

2025 Formal Verse Contest Shortlist

Known, Not Yet Known (Maura Harrison)

Most of the time my father only speaks
In song, a sanctus with a surfer's sigh,
With rhyme of reef and ocean alibi.
His notes are morning gulls: sun-scouting shrieks,
Carriers of tunes, refrains that fish the tides.

My mother only sings on solemn days
 With red and dusty dirt, in outback ways
 That wonder-wake her austral dreams, her guides,
Cognita, nondum cognita, such blessed
 Incarnate rhapsodies.

Their songlines sketch
 A map upon my heart, the sounds that grow
 Me, know me, show me incantation's best.
 It's time for me to sing, and so, I fetch
 The past and wander forth with fairest go.

Pergola Dreaming on Australia Day (Ivan Head)

One Australia Day in January , half-forgetful of the date,
And shunning social media debate,
And marches about this and that,
I spent the day up the pergola,
Wondering if pergola rhymed with cola or was more galah,
And whether to crank up Pergolese while I nailed.

In childhood when holidays had ended,
I'd wait at the Cookernup siding for the Bunb'ry Belle,
(A diesel that ran pretty well).
I watched the horizon point where rails converge,
Waiting for something to emerge from nothing as the train appeared.
The Australind, another train, had also been a neo-log .
When we were embedded in the Diocese of Calcutta.

Gravel roads led to dairy farms, where amongst leeches,
We searched gravel in irrigation ditches, craving fools-gold.
Railway steam sat in winter, weighed by rainfall or cold winds,
Folded back along the carriages, blanketing the freight-trains.
We counted them. We counted then.
In summer, Sweet Waters and Black Prince bunched on trellises.

The wind-up gramophone in the farmhouse,
Solitary in an empty room, the gramophone's
Heavy needle-head pressed the Bakelite's endless groove.
We danced to the vibe of the thing as old operetta filled the room.
Waltzing Matilda. Advance Australia Fair,
God Save our Gracious Queen, Didgeridoo.
The city of cliché sat in a wide brown land down under.
We stood for the Queen, manifest as a short before the movie screened.

Silica seeped from inland seas, opal lights up brightly,
Or tourmalines: seeps into seams, Coober Pedy, Proserpine.
Some compressed to boulder-opal, split to find rainbows,
Painted-lady, or black opal more precious than gold.
Mintabie and Lightning Ridge, crystalline.
Evening clouds are opalescent, picked or pics,
Sky-hooked transcendently with flashes of red and pink -
Picking up hill-line greens, with the sky itself crystalline,
and night as black opal. Stars make the galaxy opal strewn.

Australia is more three-layered cake than pavlova.
The immemorial first in altjirringa,

The British overlay - before the Wars,
English folk-dancing cummerbunded.
Ah, The Grand Old Duke of York!
Then, from all the lands on earth they come.
Which makes then takes the cake.
By the waters of Uluru I sat and read Locke's Letter on Toleration.
He said that the monarch could be given the royal boot.
He was published by Black Swan Press at Amen Corner, almost WA.

Wagyu sausages adorn the meat-lovers' Pavlova;
set on fifty-fifty raspberry coulis and tomato sauce -
Two-bob each way, getting sweet and savoury in one.
Pride of place in the museum of culture.
I shall consult Lord and Lady Lamington.
Did Phar Lap win? Did Bradman score a ton?
Is the surf at Bondi, up?

Take Canberra to Kati Thanda by jinker.
Pipe seawater downhill to it from the Bight.
A mag-lev shall leave for Perth on the hour and returns the same day.
Morning Tea in London Court and St George's Terrace and dinner back at Uluru.
I see it emerging out of nothing
Shimmering in its uranium mirage.

JOHN HALLETT'S COVE (Konstantin Kanelleas)

This bay, the edge of history is carved directly into it
As ripples left by ancient currents form
Striations in its elemental bedrock, marking time –
The unrecorded aeons told by paganistic painted bark,
And red-draped days of violently-exploratory barques.

I.

The shelter-cave remains, once proven, now forgotten.
A human flame flicked into native scrub ignites
A virgin oneirism feeding on the warmth while clasped
Within the glacial fingers neatly petrified.
One had speared a macropodic beast,
Speared thrice by children of the principal.
Once, piercing flesh and fur with manmade sharpness,
Thrice, followed hook by hook by hook with the archaic cruelty of utility.
The bearer of an empty pouch now feasted on its food for dreams
Conceived of by the orphaned child abandoned on the plain
And wailing to the stars that light its newly-skinless mother.
The careless waves bathe neverdrying knives,
Caressing the imaginings of sleepers
With metronomic liquid wept on high –
For this they call the crying place.

II.

Forty-thousand Summers passed,
The earth is reassailed by footfall fugues
As freedom-seeking ruminants compel a search
Led by a pilgrim borne of Africaine arrival –
The first fleet of the South who charted
Essex to the Island to the massacre at Byran.
Alone now scanning for his missing stock
Of wayward wool, he ruminates on valued flocks.
The coast in wait lies occupied as shades and shadows drink their salt...
Gowned in richer cloth, he drops to rock
To squat and ponder fluid-flux horizons.
The smoke of Albion's iron tea is carried on the wind
Through grey springs massed upon his face.
The layered stone beside him scarred with older hunts of forty thousand Winter deaths–
A perfect line speared through a sphere produces antipodes indeed.

III.

One-hundred fifty Autumns passed,
And now my time is marked in Spring.
This orbit of the Earth engraves a Grecian urn,
Its clay still wet and malleable.
Alone in rain, I hike its paths and note the striae known by Tate –
Were I here earlier, I would be frozen in a Permian age.
Erratic bulwarks on the shore auxiliaries,

Deserted soldiers of the sea.
I often feel a tapping on my shoulder
And wonder who it is that cries for my attention.
I know it to be prism-droplets of a nimbus,
But daydreams of eternity have kept me gazing forwards.
Blood and water weep from single wounds –
It's here I verify that truth religiously.
In Winter I see green, dampened by the grey –
I soothe the leaves and feel the wrath of first man's living fire.
In Summer I see brown, watered by the blue –
I let my legs submerge themselves in tears.
This leaves half a year, the half of which I think on ships
And all the mourning men they carry home
From Ithaca to British Rome and naked lands afar.
The final quarter's wholly mine – it's then I feel ancestral songs reverberating in my soul:
The cliff on which I stand/Becomes the one on which I bled.
The grains of Hallett's sand/Are all the lives I wish I'd led.
Collecting with my eyes, /I turn their histories to glass,
And while the seagull flies, /I then disperse them on the grass.
And while they glisten there, /Performing their refracted light,
Reflections fill the air. /One ardent bird insists on flight,
One cloud it pierces through. /One sea becomes one strident wave
Of men I never knew – /They gave this cove to be my grave.
This quartet folklore sings itself into my ear
As I, its heir, am sat within the heirloom cave.
I wait for Kartans, Englishmen, and Spartan lives.
Their memories are mine, I etch them in the stone.
I know I'll die in Hallett's Cove, so absolutely unalone.

Tumut (Kevin Klein)

Call it Ithaca, Hobbiton or Tatooine,
the faces framed by doorways in the opening scene
squint through sunset past the shoreline, hedge or dunes
that block the glint of arms and strains of martial tunes
because there's nothing folks here fight against or for
except themselves. And when the film's rhapsodic score
fades to a single lonely note, another face
appears, equally troubled, scanning the same place,
but oh, how disparate their visions! Our hero's eyes
meet our other hero's, and we recognize
their quests: one doesn't want to go but cannot stay;
the other will not move but must change anyway.

So, kids and chastened man in tow, the daughter leaves
her mum, who bears her own abandonment, who grieves
each loss as a betrayal. This firstborn daughter weeps
with her sisters and their kids, hugs her brother, keeps
rehearsing to herself why she's left them behind.
And if still in the desert, prophetesses find
the hero's road to death that promises rebirth,
they'll cross red hills and rivers toward the sands of Perth
in a van with no aircon, where her own daughter in turn
discovers who she is and isn't. Loves to learn,
the very first of anyone on either side
to finish uni. Snagged a good teaching job, so why'd
she keep studying? Who does she think she has to be?
And why the bloody hell a graduate degree
in America? See what happens? The family sufferings
fester: she's gone for three full years, and then she brings
home a Sepo husband. Well, he could be worse.
Respectful to a fault and doesn't seem averse
to moving here. Gives it a go in family games
of footy and cricket. Delighted by the ticklish names
of country towns, particularly this palindrome:

Tumut, with Nanna in the musty family home
for a week one May. First night, after a drive past trees
in autumn red and gold, she takes them to Chinese,
reciting, course by course, with consummate belief
the sacred tales in her mythology of grief:
of when her husband breathed his last, and how he left
a dog that when she's lonely snores like him; the theft
of grandsons' pushbikes by the bugger-all police
because the boys forget their helmets; then her niece
losing to cancer that the doctor should have caught.
The granddaughter worries that her husband's scared. He's not,
just needs Nanna to pause. She isn't looking up.

So painfully polite, says "Sorry to interrupt,
but I've got to go and find the loo. If that's okay."
Unfazed, she waves him off and answers, "Fire away."

Truth is, you can't step into the same river twice,
a fact so tragic some offer the sacrifice
of never stepping in a river again, and some
of never stepping out. One day, when we become
rivers ourselves, with no desire to stay or go
because we all connect, and everything is flow,
we'll understand those visions and each other's faces:
to find, become, and offer ourselves as quiet places.

Swimming Westernport Bay (Tony Lintermans)

Swim for the father in oceans of memory, gone into smoke.
Here in the bay where his ashes sank, my constant stroke
brings the reef closer where he stood chest deep
in a frayed straw hat readied for leatheries, unlipped
from his fishing rod before the swim to shore. Holding
our dinner in his hat, the tide cajoled him in.

Swim for the rancorous waves that smack, and straighten my line
between beach and grassy sea floor, where stingrays align
their wide wings to tremors of swell — a gliding flow
to hunt and haunt under splashy human rococo.
The yachties' marker buoys glimpsed further out
alarm the lifting eye, a dorsal fin of doubt.

Swim for the arm reaching forward, dragging mind away
from cogitation, stretching the spine to Hideaway Bay
and towns up north where siestas make more sense.
As the other arm pulls, feel the muscles tense
like a day-drowsing dog twitching its skin,
dreaming the rabbit, waking a rhythm within.

Swim for the winter joy and jump of it, breath snatched
from indoor lungs stung by ice but given back
slowly, in crawling distance as heart rate grows.
Swim towards pleasure, the light within snow.
A mother's ashes too, wind-cast, so long flown.
Her voice a missing whisper with a wetsuit on.

In the slick of immersion to vanish from self, to find
what world is, why sea hankers and chafes, the blind
dice throwing us a life — swim for the call
and haul of it, particular, unequivocal
when the only air to breathe is gratitude
at making the reef, where pied cormorants collude.

The Philosopher (Thomas McKendry)

A stiff wind blew me through a small town called Giru,
Where the pub is the best in the nation.
I was looking for work, so the post office clerk
Recommended I ask at the station.
"All the workshops are shut, and the mill is full, but
The Philosopher's out on the muster.
Though he don't drink or smoke (he's a church going bloke),
He's a tough one and braver than Custer."

So I made my way down past the cattle-yard rounds
Where I'd heard I was certain to find him.
Sure enough, by the wood the Philosopher stood
With two stock horses saddled behind him.
He was wiry and short with a smile that was caught
Behind eyes of mysterious forces.
As he held out a hand that was leathered and tanned
He said "Young man, I hope you ride horses."

Whether four-stroke or two, I'll be cold-dead and blue
Before any bike musters my cattle.
It'd scare them to death, so while yet I draw breath,
All you'll hear is the ring and the rattle
Of the stirrup and bridle while tanned leather hide'll
Hold tight to the whither and flank.
Check your straps ere we go; first we'll just take it slow,
Then we'll run 'em all down past the bank."

We took off in the fog of the morning; the dogs
Ran around us and snapped at the tails
Of the Brahmans that ran in a cluster of tan
Through the paddocks, past fences and rails.
And I looked on amazed as he galloped, unfazed,
By the tempest of hoof beats resounding.
With grace equal to none, man and stock-horse were one
In the fray, in the leaping and bounding.

As we rounded the bend the dance came to an end,
And we closed the gate firmly behind them.
Bathed in sweat and in foam we all headed for home:
The mares didn't need us to remind them.
As the morning fog lifted, the dawning sun gifted
The flower and feather it's flame,
And we slowed to a walk, and he started to talk –
And I knew why they gave him his name.

In terms simply profound he began to expound,
Without hubris nor with hesitation,
On what one man could hear if he lived in the clear

Silent sound of the land's revelation.
Though I took it all in I could never begin
To do justice to all that was given;
Every hard lesson learned, every battle scar earned,
All that comes from a life's worth of livin'.

But one thing he said stuck, and if I've any luck
I've remembered it here to a word:
"When the first pair of eyes saw our bright southern skies,
Something deep in the deep places stirred.
We don't sing of our cities. No banks or committees
Inspired a poem or a song.
It's the bush has the voice that makes poets rejoice:
It's out here where our artists belong."

By the edge of the Bruce, where the old mills produce
A king's ransom of golden molasses,
You'll find something more sweet running under bare feet
Through the cane fields and shoulder-high grasses.
Something greater than gold, something ageless and old
That's the cure for all things that ail'ya –
It's the fire in our heart, it's the source of our art,
It's the soil of our blessed Australia.

Amid ancient gums (Christina Pickard)

valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground
remembered by descendants on a sunlit shore
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

evacuated at night, far from the vermin they found,
navigating trenches; crimson rivers of mud and gore
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground

over sixty-thousand souls never homeward bound
a farmer's sickle lies abandoned; his legacy lost to war
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

that mirror a scarred Lone Pine slanted on a mound
to shade a generation's youth devoured by war
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground

collapsed tunnels sleep under moss-covered ground
where ghosts of charging men with slouch hats roar
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound

honoured in November when red poppies are found
and in April's dawn; we recall those who came before
valour's spirit lies dormant below a battleground
while amid ancient gums, troops of lorikeets sound.

The Return of Burke and Wills (Toby Ratcliffe)

Give them time, it's not too late. The skyline
Rises to see them home. The state funeral
Was just a wake. Sensors where they set off
Collect data so none are left behind.
The moon shines over their memorial
Casting praise on the expectant mundane,
Waiting to come into its own as soon
As joggers spot a stray horse or camel.

Because the unknown has stayed out there,
Their blithe send-off has not been outdone.
The new city their going ordained
Carries the transcendent grief of mothers
Unwilling to confront facts or move on.
It's heroic, this doubt at Melbourne's core,
Everything kept on hold, nothing staked out.
Some say it's time to bring the unknown in,
Let roar through the streets what can't be conquered.

To other hearts, the two men will arrive,
Unshaven, hunched backs, limping but alive,
And it's we who make the tragic blunder.
Grasp what their comeback means: the lonely cured,
Surfers rejoicing off the coast, hushed talk
In hip cafés of backtracking out of
The status quo. At Moonee Ponds appears
A band of near-naked waifs, shattering
Centuries, placing the shards in bourgeois hands.
A shame it'd be to rely on faith
For events as palpable as walking.

Belief: A Sestina (Marybeth Rua-Larsen)

"No one here/believes in green deeply enough."
Les Murray, from "The Hanging Gardens"

Belief is everything, and if it's green
it's new— a eucalyptus will never cross
its arms in no. It lets the owls rise
and glide. Its long and tender limbs believe
they'll grow beyond their forest home, like fish
contract, expand their nascent gills and live

the many sharp-toothed days they're meant to live,
to swim among the corals of the green-
black sea and know their purpose: a needlefish
that leaps from predators to safely cross
into whatever's next. There's no belief
we can't control and make our own. We rise

as if we have already risen. We rise
and tell the stories we are meant to live
in this life or the next, where mere belief
in the purpose of our lives turns us green
then gold, and every time we run we cross
the bouldered beach and cup our hands and fish

like children, minnows slipping through, those fish
a silver shower of smallness, and yet they rise,
jump back into the depths they came from, cross
the vastness where we're lost then found. We live
like luck will follow, where we're among the green-
eyed dragonflies who soar with our belief,

belief that all we see is half, belief
that we can swim among the needlefish,
among our daughters and our sons, still green
from all we've left undone, and though we rise
from our sea beds and laugh at how our lives
repeat, repeat, repeat, yet still we cross

into the world we hope to see, and cross
into the storied realm where we believe
our differences spark light, not shadow. We live
for more imagination, more schools of fish,
more skies where stars and moons and suns all rise,
where both the bush and sea bleed evergreen.

We live without an anchor, and we cross
whatever's green, whatever's gold. Belief
is the fish that leaps ahead, that seeks to rise.

BEACH (Leon Trainor)

after Ken Done, January 1, 1998

A beachscape, squiggly brush-strokes, dots:
perhaps a T-shirt or a hat
with someone in them, mark the spot
they chose to understand – or not –
what's around them, where they're at.
An ocean loiters out of sight,
where every wave's an afterthought
hissing over another's tracks
with white noise, washing, wiping out
what is to come before it breaks;
so anyone who contemplates
must come back to a golden beach
where countless blissful bodies bake,
believing they are on the edge
of truth, in a predestined space
where every one of them and we
(transfixed before an utter fake)
confirm the impenetrable
expression of artistic will
that promised more than we can see.

"The Storm 1896" (Ron Vernon)

Eighteen ninety-seven saw the launching of a prize:
The Wynne's a landscape accolade for which each painter tries,
Impressionistic painting was the fashion of the day,
And Walter Withers won it with his masterpiece in grey.

To see it in the Gallery, dull grey, in formal frame,
Can make a viewer wonder how it justifies its fame,
But come a little closer till you merge into the scene,
And suddenly it grips you in a way you'd not foreseen.

You find yourself, rain beaten, in a wild unruly battle,
On muddy track with struggling folk and sodden, forlorn cattle;
The storm swirls all around you in a gloomy rough and tumble,
With stinging rain, a gusting wind and angry thunder's grumble.

The whistling, shrieking wind's distorting scrawny, groaning trees
And shredding all the tree tops, snapping branches off with ease;
It flings away the debris in abandoned misdirection,
And buffets birds that vainly strive to fly for some protection.

The sky is blotched with angry clouds, horizon dark and louring,
The wind roars like a dynamo, destructive, overpowering;
The summer storm's explosion is a sudden fierce intrusion,
And little stabs of sunlight try to pierce the mad confusion.

Conveying these impressions in a single work of art
Requires a skill with brush in hand and passion in the heart;
I venerate this painting and the artist's deft perception;
I often stand before it, lost in pleasant introspection.

Settler (Veronika Winkels)

Wattle shadows daubed her brow,
And brawny brown strength of arm
Are her trademarks now;
A new shade of beauty to barter
That echoes back to wives of Sparta.

She shed a tear to see the place,
After so long on the unforgiving track,
With a spirit like the rein gone slack,
But for him, she mustered every grace.

His strength is fierce, moved by terror,
(Deadlier here is failure),
With the asp-menace and screeching flame,
Implacable swathes of dust to tame,
While the world scoffs at the southern game.

Two centuries and two decades on,
Did we prove them wrong?
Seasons behind, we made ourselves new,
Fresh-cut timber, as gold-green as the land is brown
Cities gilded from the central downs.

Our folly: to scorn greatness when it reigns,
(It's what damned us to these southern plains),
To prove it costs too dear,
And what beauty a common life contains.
Which gifts were nurtured, which decayed?

Pride persists, drinks from a shallow dish,
Like brow-sweat and foamed flanks,
It cares none what the old world thinks.
So we begin, in the middle, feeling our way,
Soul-worn with a grin—a life to prove to save.

Abyss (Jakub Zígúras)

I

Bronze surfers, gleaming with the light of Hellas,
stride past as on a frieze. A gaze arrests
the flux of foam. Offshore a swimmer breasts
a wave. The girls beside their taut umbrellas
embrace the sun. While café patrons pore
over the news, unroll an endless scroll—
distracted doom, mimetic rigmarole.
The tide, receding, leaves a wilting score
of sea-weed, driftwood, coins of polished glass.
Aeolian ripples lace the shifting dunes.
Upon the venous distance heaven swoons.
The bone-caressing wind makes one more pass
and shivers in the green and goldenrod
of palm fronds—some to dryness droop,
and fold in brittle strands. The sea gulls swoop.
Across a vast abyss, God praises God.

II

What can be said about the whistling bones
and the desolated advent calendars
of bombed-out buildings under falling stars,
as the destroying angel's epigones
fade beneath a constant veil of ash.
Emerging from dank basements, other shades—
their vision wounded by the spring's first blades—
see the aurora open like a gash.
The mouths of infants burst—a bloom of wails.
By grief each soul is to its body pinned
as by a falling wall. A wanton wind
bestows its ghostly burdens on blank sails.
High atop the tree, the orphaned Dream
awakes at last in darkness without source.
A death march parallels the watercourse.
The desert still has echoes to redeem.