

## **Launch speech (full text) for *Poetry of Change: The Liquid Amber Prize Anthology 2024***

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Perhaps it's not surprising to find references to 'change' in the worlds of religion and philosophy. But I was surprised that the World Economic Forum also had something profound to add about change. "Good art" they write, "can educate and create empathy, and empathy leads to change." As I read *Poetry of Change: The Liquid Amber Prize Anthology 2024*, I was moved and enriched by reading poetic accounts of brave vulnerability, and muscular resilience, probing into the nub of what it is to be human, by reading 'good art' with the capacity to generate empathy and contribute to creating individual and social change. It made me proud to be a person, to be a poet with like-minded poets.

I also keep noting how beautifully curated the book is, with many felicities, but these are random felicities as the book is not curated but ordered reverse-alphabetically "just to change it up".

The anthology includes sestina, ode, elegy, villanelle, love poem, free form and wildly inventive concrete poetry, becoming a celebration of inventiveness of form. It demonstrates a hands-on facility for embodying change in how the poem stands (or crouches, falls or leaps) on and off the page.

To honour the community engagement goals of Liquid Amber, initially I undertook my speech by a democratic process of writing a few lines about each poem in the anthology. But it was just too long, so on a poet-friend's advice, I randomly chose 60% of the poems. I printed the author names, I cut them up into strips, folded them and put them in my beautiful gold rimmed, emerald glass trifle bowl. I retained the shortlisted, place-getters and emerging poets.

Of the concrete poems, Lily Paquet's magnificent 'Plum', is a kind of poetic palindrome – working both backwards and forwards as well as shaped like a plum. Veronica Troup's: 'WordFind Me', in the shape of a gridded word puzzle embodies the quest to find the self, despite being "undone by/soft sugar lies". Michael Leach in 'Shared vision' offers a concrete poem based on a foetal sonogram. So much must change in adjusting to pregnancy, effectively using the word 'change' 15 times. "But we do not change our minds again".

Kirsten Johnston in 'leopards and their spots' riffs on the well-known aphorism to explore the changing seasons of self in a cleverly contrapuntal poem. "I knew on and off/like a light globe", describing beautifully how connection to self can flicker over life's course.

Michael Leach's Highly Commended 'Biogeography' plays on both meanings of the prefix 'bio'- biographical and biological, juxtaposing personally important geographic sites and each place's floral emblem – practice which grounds him.

Many poems honour the resilience of Country and all its beings and Indigeneity. Maggie Slattery's 'Kestrel Suite<sup>1</sup>' recounts first contact through the eyes of a kestrel. Movingly she writes, "Change: more cloud-boats on the horizon: new kinds/of rodents; new kinds of dying". Laura Koens's shortlisted love poem 'Binalup Dreaming', (place name used with Aunty Eliza Woods's permission), includes beautiful lyric utterance to ground the dreaming of a couple on Country, "Our house, a hollow/Carved from the courage/ Of our love". Anne Elvey's poem 'Nothing less' details current social and cultural challenges, writing of our need to engage in "continual undoing/the unlearning" of inherited attitudes, "tendering/towards/an aching/solidarity". Ed Southorn's 'Wallaga Lake' (Djiringanj) Country, with respect) acknowledges the loss since colonisation: "you hold the sadness of the old people,/the mountain like a child".

Many poems employed imagery and growth processes from the natural world as metaphors for individual emotional/ psychological and transformational change such as Bridget Webster in 'St Kilda Beach', capturing the eternal and metaphoric "forever back and forth – / glass, into sea-glass, into sand". This was also evident in Eliza

Burke's 'How to mutate', 'change' observed in a human finding her place alongside ancestors, in worlds of sap, tree and animals "each knowing/how the other belongs/how the law of mothers/flows through them".

Irina Frolova's 'against and pro (-creation)' is another carefully constructed contrapuntal poem. 'Change' in her poem is "cool", "/looming/mid-life/ languid with longing", ending despite the title, on what I read as an optimistic note: "dreams/ aplenty/against reason".

Jane Frank's poem 'Cathexis', grounds the narrator's somewhat panicked thought processes in reflections of a tropical environment. "Rilke" she writes "says unhitch/beauty/from terror > aliveness". The final couplet catches the quicksilver constantly changing quality of thoughts – even panic.

Willo Drummond's 'Late Autumn' after 'Benediction' by James Berry, gives thanks for the apple seed and strawberry, for verse and dance. "Thanks/to each parting, turning, shadowed/bough."

Referencing changing moon phases, and family generations, Melanie Coram's upbeat poem 'moontide's rhythm', includes a Dylan reference to "the big old moon shines like a spoon", followed by "as if god's poise resembles cutlery", one of my favourite lines, which cracks me up.

Bron Bateman's poem 'Love, the hummingbird' draws on a bird for inspiration as the narrator faces delicate shoulder surgery. "I think hummingbird/delicate, indomitable, slopes of scapulae" finishing with the affirmation, "My shoulder swoops and dives./Bone still."

The challenge of personal change is also tackled. Glen Hunting won the Emerging Poet Prize for the accomplished 'On Entering the Program', neat tercets about the difficulty of sticking with a step programme. The last two stanzas pivot from the difficulties, to being buoyed by community, listening to another participant, "I suddenly wish/she could see how brave she is."

Personal change is also addressed by Shortlisted and Emerging Prize poet Becky Houston for her wonderful 'Open-Mouthed' – a perfectly titled poem with the last two lines demonstrating the capacity of poetry in compression. "Can shame cross continents?/I squint and see something different /on the horizon/Something new/It does not/have teeth". Kylie Hough's gritty, insistent 'Ode to impermanence', a terrifically tight rave in honour of the guts it takes to reinvent yourself. The narrator has to, "purge the poison/like I was Snow White, only, no prince brought me/back, fuck that, I kissed myself into being".

When ceasing a practice which is abhorrent, the face of change is welcome. This is represented in in Jan Napier's poignant villanelle about the end of whaling. One of the repeated lines reads: "No blubber slithers into boilers cleansed of red."/".

As much as things change, some poets contrast change with the comfort of the way things stay the same. Jan Napier again in 'Albany: After Fifty Years' "Yes, yes, the bluesilver sea", as you imagine the narrator has done many times before.

Sam Morley in 'Keep driving while I watch' writes of paradoxical faces of nostalgia describing returning to a sheep farm, remembering the trust of walking over the backs of stressed sheep. "We were exquisite then", he writes, despite blood and whetstone and blade.

Poems also mark never-to-be-repeated cultural moments, such as Jennifer Compton's 'Some of the First Footage' describing one of the earliest pieces of footage of (French) women ever to be filmed. Distinctive French, lyric and relational detail captures a moment of pristine unselfconsciousness before cameras became common. Also Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon's 'Jela in Black and White, Leaning Against a Car at Coogee Beach'. It juxtaposes a snapshot of a young Croation beauty and includes the author's father's acid comment "this was beautiful coastline, but they put all the shit/down here near the wogs, so those rich bastards/north-of-the-river could enjoy their views."

Inevitably, loss is a by-product of change as in Anna Quercia-Thomas's myth-based 'Phrygia, or there used to be bones here', An imagined elegy by Achilles to Patroclus. She writes "do you think of him sometimes/when you empty the sand from your shoes?" In Scott-Patrick Mitchell's 'An Obituary for the Drive-In' the obituary is both for the Drive-In which "dreams nostalgia into being", as well as a lover who has died, who took corners en route with "the big swing of wheels/kissing bitumen." Sophia Haralambis's 'Even The Seasons', charts life lessons, and the loss of a 'you' embedded in changing meteorological seasons. She writes "its as like as/ rain the days,/washed clean away." Jennifer Harrison's 'Rise', after Eavan Boland's 'Elegy for a Youth Changed to a Swan' is a mythic incantation of sublime beauty, interwoven with loss and grief, whether for the inevitable boy to man transition or for a more material loss. She writes, "we rise from elegy . from loss's/ bitter fennel . we rise so that he lives within/the trees ." Loss also reverberates heartbreakingly in Allison Browning's "Rhetorical Question", lines suggesting the loss of a child, "Freshly fledged. Your/absence now, a weight that gravity/ could not/ bear".

The body and its inevitable and unexpected changes also feature. Competition winner Alana Kelsall's 'eye pressure' is a prose poem which uses judicious repetition. The poem explores human vulnerability to body changes, in this case, changing eye pressure. Kelsall finds striking ways to describe the narrator's condition, including "shadows in the fields of my eyes", and "not wearing the sky on my eyes". Miriam Lo's 'Stopping Traffic: (peri-menopause)'" is a sometimes accusatory, sometimes celebratory ode to menstrual blood and the ambivalence of approaching menopause. "Red," Lo writes, "you come and you go. Red, you are / the flow disrupting flow". Ending on the paradox "Can a burnt-out apple tree still blossom?" Samantha Bew's 'Strange Thief' narrates in sophisticated rhyming couplets a medical diagnosis error, finishing with the poignant paradox: "By day, the thief steals movement from my side./At night, my heart repeats *I am alive*." Helga Jermy's poem introduced me to the mind-boggling concept of the 'Femtosecond' the title of her poem, said to be "one quadrillionth of a second, or one millionth of one billionth of a second," presumably what it takes for corrective laser eye surgery. Afterwards, "Even my ray-bans/ can't disguise the ecstasy of the scarlet bellied robins."

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A number of poems celebrate the transformations wrought by poetry composition itself. Peter Mitchell's "Monkey Talk" celebrates transforming childhood bullying due to pronunciation challenges from a cleft palette to the felicities of poetry. "Now the calligraphy of mis-pronunciations, /ilts, plosives & lisps are fiery poetry". Or in the case of Ana Constantinou's "autistic big girl gifted", social anxiety for a neuro-diverse person is given powerful presentation, with the hard-won final lines: "learning to wear my esoteric bits like a Christmas tree wears its/ ornaments. Proudly. With joy." Scott-Patrick Mitchell's 'poem as my mother pregnant with me' creatively uses the extended metaphor of poetic composition to reference their mother's growing pregnancy. They write: "be brave in the dark, my spark, see how stanzas thicken" and the exuberant line "and together we scream/love into existence."

Poets also draw on science. Shoshana Rockman's 'Thank you Einstein', invokes Einstein's theory of relativity in her ode in appreciation of momentum. She writes, "I surmise that sanity is an ongoing series — of adjustments." Oz Hardwick's shortlisted poem is 'Play It Again, Werner Heisenberg', he of the uncertainty principal and a major Nazi collaborator. With deft hand, Hardwick writes, "We wear time like a wardrobe malfunction at our best/ friend's wedding, we carry time like a switched briefcase in a/ 50s noir". David Atkinson's 'The Challenge of Algebra' hones in on one of the most inspiring aspects of reading this anthology – that despite suffering, "Change is a hope which cannot/be contained; it bubbles/and spurts like water", even in the setting of this poem – a subway during the siege of Mariupol, Ukraine, and a mother, who "repudiates the sickle of death", supervising her daughter's algebra.

Anne Kellas's poem 'Botticelli's Venus revisits the scene' uses double ekphrasis to comment both on the referenced painting and also the poet Auden, to juxtapose how art from the past may be viewed differently in the present. Kellas writes, "The gods are all gone."

Grandfather "lolo" in Kaya Ortiz's 'Planetarium sestina' includes the stunning line "I lie on the open field of time, my broken heart in flight".

Cultural/socio political commentary is also an anthology subject. Second Prize winner Gayelene Carbis's 'Rich' tackles the Australian cost of living crisis with a mocking humour at social injustice and entitlement. Another personally favourite line: "not/wanting to be pigeon-holed because I'm not a pigeon". David Adès's 'How Not to Avert a Catastrophe' is a potent extended metaphor, a plea for action/activism to avert the dual catastrophes of cost of living and global warming. His final line challenges us all but particularly those in power. "You know all that, right?"

The loss of culture is particularly grievous in Yvonne Patterson's 'weight of ash' with the line, "beneath the Bebelplatz ghosts .../20,000 books Remember", referencing book-burning under Nazism. Marcelle Freiman's, 'Chana c. 1940-1945', also describes antisemitism in this case suffered by her maternal grandparents, under the rule of the Nazi-supporting Afrikaans Nationalist Party. Her final stanza begins, "The clock in the passage did not stop ticking. This life:/for the children"

In poems I'm putting under the heading of quotidian are Clare Carlin who manages to pack a deal of mystery in her small poem, 'Little Sound', leaving puzzles for the reader. It finishes on the evocative lines, "Look in on her/quiet now/ face thick with rain."

David Regan's poem "The point of no return" draws on painting and colours and invokes the ungovernable nature of change in "the day as open/as pandemonium". Also in this category is the hilarious poem (to my mind) by Gayelene Carbis which I have to admit an interest in, as it's written about me, 'Writing Witch Anne C'. Carbis's razor sharp wit is on full display, riffing on the felicities and otherwise of autocorrect errors. "I meant to say/with, Writing With Anne C but I've gone and called her a/ Witch, typing/swiping again".

Sand crops up in poems by Anna Quercia-Thomas, Samantha Bews, Bridget Webster, Ed Southorn, Laura Koens, and Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon, emblematic of both the transformation which makes it, and iconic poet Wordsworth's line, "To see the world in a grain of sand". The poet's quest has been admirably acquitted in this anthology.

I declare *Poetry of Change: The Liquid Amber Prize Anthology 2024*, launched!

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