

Notes used by Luke Carman in his judge's address at ZineWest Launch, 10th October, 2015

I'd like to thank Sue Crawford and Carol Amos, and everyone involved with putting on this event for intrusting me with the profound honour of judging ZineWest's 2015 competition. The launch of ZineWest is one of my favourite occasions in the literary calendar. In fact, last year's raffle was probably the most climactic moment of the year, far as literary celebrations go. The fact is that ZineWest has a special place in my heart. Five years ago, a story of mine, with the somewhat lacklustre title 'My Time', had the good fortune to be published in ZineWest 10. The story went on to be included, albeit in an altered form, in the collection of short stories that was published in 2013 called *An Elegant Young Man* – to date my only single authored publication. While ZineWest 10 wasn't my first publishing credit, it was one that meant a great deal to me at the time, and it's one that I hold in pride of place.

It was not an easy task to cast judgment on the submissions for this year's ZineWest. From the moment I opened the document of assembled stories for this year's competition I knew I was in trouble – from the very first it was clear that the crop was of an exceptionally high order, and much soul-searching would be required.

The first story in the document sent to me was **Pano**: it begins with a series of visions and revisions in the grey-green surf's infinite shape-shifting, set alongside a tale reflecting on the slow but sure decay of the body; a lamentation on loss, and the elegiac quality of memories.

It's a tone that I found echoed in the outset of **Convict Trail** – a story that begins with trees losing their shape and turning to shadows, as young men, who break into wails and tears despite their youth and strength, despite their physical size and ferocity, march onward, through elegies of their own.

In **Gertie**, by contrast, there are no bodies at all, only the virtual world of memories and the irony of a poet who wonders in eulogy after the titular Gertie, who lives in the secret crumbs of a personal history: a picture, a photograph – gazing wistfully out to sea – renewed, almost, by the deathless force of Facebook.

Snap pull us back to the hermetics of the body, a mess of bodies in fact, huddled on the assembly-hall floor. They are disheveled, unwashed bodies resting together, hearts trembling, as a bright morning light breaks in – even if the scene is itself another act of painful separation.

In **Bone Sister**, too, the theme is the loss of loved ones. Here the missing part of the puzzle, in a sense, is the banging together of skulls that awkwardly beat between two sisters as they embrace, sisters whose bodies are made of the very same stuff; the same memories and moments in time, tied together in blood and kinship.

In **Bringing Us Back**, the circuitry of existence seems eternal, inescapable. In fogs of myth and legend, the past and present endlessly circulate in opaque mists of space and time, the piercing of early light mingling with the end of dreams – enduring as the deserted streets of eternity.

In **Demolition**, a building, a house, becomes a body – a kind of mother whose birth was witnessed by her children. The walls become the womb of dreams and memories, the birth waters of secrets, in which family itself lives and dies, in which there are rebirths and rebellions.

Tappucino, brings us an altogether different relationship between bodies and buildings, this time in the mode of discipline and punishment. The rebellions and rituals that go on in

confinement reverse the dialectic between the everyday and the extraordinary – a world in which a cup of tea requires the sort of ingenuity that ‘outside’ life renders invisible.

Leaving the island shows us another kind of confinement, this time geological in scope, and almost, bodily in character; old folks and their gummy mouths, the tumbling sky and burning backs of those taro and yam growers and the reckless, cavorting homes with tipsy weather-board skin. And just as fully as the island contains all this, just as whole as its hermetic seal might be, suddenly, brusquely as we arrived, we are gone.

From there, in fact, to ***Nanjira***, coming into Bungoma by rail in the late afternoon, dressed in long caftan, and the as the light fails, loud voices arise, signalling, not unruly teens as first was thought, but the birth of a baby in the adjoining carriage. The mother, tall and proud, exits, and the train, like the reader, must go on.

In ***Cigarettes and Smoke***, we awaken on the couch where light leaks in from under curtains. Here again, the ordinary seems abnormal as it drifts onto centre stage. A boiled egg and a second smoke seem ripe with portentousness. An uncomfortable conversation disrupts the stultifying ease, and must be locked out like the day’s all-piercing light.

From that unpleasant idyll to a day of rest in ***Sunday (4.38pm EST)***, a poem that begins with a Crossfit body moving like popping candy – the body of a mother, who, like a maternal bird, watches as her young children, all egg plant and whizzfizz, launch themselves into the pink sky.

Another Sunday sunset is demanded in the opening lines of ***In the Driveway***, a poetic look at the bleeding between bodies and houses, between memory, intimacy and the pain of separation. The reversed welcome of the driveway, bodies pale from loss of love and the death of smiles upon once loving faces.

Bitter, metallic tang is the blood that soaks the lines of ***Vlad’s Host***, a poem of winged shadows and halos on the tombstones that sit between urban wastes and the unblinking stare of the stars – all tied together in the intimacy of a kiss’s silken cord, wrapped around stealthy apparitions riding rough-shod over bare forests.

From the flit of midnight’s children to the dawn of a new day in ***The Journey***, a story set in 19th century India, one beginning with dreams of freedom – a young girl’s naïve vision of a promised land of endless abundance, just on the other side of forbidden seas. She slides two gold bangles onto her arms before she sets sail.

In ***Elegy***, we find another house full of memories, this time focused in the proliferated form of the book, accumulated in one place by 80 years of collective habit, now too heavy for a grandmother to carry. With the help of her granddaughter, a maker of books herself, the pair cast judgements on the fate of the literary horde, considering as they go, the gaps between fact and fiction, and some stray entity called poetry.

In ***Co-Conspirators***, another grandmother, and a different daughter, share the tiny conspiracies of life – tea, laughter and trespass. Once again the rich ritual of tea-making stands in for a raging against the injustices of the body’s fragility, and the confinements of old age.

The wreckage and recognition of the dead is the focus of ***The Last Rights***, a poetic story in which the coldness of a master bedroom persists amongst rubble. In memory, in a ghostly return, we hear the laughter that filled this ravaged former residence, we see the motionless stare of a bird still in its cage, flowers on their death bed with half-sprouted memories of loving hands. We leave the scene with a closing veil of tears.

The web of memories that tie a life together is the subject of ***Strings***, a poetic piece which begins with a reflection caught in the pale blue light of a bus window, and the realisation that the

self is a knitting together of cotton by some rather crude set of hands, for some unknown purpose – strings that lie along a table, or onto the hands of a clock, to every hole in the wall and every drifting speck of dust, until the cotton is exhausted at its source, and the self unravelled.

In *The French Girl*, we find another kind of universal system being devised – this time by a young girl whose search for cosmic alphabets finds declarations of love in the broken triangles of mirror balls and lowercase lotuses. The world, the universe, as we find in the clear light of day, is not a web of cotton threads by a young girl's decoupage.

From this sense-making of cut-out fragments comes the fragmentary screech of a derailed big bang in *Paraplegic*, a trail of smoke signals the end of time – suspended now with the hand-shake of a clock, purple palm prints appearing on the skin like tattoos, a man becomes a consonant, becomes motionless. The vestigial touch of skin vibrates like an unrolling wire of mesh nerves and white coated men turn to clouds. Children are lost to memory.

From broken bodies to broken pens in *Charlie Hebdo – Death in Ink*: the shift is an illusion. The pens are broken and bleeding in the way of human bodies. But in their sundering, new bonds are formed, between the poet and the dead, between the spirit and the hope of freedom. The lights of the Eiffel Tower are dimmed, but the unity between art and life is as vital as ever.

From the dimming lights of Paris to the flashing of human flesh-eggs in the appropriately titled *Flashes*, the subtle story of Percy Marceau's life changing encounter with an unsolicited pair of breasts on the train to Gosford. In this story, bodies intrude and unsettle, they forewarn of their chaotic unreliability.

In *Danger: No Safe Place*, There is no solitude from the shame of bodies, not even when you're trying to go to the toilet. There the horror of the unsolicited conversation is the abject threat, and the crude scriptures of bathroom stall graffiti stare back at you like a message from dignity's abyss.

Prokoffey's Woman also opens an abyss of sorts, standing upon the precipice of four haunted pages as the ghostly figure of a woman with yearning eyes and an enigma resting upon the fragile perch of her wrist, her bloodied body seeping through the pages as poet and muse move through the trains and streets of Blacktown.

From the threshold of one literary reference to another in *We'll Get Stoned on the Couch if it Takes All Night*, a swaggering, heaving and cussing poetic kerfuffle, dragging the hefty body of a couch in a pulsing and pushing rhythm up and down the stairs, sweating in specks as if from a watering can, until, breathlessly, it is plonked down ready for arses and intoxication.

The Chai and Samosa Date begins with a very different sort of sitting. One of discord on a date. Chai and Samosa won't be let alone to find whatever connections they might have together. Our protagonist's date's mother, who has come along for the ride, tells him, 'One is sweet, the other spicy.' This is a romance story of receding hair, of one unyielding and unmarried son, and a battalion of busy-bodies who insist on not minding their own business.

With *Saving the World*, the all-consuming savagery of an indifferent and self-satisfied system is examined for some sign of redemption and found lacking. The fires of the belly lead to burn out, and the faceless stalker of that inner fatigue is ever on-coming. The kindness of strangers is devalued, and everyday life can barely breathe beneath the ashes seeded with the hope of survival.

Call Me Elizabeth begins with one small act of intervention, an outcast girl's rescue of a baby brown snake. Elizabeth secrets the snake into her backpack and takes her charge through the streets of Parramatta, then from station to station across the western suburbs, all the way to

Toongabbie, and into the muscle-bound arms of a boy who understands the need for brown baby snakes to hide in wide open spaces.

The sense of being alone and hidden in plain sight resonates in ***The Moment of Truth***, a poem from which the glassy presence of the self in the light of the night begins to speak, not to, but *at* the poet. Shaking fingers find another cigarette, touch an unshaven check. Red eyes, silver rings, the moonlight gleams and the cries of the lady goddess between the dark and the pillow's damp become the symphony of a sleepless battle.

The theme of restlessness continues in ***Something in the Air***, the first whiff of which is caught in the nostrils of the drover's slowly herded cattle. This is a story about the good life, an open aired affair of mateship and the pastoral glory, but the nervous ticks, the small aches and pains, the gripes and signals of old age's unwelcome arrival mark the loss that's yet to come.

The body of the world is a creative art of sorts in the god-like imagery of ***Create Art with Me***, a poem at home in its omnipotence and its intimacy. The body here is human too, a broken opium den stagnating and devoid of feeling, but the persistent cry of a Valhalla echoes in the poem's beckoning bones.

The complexity of bodies, the complexity of the self, is the struggle of ***Being Different***, a story in which the hybridity of our protagonist dodges the awkward shame of difference and being itself – finding in a thorny, tribal world of persistent discriminations a place for otherness to rest its head, and community to awaken.

In ***Changing Time***, ironically enough, we begin with two familiar accents – the hyper ocker call of an old fashioned Aussie stereotype saying 'Aww fair go Love!' who then hears back 'Don't you fair go me mate.' These two voices are soon absorbed by the sea and the sound of waves, and we are brought to distant ports, around the Mediterranean, sailing into dreams and love and reverie, in search of an adventure far beyond our suburban world – indeed, into the mysterious unknown that resides just on the other side of our collective covers, toward whatever it is that comes after the story has ended.

So it is, dealing with this resplendent array of sojourns into the human heart that awaited the difficult task of finding a clear and present winner. It wasn't easy. Nevertheless, I have done my duty, and judgement has long since been passed, and now, it is my solemn task to present the winners to you without further ado.