The title is taken from one of the 815 entries submitted for this year’s Judith Wright Poetry Prize for new and emerging poets. Written by one anonymous witty wordsmith, it caught my eye in amongst a very lofty pile of poems. Originally a biblical reference, it ensured that I had lyrics to Nick Cave’s ‘The Mercy Seat’ stuck in my mind.

The winning poem this year is Tim Wright’s ‘emoticon’. ‘emoticon’ is a surreal, yet highly concentrated, poem. It’s a poem full of references to everyday detritus which, as in dreams, seems to attach a more random signification to things. Whatever is being brought to brief conscious attention in this process is nonetheless addled with affect. It’s a poem about the peripheries of making sense in a strangely familiar suburban terrain (not devoid of nostalgia for past things: Asterix comics under the lino, a typewriter, leaving Fremantle Harbour in 1998 …). Perhaps it is written against the simplicity of summing our feelings up with a simple typographic symbol, or encapsulating yourself in a snappy status update. Tim’s poetic language instead ventures into a phenomenology of self, paying attention to detail like ‘a honeyeater stumbling on a branch, tenderly efficient, checking nodes of flowers’. ‘emoticon’ is the work of a new ‘new-romantic’, and although the surrealist image has been around in poetry for a long time, Tim’s voice oscillates between thoughtful and playful in a way that keeps you present with both its surface and depth.

For me, Tim represents a current redefinition of what it means to be a practising poet. Like all the other entrants in the Judith Wright Prize, he hasn’t yet published a collection of poems in book form. He is, however, someone whose work I’m familiar with from various readings, events, online journals and reviews. Tim is participating in a poetic community/coterie/culture which, while definitely still a ‘minor literature’, manages to circulate across media and place. All entries in this competition were anonymous, but I can’t help but feel that poetry is as much about the energy that you put in to it – the discussions, the cross-fertilisation with other poets and their work – as it is the piece itself. In this way, rather than being a budding self-contained capital P poet, Tim is part of a new breed (I hesitate to say ‘school’) of poets working in a technologically mediated culture, opening up a continuing contemporary local dialogue with poetic tradition.

This idea that poetry is informed by reading is also borne out in the work of the two runners-up, as I was able to pick their influences quite directly. Sarah-Jane Norman’s ‘Open Water’ is part homage to Dorothy Porter’s *Ahkenaten* as she rewrites Homer’s *The Iliad* focusing on the relationship between Odysseus’ son and his wet nurse (‘For fuck’s sake,/leave me alone. Let me lie in state/ let me bake in my swaddling/like a fat salmon.’). Astrid Lorange’s ‘you dropped the tea tray’ is perhaps what’s now called ‘post-avant’ in style, conscious of language and semantic swerve (‘I am an un-traditional/ couple which means I am always/ a more-than-one scenario’). The two entries are very different; Sarah-Jane’s sequence is a finely honed extended verse narrative, whereas Astrid’s poem is short and syntactical.

There were also five commended poems, any one of which could have just as easily pipped the...
winners at the post. It’s such a subjective process judging poetry, and perhaps this is only appropriate for a medium which feeds off vagaries of mood and sensibility.

Of the commended poems there is the Ashbery-esque enigma of Thomas Lee’s ‘Plateau’ (‘biro sideburns and blue tinsel not worth removing’), the allegorical prose of Maria Freij’s ‘Where the Heart Is’ (‘It was tired of orchids. God, how it was tired of orchids.’), Peter Lach-Newinsky’s ‘The Knee Monologues’ (‘we’re concave convex like the universe’) all which had that x-factor that made me whisk them out from the pile. I was also glad to select Aden Rolfe’s ‘Purge Landscape’ in a competition that has Judith Wright as its eponymous poet, although Aden’s neo-gothic scene is more archetypal and, I suspect, far from New England.

The other commended poem, Briohny Doyle’s ‘Without Events’, questions relationships of place, the body and the screen:

... i am a story without a narrator without events tied to a body i don’t have events that cannot happen i am perspective without depth without mind on a monitor at the edge of a headland staring over//the abyss filled with tangled cable filled with numbers filled with blood filled with refuse//

It’s impossible to sum up the rest of the entries into a pithy overview, but overall the themes of the majority of the poems seemed to reflect contemporary issues. There were poems about post-colonial Australia’s relationship to the land, about the politics of war and many about environmental changes. There will always be angsty love poems, and poems about children.

It’s great to see so many poets under 35 in the winning entries this year, and congratulations to Tim Wright on receiving the prize of $3000. The runners-up will appear in Overland 195.

emoticon

Here we go / under the lino

all the Adventures of Asterix you can read
let your dictaphone play to the trunks of trees

shadow housing
a gondolier down your arm

already I’ve said strange things
(and not understood what was said to me)

This is what will happen in the orange
you will be greeted by
retired fast bowlers

chuck a u-ey
& it’s the stars that glom together

climbing down a banister in frocks
declaring a need to be hugged

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