a note for Hayden: *Just gone to the river for inspiration*, and props it up against the wine bottle.

She takes the train, sits opposite a young couple. The girl has earplugs in, Tess can hear the muted crash and jangle of the music. The boy talks to the girl despite the earplugs, reciting snippets from a poster on the wall. 'Report any anti-social behaviour,' he says. But the girl isn't listening to him and he lapses into silence. He catches Tess looking at him. She's the first to look away. She reads the poster and almost misses the station, stumbling over the girl's bag in her last minute rush to the door.

The wind is cold on the platform, she bunches her jacket lapels together at her throat with one hand and walks briskly. She cuts through the reserve and takes the steps down to the river. Stands a while and watches the flow, hears the soft lap at the bank.

She listens, isolating each sound: the water, bird call, hum of cars on the overpass, wind in the trees. A rustle behind her and a rabbit darts out and along the path, then back into the undergrowth.

The wind in the trees starts to sound like a hot-plate sizzling. Something out in the water makes a *plunk*, like a cricket ball struck cleanly by a bat. And another sound like sheets flapping. Chips sizzling, or is it an Aspirin dissolving. A man in a blue tinny rows by – Plunk! Swish! – and she realises the cricket ball sound is probably the clunk as the oar moves back and forth in the metal ring. It starts to sound like cattle trampling on wooden boards – eyes wild, heads reared, hooves drumming. Everything can sound like something else, if you listen, really listen long enough. Familiar patterns can fall apart, make no sense. Underneath the patterns, she senses an anxiety. It's there in the shifting nature of meaning in what is familiar. Like repeating a word over and over till it reaches nonsensical proportions. She says her name under her breath. Then louder, repeating 'Tesstesstestess,' until it starts to sound like *stestesteste*, and she reaches blindly for the familiar ring of Tess.

She walks, hands in her pockets, eyes on the water – the gentle rhythm. She wants her steps to fit in with the flow; she softens her knees, tries to make her movements water. Thinks she might like to take up Tai-Chi, she might be good at it. She rolls along the path, her head full of the flow of water and air around her. She is calm now, though a ripple of under surface tension is there; the way the stars are still there in day time, or things still there in the room when the light is switched off. She thinks of the blank white canvas propped expectantly on the easel. She feels hollow and heavy all at once.

She returns home; Hayden is not back yet. She looks in the fridge for culinary inspiration. Sends a message to Hayden: *pick up some takeaway from the Thai please we have nothing in the fridge.*

Almost instantly a message pops back: *good timing! I'm just passing it.*

She takes the canvas from the easel and rests it against the sofa. Packs the brushes and paint tubes into the case and places it behind the couch. She takes the note she'd written and crumples it, tossing it in the bin.

When Hayden comes in with the containers of fragrant food, he pours himself a wine and gets the plates, talking to her while he rattles around in the cutlery drawer. He doesn't ask her if she's started on anything yet. She doesn't tell him that she hasn't.

'Genna's resigned,' he says. 'Said she's had enough of work. Lucky her husband's a millionaire.'

'Is he?'

'No, but he's wealthy.'

'Was she good at her job? Will you miss her?'

'Not really. She's replaceable. Saw Brendan in the Thai. Shelley's pregnant.'

'Oh-h. That's great. Pass me the plates.'

'Brendan's over the moon. Shelley too. Morning sickness is a drag for her though he said.'

'Mmm. It would be. Can you grab a large spoon while you're out there.'

Hayden sits. 'Brendan was ordering vegetarian. He wanted prawns, but shellfish can be bad for you when you're pregnant.'

Her mouth is full of rice, she nods, 'Mmm.'

'You should've seen Brendan, he was so excited.'

'Mmmm.'

'You don't sound too excited for them.'

'Of course I am,' she stops eating. 'I'm ecstatic for them. I'm just ... I'm eating, Hayden.'

'So am I,' he says, mouth full. 'We always talk and eat.'

She takes another mound of rice, keeps her mouth busy.

'Are you still worried about the miscarriage, is that it? That it might, you know, be too soon, it might happen again?'

'No, no, I'm fine with all that.'

'Because Brendan reckons we've left enough time, you know, before we try again.'

'And what's Brendan, an obstetrician now is he?'

'No, don't be silly. He just, you know, offered his tuppence worth. That's all. We were just talking about Shelley's being pregnant and one thing led to another and ... I told him about the miscarriage, how it had really knocked you about and ...'

'I'm okay with that. I told you. It's all okay.' She pours another wine, reaches over to refill his glass 'So do you want to go to the Aquarium thing? The symphony?' she says.

'Yeah, we could. Let's see how we feel.' He sips his wine, places the glass carefully on the table. 'You do want to get pregnant don't you?'

She thinks about how sometimes in the middle of the night, when she rolls over in bed, half wakes and wonders where she is, who she is, then feels the warm presence of Hayden by her side and remembers. And she wonders at the hollow alarm that rings through her at first. She always tells herself she is only half awake, that familiar things will settle. And they do. 'Yes,' she says.

'Because, you know I don't want it if you don't.'

She nods, moves the food around on her plate.

'If you aren't ready yet, you know,' he shakes his head, 'just say so. It's only if we both want it. You do know that don't you?'

'Yes.' She shuffles forward in her chair, reaches for the wine glass.

'Well, just so long as you know.'

They eat in silence for a while, amplified clink of forks on plates, clunk of glasses to table. Together they clear the plates from the table. Hayden puts the containers in the bin. 'We should reuse those,' Tess says.

'We've got enough of them already.' He reaches into the bin, pulls out a scrap of paper.

'So, did you get any?'

She looks at him, puzzled. 'Any what?'

He holds up her note, 'Inspiration.'

'Oh, that. No, I didn't.'

He scrunches it up and throws it back in the bin. 'So, is it back to work, or ... just more days trying to woo the elusive muse,' his lips purse together exaggeratedly as he drags the word out into two syllables.

Tess looks at him, then turns away. 'Your turn for the dishes.' He doesn't object.

He runs water and swishes the detergent around with his hand. 'Sorry,' he says. But he doesn't look up and she senses a flippancy, a smugness all the same. Later, he brings her a cup of tea and rests his hand on her shoulder. 'Let's do the Aquarium symphony tomorrow, could be good,' and he sinks into the chair opposite and shakes out his paper.

In bed, his body fits neatly around the bend of her legs, curve of her back. He presses gently against her, she hears him take a breath, his lips opening near her ear as if he's about to speak. Then he breathes out and remains silent. He rests his hand on her arm. Soon she hears his breathing, regular and slow. But her own breath and thoughts feel as if they don't belong. The sheet is wrinkled awkwardly underneath her, her arm hot under his hand. She strokes her wrist with her thumb, over and over, staring into darkness.

They go to the Aquarium, but there are no tickets for the performance. 'We sold out days ago,' the woman says. They buy tickets for general admittance, hoping they'll be able to hear something of the music anyway. But sections are closed off and all they hear is an occasional haunting wail that may or may not be part of the symphony. They watch the jelly fish gliding serenely by in their glass compartment. Tess finds it hard to tear herself away from their treacherous serenity. Imagines the tentacles sliding out towards her, slowly wrapping around her throat and the sudden painful sting that must follow.

Hayden moves away and she turns to watch him go: that compact stride, hands sunk into his pockets. Something so familiar, she'd pick him out in a crowd, yet, something else too, a ripple under the skin of things.

She has a sudden flash of herself at home, baby on her hip, the same blank white canvas on the easel, the baby's mouth a wailing 'O'. She is thankful for the sanctuary of her own mind when she thinks of the miscarriage – not her doing, no-one's fault, just something that happened. But, a godsend all the same. *Godsend*. She'd thought that as it slithered from her and into the toilet bowl, leaving her quivering and clammy. She turns back to the jelly fish, their mesmerising translucence, that slow slide safely behind glass.

She sees Hayden by the tropical fish and walks over to stand beside him. She watches his reflection in the glass. She sees that he is not looking at anything in particular; his gaze is focused in front of him, where seaweed undulates gently. He turns his head, sees her and his eyes widen.

'Oh, there you are.'

'The jelly fish hypnotised me.' She links her arm through his and they walk on slowly, as if they are promenading along the quay. There it is again. That ripple under the surface. Something has made her afraid, as if she is falling. Slowly. The patterns falling apart: Hayden's face, unreadable yet set as if in stone, the dead weight of failure and memory, thoughts like thorns piercing a veil. Her hand slides down his arm to his elbow. She watches two small fish, vibrant colours and synchronised movements. On and on they swim, darting through seaweed and rocks as if they have rehearsed their routine. One turns suddenly, and wheels away with a flick of its tail, and she watches it boldly lose itself amidst the writhing seaweed.

She sees herself by the river again, legs striding, arms swinging, the water murmuring beside her. Hayden turns away, trailing his hand against the glass wall, and she watches him go, her hand falling to her side.

## LOCAL PRIZE

### EARTH ORBIT

by Michelle Wright

My second family home was a space station that orbited the earth. Once every twenty-four hours. It was gold on the outside and black on the inside. My mother was the captain, and the crew was me and my two terrapins, Lester and Livingstone. They lived in a plastic tub with water in the back. Mum called us her 'motley crew.' Our voyage began at the start of summer just after I turned five. We boarded the vessel in the night and I slept through the countdown and take-off.

I know I had a normal earthly home before the space station, because the time before leaving it is there in my memory. It's a moment of passing from shade to light. So bright that it left an after-image in my mind. High up and blinding, probably the sun, and a lemonade icy-pole was dripping down my wrist. My father was there too, lurking in the shade, his arms with the bright light making the hairs look orange and big hands up in front of his face, shielding his eyes from the sun, or maybe from my mother's gaze.

Then just a blank. And a jump to memories of life in the space station. Long days of muted sounds and slow, confined movements. Deep blue through the windows and millions of stars. The low groan of engines firing and clicking as they cooled. I know now it was a Datsun 120Y, my mother's car, with garbage bags of clothes filling up the footwells and blue cellophane stuck over the windows. She pricked hundreds of holes with the pin from her

Woolworths name-tag for the stars and made me a helmet with an ice-cream container and aluminium foil.

My mother steered the space station towards the rising sun, always heading east. Each morning she woke me up at dawn. She'd peel away the cellophane from one of the windows and shut the jet rockets down. She'd swing her stiffened body into the back seat and slide behind me in my pillow nest. And the air in the cabin would be thick with a night of shallow breathing and she'd blow on my sweaty hair and make my spine shiver. We'd wait for the sun to appear over the rim of the blue marble earth and when it hit the window it stung our eyes so much and was so beautiful that it made both of us squeeze our eyes up till we cried.

One morning after breakfast, she announced that we were coming back to earth. We'd touch down in a place whose name glowed with gold and warmth. Sunshine. There were lots of white painted houses and green metal fences as we made our approach. The streets were flat and soaked in light. The buildings were all low. Beige and grey, like they were camouflaged, keeping their heads down. Even the trees that lined the streets were short and squat.

We landed in my grandmother's backyard and were put into quarantine in a room next to the laundry at the back of her house. We came and went and my grandmother hardly even said hello. She lived alone in the rest of the house and left us to ourselves. That room was my third home.

My grandmother's back yard was brown and bare and by the fence was a concrete bird bath. No birds ever flew into the garden, so I used it as a playground for Lester and Livingstone. On the other side of the fence was a white and blue service station with half its scratchy red letters fallen off. When it was closed in the evenings, my mother took me there to the flat empty concrete and taught me how to rollerskate. I spent half my time on the ground dribbling spit on my scraped off knees and watching my mum. She was amazing. She twirled and jumped and looked like she was weightless. When I watched her, I heard music playing in my head.

On Fridays when Mum got home from work, she would take me to Mr Vella's milkbar. She'd have a strawberry milkshake that Mr. Vella made

himself and served in a tall metal tumbler with a paper straw. I'd have fifty cents to choose my own mixed lollies. I'd always buy just mates. I liked the way the chocolate melted quickly, but you could keep the caramel on your tongue for ages till it flattened down to paper thin.

On the weekends that my mum didn't have to work, we'd walk through the concrete drain under the main road with its brick arch at one end and green fringed water running along the middle. We'd follow the trail that ran alongside the creek, the water still and ragged, slinking past the reeds and rocks. I still had a thing for reptiles, but I'd moved past terrapins. I was obsessed with crocodiles. Mum would tell me that the creek flowed all the way to Brazil and that crocodiles the size of buses had been sighted in its depths. We walked along the banks for hours, like explorers in the Amazon, hands curled into binoculars in front of our eyes, straining at submerged logs and shadows far downstream.

One morning when summer was coming round again my father, whose real name was Pietru, arrived to stay with us. His hands were not as big as I remembered, and his voice was soft and low. He talked to me like he talked to adults, with a solemn face, not asking me any questions and using words I didn't understand. But sometimes he was silent and then my mother took me to the playground down the road and we lay down on the prickly grass. She'd tell me to shut one eye and we'd pinch the clouds between our fingers and breathe them in like steam.

On Christmas day, Pietru woke me up in the middle of a dream. It was not quite light outside and my mother wasn't in the room. He put his big hands under my armpits and propped me up against the bed head. He pushed a soccer ball between my sleep-numb arms and kissed me on the forehead. That's all I remember. I must have slid back into sleep and when I woke up for real on Christmas morning, he wasn't in the house. My mum and grandma and I ate lunch on a card table in the backyard. My mum helped my grandmother put a tarp over the clothes hoist and we sat under its blue shade with a wet tea-towel on the slices of ham to keep them from drying out. After lunch we

closed our eyes with our heads tipped back and sucked on frozen watermelon. No one mentioned Pietru, so I left the soccer ball under the bed.

The next day was Boxing Day. I didn't know that everyone called it that. I thought it was the day you packed all your things into boxes, because that Boxing Day my mother and I moved out of my grandmother's house and into a new one. My father didn't come. When I asked my mother why, she said, 'He's gone to Antarctica. To live in a hut and count the polar bears.' She looked down at the linoleum in our new kitchen and kept looking at it for ages. In front of the fridge it was lifting up and a little bit rotted away. The rest of it was grey with blue squares, but in front of the fridge it was brown.

'Not polar bears,' she said. 'Emperor penguins.' She pushed herself up from the floor. 'It's emperor penguins that live in Antarctica.'

That was the last time my mother spoke about my father. I thought then that she didn't want me to be concerned, thinking about him in that dangerous frozen place so far away and on his own.

My sixth birthday was a Friday, and mum took the day off work. We took three different trains to get to Stony Point to catch the ferry over to Cowes. I was so excited to be out at sea that I peed in my shorts and I had to wear a towel like a skirt while mum washed them in the bathroom sink on board and dried them in the sun on the wooden slatted seats. I don't remember all the details of that day. I know there were seagulls when we ate our fish and chips on the grass by the beach in Cowes.

Afterwards we lay in the shallow water with our arms and legs floating in and out with the rippling waves, and just our faces sticking up to breathe. It's the best birthday celebration I've ever had.

A few weeks into my first year of school, Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, though of course I didn't know who he was back then. My mother cut his photo from the front page of the newspaper and stuck it on our fridge.

'Is that my grandfather?' I asked her when I got home from school that day.

She laughed and said, 'I wish,' and then she told me all about the tall dark man with his arm held high. The photo stayed there for years, crowded in on all

sides by my primary school drawings and final warning electric bills. I actually don't think she ever took it down.

\*

It feels like everything important happens in Summer. I remember the day Nelson Mandela died. The fifth of December, 2013. It was a Thursday. I was twenty-seven years old. Almost twenty-eight. Mandela had spent more than my whole life in prison. And what had I done with my twenty-seven years of freedom? I'd dropped out of school half way through year eleven and had done some pretty stupid things. I'd held down a few jobs here and there, but had really hit a wall when I was twenty-four. For the last three years I'd been living between friends' couches and the streets. I hadn't seen my mum in over two years. That day the news of Mandela's death came through, I called her up. I told her how I remembered his photo on the fridge. We were crying on the phone like it was my real grandfather that had died. She didn't ask me any hard questions or expect me to give her any guarantees. She just said to come and live with her and spend some time together. Then before she hung up, almost as an afterthought, she told me she had cancer.

I turned thirty a week ago. Mum died the day after my birthday. Her funeral is today. She was only forty-eight. I'd never thought about how young she was before. She didn't seem to have an age. There are so many things that have come to mind since I woke up this morning. I have to give her eulogy this afternoon and all week I've been thinking about the years with her and not knowing what to say. I'm finally getting my life together and she's not here to see it. I've accumulated a shitload of regrets over the years, but that's my biggest one.

All morning I've been wading through memories to tell the story of who my mother was. And it's that year before I started school that keeps rising to the surface. The year we left my father and crossed the Nullarbor in a clapped

out Datsun space ship. The time we lived in my grandmother's house and mum worked two shitty jobs and still had time to trek the Amazon. The year my father came back for Christmas, then disappeared forever. The year Nelson Mandela walked free. When I calculated her age, I realised that year when I was five, she was only twenty-three.

Yesterday I took the train out to Sunshine and went down to Mr Vella's milkbar. There's Vietnamese people now behind the counter, but they still have the same lollies more or less. I asked for a dollar's worth of mates and walked to the playground at the end of our old street. I lay down on the grass and put one in my mouth. The chocolate melted quickly and then the caramel was so sickly sweet, it made the back of my throat itch and I coughed till I was crying. I lay there for a while thinking about my mother. Not getting sentimental. Just thinking about how strong she must have been, and how I didn't even realise. I just took it for granted that she would make things happen. That's the way it had to be. It's thanks to her I know to give myself the time I'll need to work things out. I know earth orbits can't be rushed. I know about the time it takes to circle through the shade and back into the light. How the trick is to keep steering towards where the sun comes up over the horizon, like you're driving towards the edge of the earth. And knowing that you can't fall off.

# THE NILLUMBIK EKPHRASIS POETRY AWARD 2016

Ekphrasis (pronounced Ek-fra-sis) – the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.

The Nillumbik Ekphrasis Poetry Award invites Australian poets to respond with 12-line poems to artworks from the Nillumbik Visual Art Collection or exhibition program. In 2016 six artworks were selected from the Shire of Nillumbik exhibition *Laughing Waters Road: Art, Landscape and Memory in Eltham*.

## JUDGE’S REPORT

by Helen Lucas

2016 Judging Panel: Helen Lucas, Steve Smart, Karen Throssell

An ekphrastic response to an artwork is not merely a description, nor an idea inspired by the work that does not clearly reference it. It is not an opportunity to adapt an existing poem by adding a line or two about the sculpture or painting.

As judges, we, individually experience and respond to the artworks, make our own connections and associations, so before the judging process has begun, the process is subjective. We want to be ‘wowed’ by a poem and this is why it is challenging for the poet – to successfully allude to the artwork, demonstrate a deeply individual response, and use poetic technique imaginatively and appropriately.

The poems were considered with the following criteria:

- **a clear relationship to the artwork**
- **poetic technique** – the careful selection of words for their sound, meaning and association. Poetry allows for great freedom with words – an invitation to use every aspect of the writer’s tools – each word, the lines, and the spaces in between.
- **how the poems sounded when read aloud.** When words count as crucially as they do in poetry, the sound is what the poet can draw on to add depth to their poem. The arrangement of the words and lines can affect the way it is read. The sound of it read aloud factors strongly in our judging. The choice for the final winners came down to this.
- **the use of metaphor** – the poet needs to demonstrate a response to a particular artwork, however it also provides the temptation to be too literal and ignore the possibilities of the metaphor. What comparisons can be made to another thing, idea, or emotion?
- **a sustaining strength or quality** – a certainty in the work, a confidence in an idea and the expression of it and the choice of words chosen to do this successfully.
- **originality** – what a breath of fresh air some poems were to read, the unexpected or unusual use of a word, a left of field idea. This is particularly relevant when there are many entries for the same poem.

The judging panel love the opportunity to read and respond to the entered poems. As poets we also consider how we would respond to the artworks, and enjoy discovering how others approach the task. We commend all the poets who rose to the challenge of this Ekphrasis competition as it allows us to share and explore poetry together.

## OPEN PRIZE

### *Flower of a distant season* by Miguel Jacq

The winning poem reflected the layering of the glass in the installation, successfully expressing both its density and delicacy. We loved the way the poet wrapped a story around this artwork, addressing it directly, creating a relationship with it, whilst never becoming overly anthropomorphic. Its unusual structure and line pattern, six by two lines, and the elegant use of enjambment carries the reader onto the next miniature verse, in a way reinforcing the individuality and delicacy of the panes of glass. A beautifully considered and crafted poem, worthy of the first prize.

## LOCAL PRIZE

### *Two hands touching: the gift* by Clemence Overall

This evocative and understated poem personalises the deeper political question of history and reconciliation, without referring to it directly. The poet references the artwork, the process of making, whilst delicately creating a relationship between black and white. It stood out from the other poems as it demonstrated a certainty and clarity of intent, avoided clichés, and treated the issue of reconciliation with dignity. We loved the last line especially: ‘shrouding the egg’s slow curve’.

## YOUTH PRIZE

### *Bones Hidden* by Maya Rizkyvianti

The winning poem demonstrated a high degree of sophistication and speaks to our need to make sense of death and to express it in some way – in this case, to reappropriate a skeleton into an artwork. The poet also won us with images likening the arrangement of bones to ‘rows of dead cavaliers’ and ‘a disembowelled chandelier’. The closing line refers to and explores further the opening line, giving the poem a lovely resolution.

## OPEN HIGHLY COMMENDED

### *This mute and tidy skull and cross bones* by David Kelly

This poem was very close to winning. Its reference to the skull and crossbones had us reviewing the image, and gave us a new perspective. We loved it for its vivid imagery and clever combination of words, such as ‘pretty opalescent leftovers’ and ‘russet Houdini’. Original and evocative.

## OPEN COMMENDED

### *Stone* by Robyn Hyde

A clear sustained structure and intent, speaking to our human need to create and recreate.

### *Meta* by Damen O’Brien

This poem demonstrated a strong evocation of the artwork within an artwork.

### *Bad Water* by Alyce Caswell

An original response to this painting. Seemed to get better on each reading.

### *Wurundjeri Treasure* by Sharyn Jones

This understated but powerful poem managed to combine the personal and political within a context of artistic expression. The poem’s resolution was satisfying.

## YOUTH HIGHLY COMMENDED

### *I found you in the garden* by Phu Nguyen

We commend this poem for its original and intimate response, with the poet likening themselves to the artwork. There is a clear consideration of the substance and nature of the panes of glass and its applicability to the person: fragility, beauty and vulnerability.

## OPEN PRIZE

### FLOWER OF A DISTANT SEASON

by Miguel Jacq

did you reflect on the possibility  
that your glass petals could still

bloom, gift organic beauty to grime,  
stack your chances on the mosses

that conspire to dress you?  
these layers were sand once, no

use denying it: your hue still  
hints ocean, but is opaque about

soft clarity of youth - fluids that  
moved you before winter overlapped,

etched a memory on stiffening skin  
some flower of distant season.

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Hannah BERTRAM  
*I found you in the garden.  
Someone left you there (detail) 2008*  
found glass, moss, variable dimensions  
Photography: Malcolm Cross  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Licensed by VisCopy 2016

## LOCAL PRIZE

### TWO HANDS TOUCHING: THE GIFT

by Clemence Overall

For hours he carved, squatting by the fire  
Reflecting on the man with transparent eyes

He carved a gift, a quiet invitation  
Infused with whispered stories of ancestral beings  
Who emerged from the land  
Dreaming new life

In the morning, he sang to the emu whose egg he had stolen  
And to the kangaroo whose shadow he lay frozen  
Across the egg's ghostly grey skin

At twilight he smiled back at the man with see-through eyes  
Their two hands touching; Black and white  
Shrouding the egg's slow curve.

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Wurundjeri  
*Emu Egg (Kalti Paarti) (detail) 1860s*  
Courtesy of Tim Erikson

## YOUTH PRIZE

### BONES HIDDEN

by Maya Rizkyvianti

So is the human spirit  
to place the femurs and mandibles and metatarsals of stinking road kill  
(stomach full of rabbit, mind bogged with their good flesh; eyes like  
two god-given blackberry nodes, now clouded over)  
into an order which blesses the eyes with unhinged symmetry  
like rows of dead cavaliers or a disemboweled chandelier.  
We pull things apart like crows crack walnuts  
and find beauty in the way the shells have assembled on the ground.  
We let remains become art and art become alive because  
we are terrified of bones hidden, the finality of death smeared over asphalt.  
In sterile rooms that celebrate the morbid and the abstract  
we ponder and say "Maybe death is not so terrible, as Death would have us think."

## OPEN HIGHLY COMMENDED

### THIS MUTE AND TIDY SKULL AND CROSS BONES

by David Kelly

this mute and tidy skull and cross bones  
from which the spirit and growl has fled  
this slab-board symmetry  
of pretty opalescent leftovers  
insults my goddish complexity  
my blood pump and air pump  
and the fang clamp of sudden death  
  
and Christ how fast I was  
evasion was my second art  
the russet Houdini of drygrass farms

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Jessie IMAM  
*Untitled #4 (fox bones – pattern)* 2012  
digital photograph printed on  
hahnemuhle photo rag paper  
86cm x 83cm framed, 50cm x 50cm image  
Visual Art Collection: Nillumbik Shire Council

THE  
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Visual Art Collection: Nillumbik Shire Council

## OPEN COMMENDED

### STONE

by Robyn Hyde

You were bound to be shifted  
weathered and washed  
by drought and storm.  
Knocked and rolled  
by animal fleeing and foraging.  
Raised and realigned  
by human need for food.  
Stacked and capped  
by human want to define space.  
Remodelled and reimaged  
by human urge to create.  
You were bound to be shifted

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Joanne MOTT  
*Laughing Waters Landscapes*  
(site specific installation) (detail) 2016  
boulders, river rocks and paint  
50cm x 1000cm x 700cm (variable)  
Location: Back lawn, Montsalvat  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Licensed by VisCopy 2016

## OPEN COMMENDED

### META

by Damen O'Brien

There, where the trees clear, an abandoned easel.  
Not even a ripple in the river's wry turning.  
Still slopes and brown leaves, a suspended forest.

The picture, the painting. The picture, the painting:  
the recursive echoes of easel and image.

Standing in front of this hushed installation,  
in whose postcard will the watcher be watched?  
In whose poem is the easel still standing?

At the furthest bounds of the edge of vision,  
the artist vanishes in a cold gasp of water.

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



John R. NEESON  
*Riverbend Project* (detail) 2015  
digital photograph, wood (easel),  
oil on board  
dimensions variable  
Visual Art Collection: Nillumbik Shire Council

## OPEN COMMENDED

### BAD WATER

by Alyce Caswell

I studied gongfu cha  
and dare not use bad water  
but now it rises to my knees

the tea was good once  
when the water fed the trees  
never bitter, never weak

the trees are gone now  
they left me so few leaves  
and so little water

I'll add to it my salty tears  
and let it steep a few more years

it might be better then

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Michael PECK  
*Ghost of Little River* (detail) 2013  
oil on linen  
260cm x 150cm  
Courtesy of Metro Gallery and the Artist

## OPEN COMMENDED

### WURUNDJERI TREASURE

by Sharyn Jones

Wurundjeri artist,  
in dreams I see you work with reverent hands.  
Carve your birds and leaves with ancient skill.  
Unlock the magic colours held within.  
Bringing to life the secret stories of your land.  
Your children long since stolen,  
your language silenced.  
We gaze upon your art with wondrous eyes.  
Your name is not forgotten,  
it simply hides—too precious for this world.

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Wurundjeri  
*Emu Egg (Kalti Paarti)* (detail) 1860s  
Courtesy of Tim Erikson

## YOUTH COMMENDED

### I FOUND YOU IN THE GARDEN

by Phu Nguyen

I found you in the garden – a great glassy pain  
You were pale, and it looked clear  
That you and I both are dirty at our core  
We've seen long days, together in the sun

Like a skyline you stood against the wall  
Municipal mirrors reflecting monotone mouths  
A shouting gallery of scarred glass, hidden behind unpolished gloom

You seemed fragile, and it seems I am too  
When I found you in the garden  
A touch from shattering  
And a whisper from tears  
You look hurt and thin, I am too

THE  
NILLUMBIK  
ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ  
POETRY AWARD 2016



Hannah BERTRAM  
*I found you in the garden.  
Someone left you there* (detail) 2008  
found glass, moss, variable dimensions  
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Courtesy of the Artist  
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POETRY AWARD 2016



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Wurundjeri  
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 POETRY AWARD 2016

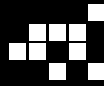
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ALAN MARSHALL  
SHORT STORY  
**AWARD** 2016

THE  
**NILLUMBIK**  
**ΕΚΦΡΑΣΙΣ**  
POETRY AWARD 2016



**N I L L U M B I K**  
THE GREEN WEDGE SHIRE

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