

**THE ADA CAMBRIDGE AND BURBIDGE PROZES
JUDGES' REPORTS**

2023

THE ADA CAMBRIDGE BIOGRAPHICAL PROSE PRIZE 2023

ELISABETH GROVE and HELEN JARVIS

OVERALL, THE QUALITY OF THIS YEAR'S ENTRIES, 56 IN TOTAL, WAS HIGHER THAN EVER before, which made our task of selecting the top ten even harder. Writers from across Victoria chose an impressive range of topics and themes, some contemporary, others historical, some in local settings, others exotic—all from different perspectives, 'based on the true-life experience of the writer or another person'.

Combining fact and fiction, biographical prose is a curiously hybrid genre, allowing for a great variety of approaches. Perhaps inevitably, Covid isolation at home was in the background of many of the submitted stories this year. Yet it was also interesting to see a surge in accounts of life and travel overseas. This is reflected in our shortlist, with several stories that deal with cultural difference in moving and nuanced ways. In deciding on the shortlist, we looked for stories that were effective as biography and told a compelling tale, that were original and emotionally persuasive. While some were personal memoirs, the strongest couched their stories within a convincing narrative that was carefully structured and able to maintain impetus from beginning to end.

So many individual voices, so many styles! We were privileged to encounter stories that conveyed the variety and diversity of multicultural Australia with skill and sensitivity. Our heartfelt thanks to all who entered the competition.

FIRST PRIZE

'Conversations with a Seagull' by **Anne Hotta** A moving, multi-layered story of an Australian journalist visiting the site of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami that is both complex and ambitious in scope. The narrator's inner struggle with the moral and cultural challenges of reporting on the tragedy to a non-Japanese audience includes the highly original perspective of dialogue with a one-legged seagull. The local and religious dimensions of the disaster and its implications for her role as journalist and outsider are subtly intertwined with the dissolution of her relationship with her Japanese lover.

RUNNER UP

'Crossing Over' by **Diana Renner** An emigration story tracing a family's escape from Romania in the 1980s, and its aftermath. Told in poetic and rhythmic prose, this is a powerfully rendered youthful experience of the narrator crossing the border from the known world (a prison) to the ambiguous 'freedom' of Austria, where refugees are un-personned. Episodes are carefully shaped and contextualised, with the dream of the angel evoking the lost world of her Romanian past.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

'A Row of Little Boots' by **Catherine Bell** This account of a young teacher's visit to a Catholic orphanage in 1974 is sparsely told but evocative. Bell creates a vital portrait of two young boys who have invited their teacher to dinner. Using a simple episodic structure, the narrative depicts the pathos and hilarity of the children's situation tenderly but without mawkishness.

‘Lik Lik Sinabada’ by Lorraine Proctor Recollecting a year spent in Papua New Guinea in 1962, when the narrator was twelve years old, the child’s complex range of thoughts and feelings are strongly realised—her sense of alienness, fascination with the adult world of sexuality and power, and growing awareness of racial inequality. The writing is deft, the narrative well-shaped, and reflections and episodes nicely balanced.

COMMENDED

‘George Verdon, Marvellous Melbourne’s Money Man’ by Peter Newbury A history piece with special relevance to Williamstown, this story is eloquent and authoritative, providing an original perspective on ‘Marvellous’ Melbourne’s history and early prosperity and the present obscurity of George Verdon, one of its founders.

‘Primer’ by Warwick Sprawson Recounts the experience of an outsider flying in to Northern Territory indigenous communities as an electoral officer. Physical details, individuals, and landscape are sharply observed. There is comedy in the dialogue, and in the incongruously bureaucratic electoral process in this context.

SHORTLISTED

‘Buttons’ by Tricia Bowen A memoir that details a child’s experience of her father’s post-war treatment for depression and the impact of electro-convulsive therapy. The child’s observations of his decline are painful and understated, crystallised by a judicious use of metaphor.

‘Drinking Tea’ by Linda Carr A memoir of the early months of an Australian woman’s motherhood in a Japanese village, this is subtle and delicately sketched. The narrator’s awkward experience of otherness, and her later awareness of how she has been changed by living in another culture, are an engaging reflection on cultural difference.

‘The Mothers’ by Anastasia FitzGerald A very funny account of Australian snobbery decades ago, from the point of view of a woman whose mother was a paragon of class consciousness and ‘breeding’ Dialogue is sharp and witty, the central conflict evoking the major social shifts wrought by post-war migration.

‘Stripped Down’ by Jemma van Loenen A deeply felt but unsentimental account of attempts to foster a child, with a beautifully managed ending. The story conveys the pain of infertility and the frustrations of bureaucratic incompetence. A compelling narrative of failure, but also of acceptance rather than complaint or self-pity.

THE ADA CAMBRIDGE POETRY PRIZE 2023

GAYELENE CARBIS and ANDY JACKSON

THE PURPOSE OF WRITING AND READING POETRY IS NOT ABOUT WINNING, OR EVEN ENTERING, COMPETITIONS. Poetry is an expansive container for human emotion, ideas, politics and experience. With that in mind, this year's Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize demonstrated again the continued relevance, diversity, and vigour of poetry in this land.

Poems entered for the ACPD are judged according to 'creativity, expressiveness and originality', and ought to be 'carefully proofread'. To us judges, those words meant many things. We were looking for poems with emotional or affective resonance that lasted beyond the time of reading. We wanted poems to follow us around, and with each re-reading, to maintain or even deepen their impact. This might be because of the beauty or force of their language or imagery. It might be their unobtrusively skilful use of formal techniques—lineation, enjambment, the sound and patterning of words. It might be their original, convincing voice. Some poems that had something important to say were let down by a simplistic or overly familiar approach. Other poems, otherwise strong, included distracting typos or inconsistencies.

To judge a poetry prize is always a tremendous pleasure, but it is also bittersweet and painstaking, having to separate those poems that are heartfelt and thoughtful from those whose craft and humanity have elevated it to something enduring. There were many poems on the longlist, making the choice of a final ten very difficult indeed. Having two judges helped to leaven and expand our individual subjectivity, so that when the final decision emerged, we were confident that we had considered the poems comprehensively.

In the end, the following poems stood out for the way their form brought their content to vivid life. Congratulations to the writers of these poems, and to all who entered the competition. We hope that you continue to write, read, and talk about poetry.

FIRST PRIZE

'Coastal Collapse' by **Ross Gillett** There is a subtlety and restraint to this poem that is immediately apparent. Its thoughtful observation of the shifting sands of coastal dunes allows for an immensely vivid sense of place, but the sands here are also haunting emblems of loss and love, while the ocean speaks of yearning and the irreversibility of time. 'Coastal Collapse' is written in unpunctuated sentences that flow intimately through and across tercets, with a voice that is measured, almost laconic, yet suffused with emotional implication. Words repeat effortlessly, reminding us that the extended metaphor of the poem—of grief and change—is not only personal and relational, but environmental. A highly accomplished, breathtaking poem.

RUNNER-UP

'Bubbles' by **Sam Morley** This poem opens at the precipitous bank of a 'detritus creek', moving through a series of compressed and striking images of human incursions on place and on those who share the land and water with us. From the creek's 'brown tomb of that bottomless confluence' to the 'light bloating light in a hotbed of urban dregs', the poem's metaphors are compelling in their illuminations and original in their lyricism. The arrangement of lines manages to be both disciplined and organic. But it is the ending that resonates most powerfully here, interrogating the reader with a kind of merciless compassion. A beautiful, haunting poem.

HIGHLY COMMENDED **‘One Day’** by Yvonne Adami

‘One Day’ is a very fine example of the writer’s maxim ‘Less is more’. In two stanzas, and very short lines, this direct and spare poem conveys a very great deal. Not a word is wasted. A beautiful poem, carefully crafted yet seemingly effortless, it has a freshness and immediacy that is instantly appealing. But it is the surety of voice that makes this poem impressive. The poet has felt no need to embellish or elaborate, or try to ‘show off’. The lack of punctuation ushers us into the memories of place and family, to walk with the speaker of the poem ‘to the edge of the town / at the edge of the world’, to see ‘a crescent moon / a plover crying’. Outstanding for its economical imagery, this poem makes an utterly convincing claim for spareness and implication, lingering long in the mind after reading.

‘In Care’ by **Rosemary Blake** It is rare to find a poem about visiting an ageing parent in care that is so restrained, and yet so full. The opening couplets of ‘In Care’ allow ample space, on the page and in the heart, for the ‘scattered sunlight’ and the ‘small leaves / caught amongst the reeds’ to feel immediately significant. The poignancy of the poem emerges from what is implied; there is no overstatement or grappling for closure. Instead, even as their mother initially fails to recognise the speaker, the impact of the events is allowed to speak for itself. The poem’s final image, of ‘small bud-swings’ that ‘mark the branches / of the ornamental elms’, leans into equanimity with grace and presence. A refreshingly uncluttered, yet sophisticated poem.

‘Driving to the snow: young, six or seven’ by **Anne M Carson** From the engaging, storytelling tone of the title, we are immediately in the territory of childhood memory of a family car-trip to the snow, with all the unspoken tensions of an unhappy family simmering beneath the surface. This poem is a recounting of a child’s startling and powerful discovery, building beautifully to its epiphany in an affirmation of selfhood and redemption, with language that is both an incantation and a revelation. This is a fine example of field poetry at its most effective, where form meets content to reveal meaning—the spaces making us pause, the flow of phrases compelling us to read on, an accumulative effect to its final revelation. The last line, two simple devastating words, is understated and extraordinary.

‘Coil’ by **Emilie Collyer** The opening three short sentences of ‘Coil’ are rich with ambiguous portent, a remembered encounter that is rendered with immediacy and significance. Fragmented, staccato phrases gradually build a visceral and philosophical account of an encounter with a snake, while also seeding striking, condensed insights and provocations. In a confident prose-poem form, which embodies the breathlessness of the moment, snippets of spoken and thought dialogue brush up against heightened visual imagery. Here, ‘dumb humans’, ‘here to grieve a family death’, ‘still learning how to walk on this land’, are struck still within their vulnerability and awe. The ending of the poem, immersed in mortality, skin and breath, is transporting, and the speaker’s acute alertness has become our

‘Two men who loved me’ by **Shoshanna Rockman** This poem offers us a strong, authentic, and highly original voice; a storyteller speaking of their life experiences in words well-chosen and potent—from the Dead Sea to teeming city streets and epochs. A compelling sense of rhythm and sound, vivid imagery, and a distinctive voice—at times defiant, troubled, Biblical in its cadences and imagery. Also of note is this poem’s use of dashes, alliteration, and metaphor to powerful effect—flourishes that are dramatic, yet not self-dramatising. The careful attention to rhythm and sound makes the poem a very great pleasure to read. Beautifully allowing for paradox in its exploration of belonging and alienation, ‘Two men who loved me’ has an epic, larger-than-life feel to its deeply personal recounting, building powerfully towards its memorable, perfect last line. This poem offers new riches upon each re-reading.

COMMENDED

‘I wonder if anyone has ever known a hotel as well as I know this one’ by **Nicole Butcher** This poem draws the reader, with humour and keen observation, into a world that is both familiar and unreal,

even slightly surreal. Here, the hotel room is seen anew—the unsaid, palpable, and pulsing in every lovingly described detail.

‘Haven’ by Emilie Collyer Singular in its depiction of those on the fringes of Melbourne suburbia, this poem is a searing, genuine portrait of place, but also tender and acute. Using an unforced and understated vernacular, in panoramic lines of expansive attention, ‘Haven’ is moving, filled with heart and urgency.

‘Scintinmammography’ by Alicia Sometimes The metaphors in this poem are exhilarating in their originality and music. The composure of the voice is a stirring contrast to the grave predicament of breast cancer which the speaker depicts. Here, under the surgeon’s gaze, and through the poise of the poet, the acute vulnerability of the human body becomes the wonder of the cosmos.

THE YOUNG ADAS SHORT STORY PRIZE 2023

MARGARET CAMPBELL and CHRIS RINGROSE

THE 92 ENTRIES FOR THIS NINTH YEAR OF THE YOUNG ADAS COMPETITION came from a record-breaking 20 different schools and colleges, and to read them all was to be taken on a breath-taking tour of the imaginations of students aged 14–18 living or studying in the Western suburbs. Every possible genre and prose form was deployed, from the rhapsodic to the grittily realistic, and writers often used their 1,000 words to grapple with compelling issues of identity and social justice. At times the settings were close to home; at other times writers took us on a search for family histories, or invented alternative worlds where their thematic concerns played out dramatically. They were certainly not afraid to explore challenging scenarios and ethical dilemmas. Some entries to the competition tended to be static and lacking in dynamism and conflict, while others relied too much on elaborate description and accumulations of adjectives. Experiments in prose style could be adventurous and rewarding, or at other times overwrought and adjective-heavy. The boundaries between ‘story’ and ‘essay’ were tested—often with original results. But the judges can honestly say they were never bored. Instead, they found themselves full of imagination for the young writers’ command of language and willingness to take risks with their narratives.

Ten stories were short-listed by the judges; this was by no means an easy process. As can be seen from the comments below, they each offered a distinctive view of the world and this particular writing task. Congratulations to those short-listed, and a big thank you to all the young writers who took the time to write and submit work to this year’s Young Adas.

FIRST PRIZE

‘My Grandmother’s Soldier’ by Syazwana Saifudin We found this to be a well-crafted and satisfying story with a neat, effective structure. Teenager Adrien’s visit to the basement of the house turns up significant documents relating to The Great War and its aftermath. One of the story’s strengths lies in the way the provenance and source of these papers is gradually revealed, so that their deeper context becomes apparent to the reader. In the process, the familiar phrase “Lest we forget . . .” takes on a renewed significance.

RUNNER-UP

‘Wings of Hope’ by Jennifer Williams This original piece seeks to convey the hatching and development of an insect up the point where it is ready to fly. The intensity of this process is well conveyed, and the introduction of the girl who cares for and assists in it adds a different dimension. A shift of perspective near the end allows the sequence to be seen as an allegory for youthful development and the quest for fulfilment.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

‘Young Love’ by Sai Hansika Chenna This account of the coming-together of two young lovers is charming and built around authentic details of place. The use of Hari the calf as a focus for the growing affection shared by the pair is deftly handled. It also allows for moments of anxiety, tension, and family conflict—all happily resolved at the conclusion.

‘The Precipice’ by Taylor Navarro A dramatic story of marital abuse and neglect, set in a hospital where the life of one of the two people involved is threatened. The use of first-person, present tense narration allows the tension and confusion of the situation to merge dramatically and convincingly, as the

narrator contemplates the life-support system and the relationship itself. We admired the way the writer was able to suggest the paradoxes present in such a relationship: 'I hate myself the way I love him'.

COMMENDED

'Akhila' by **Harguan Kaur** Harguan has written a compassionate, vivid account of a teenager's struggles with identity, self-image, and personal relationships. Akhila's confusion and sense of betrayal are set out believably in a mixture of recollections and stream of consciousness. The narrative takes some risks with the brief exchange at the end, but ends by suggesting a possible way forward.

'Curse or Blessing?' by **Siya Gauri Singh**. This story manages to portray an alternative world in a few well-constructed paragraphs, and to take the reader on the journey of self-discovery on the part of a preternaturally youthful operative of the shadowy 'Agency'. His growing disillusionment with his role climaxes in a narrative shift into magical realism and a final image that offers hope of renewal.

SHORTLISTED

'The Only Man' by **Yahia Zoubiri** This intense story builds relentlessly towards the demise of the protagonist John. Despite his conviction that he can start his unsatisfactory life 'anew', events conspire to deny him that opportunity. He himself comes to believe that all avenues are closed to him, and the final repetition of his need to 'start anew' takes on a desperate aspect.

'Lightshow' by **Melany Nguyen** In 422 words, Melany takes us through the sequences of a distressing, dazzling photosensitive epilepsy episode. Readers are exposed to an experience that might be unexpected territory for most of them, and the writer's skill in finding new words and phrases for its different stages is something of a tour de force.

'Nirin River' by **Aleena Kayani** This is a dramatic tale which combines tumultuous weather, estrangement, catastrophe and redemption in a fast-paced narrative. The narrator, living apart from their father on the same country property as the result of some unexplained rift, finds themselves working alongside him in a storm to save the family dog from the river. The ending is bitter-sweet.

Somewhere Only We Know by **Talisha Galea** Loss, grief and yearning characterize Talisha's haunting story of an encounter with the spirit of a deceased friend. The garden setting is cleverly used to convey childish innocence and affection, and the ending balances realistic acceptance of mortality with a degree of consolation.

THE JENNIFER BURBIDGE SHORT STORY AWARD 2023

CHARNIE BRAZ and HELEN CERNE

THANK YOU FOR GIVING US THE OPPORTUNITY TO ONCE AGAIN JUDGE THE JENNIFER BURBIDGE SHORT STORY AWARD, known as the Burbidge Prize, in honour of our dear friend and mentor, Dr Mary Burbidge and her daughter, Jennifer.

It has been our great pleasure to read these fictional and non-fictional stories exploring the theme of disability. It is wonderful to see the prize entries grow in number and in quality in the few short years since it was brought out of hiatus and incorporated into the Williamstown Literary Festival stable of writing prizes. Mary would be so pleased and we are grateful that the prize will continue her great legacy.

Of the 45 entries this year, the vast majority of writers did an excellent job of meeting the entry guidelines and, overall, the stories were engaging, revealing, and demonstrated a degree of mastery in character construction and narrative.

We were particularly appreciative of the recurring themes of hope and special abilities; stories of grit, compassion, and optimism. At the same time, the entries showed great insight and used perspective and point of view so deftly as to bring the reader into the story through close observation and vivid language. Many were human stories of trial and triumph told with humour and deep love.

By no means was it easy to arrive at a shortlist and a winner, which made for a lively and robust judging process. Before we comment on the final six stories, special mention must go to ‘The Tiny Man’ by Mia Barbaro, ‘Cattle Season’ by Amelia Hartin, ‘Reborn’ by Suchita Smith, and ‘Red Sand, Black Hands’ by Thomas Stark. These shortlisted stories all featured strongly in our discussions and remain memorable for their high standards of writing and compelling plots. To these writers, we say a particular thank you for your efforts and for extending to us the privilege of reading your insightful stories.

FIRST PRIZE

‘The Neighbour’ by Andrea Pavleka This poignant, striking story is a compelling read with its consistent first-person perspective and clever, understated plot. It establishes the narrative through insightful use of introspection and spare, disclosing dialogue with a strong voice for Gracie, to build a picture of capability rather than limitation for the young protagonist. The well-delineated, ingenuous voice delivers a gradual reveal to the reader and is a strong example of the unreliable narrator.

RUNNER-UP

‘He Brings Raspberries’ by Sue Lindsay This well-structured narrative subtly captures a vulnerable protagonist. The astute use of repetition serves to establish the protagonist’s perspective, both chronologically and among a continuum of events, which is an effective vehicle to take the plot forward. It shines a light on the issue of financial abuse in a respectful and dignified manner and uses a deft touch to establish the first-person point of view. It is a sophisticated and pertinent story in a Raymond Carver-esque style where less is more.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

‘The Audacity of Hope’ by Mary Howley This well-written narrative in the first person uses present tense effectively to explore the social, emotional and psychological impact on a mother coping with the early months of new parenthood with a baby with genetic differences. It is an engaging story, as much about the complexities of relationships, hope, and disappointment as it is about mothering a baby with disabilities. The central character weathers insensitivity and judgement from those around her, as well as her own anxieties, yet the tale ends on an uplifting note with the baby’s first smile.

COMMENDED

‘Extravagant Bad Boy’ by Paul Taylor This entry offers a fresh take on disability in an arresting, dialogue-driven story that explores the ups and downs of an adolescent sibling relationship marred by grief and guilt but buoyed by love between two brothers. It explores the concept of disability not as a limitation but as a special ability. The exchanges between Badboy and Karl are insightful and amusing and provide an effective illustration of how Karl’s difference is a gift. The pertinent word choices work well in contrasting the brothers’ close connection and their individuality.

‘Casting Shadows’ by Catherine Egan This is a heartfelt story that gives the impression of having been cathartic for the author to write. It reads as a diary entry and captures the challenges and concerns of a mother for her son, who lives with chronic illness. It is a touching example of this literary form—one that is entirely in the spirit of the Burbidge Prize. Mary herself relied heavily on her diary to reflect and reason throughout Jenny’s life and after her passing. This entry spoke to us not just for its excellent writing and insight, but for being a fine example of why Mary established the Burbidge Prize.

SHORTLISTED

‘The Tiny Man’ by Mia Barbaro This sensitive story explores well the emotional, social, and psychological impact of a brain injury on a young lawyer at work.

‘Cattle Season’ by Amelia Hartin is a compelling and close observation of character and disability as an element of a person rather than a defining feature. The language was simple and beautiful and the relationships between the characters well-constructed and complex

‘Reborn’ by Suchita Smith With an arresting opening, this story shows rather than tells how difficult it is to learn scuba diving when you have a physical disability. An optimistic self-aware ending reveals it is also fine to accept what you can and can’t do.

‘Red Sand, Black Hands’ by Thomas Stark We found this to be an excellent portrayal of socio-economic disadvantage, geographical isolation, toxic masculinity, family alienation, and disability. The central character has a disability and he was the only member of the group with the advantage of a moral compass.