

# The Ballina Region for Refugees Annual Seeking Asylum Poetry Prize

**S***ocial Alternatives* is pleased to be associated with the Ballina Region for Refugees (BR4R) annual poetry prize for another year. The BR4R is a community run volunteer organisation that supports refugees in regional Australia. As Coleman explains in *Social Alternatives* Issue 40: 3 'Poetry to the Rescue' 2021,

*BR4R organises street rallies, vigils, public talks and letter-writing campaigns to raise awareness of the plight of refugees. The group hosts a homestay program and provides financial and material assistance for refugees and those seeking asylum both in on-shore and off-shore detention and in the community. One of the group's key aims is to support refugees to settle in regional Australia, including the provision of housing, education, employment, access to social services, and social integration (Coleman 2021: 4).*

Their annual Seeking Asylum Poetry Prize celebrates the positive contributions that refugees make to our communities. Every day millions of people globally embark on dangerous journeys to find safety and freedom. The poetry competition acknowledges the circumstances that forced asylum seekers to flee their homelands and request refuge in Australia. It highlights poems that consider the experiences, aspirations and hopes of refugees and asylum seekers looking for a home in which they can build new, meaningful, and safe lives (BR4R 2023).

The competition accepts poetry from anyone in the community but poems from refugees and asylum seekers themselves are especially welcome. The 2023 BR4R Seeking Asylum Poetry Prize focuses on the theme of *Finding Freedom*. Cash prizes were enabled by donations from Christine Ahearn and a bequest from Louise Griffith. Prizes are awarded to the first, second, and third placed entries. There are also categories for a poem from a refugee or asylum seeker and from someone under 18 years old. The winning entries for 2023 are published in this issue of *Social Alternatives* along with the Judge's report.

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## Judge's Report – BR4R Seeking Asylum Poetry Prize (2023)

RENEÉ PETTITT-SCHIPP

I would like to thank Bill Boyd and everyone at Ballina Region for Refugees for the excellent, ongoing work they do, raising public awareness of refugee people's experiences. As a poet, I especially appreciate the use of creative engagement as a way to encourage Australians to expand their empathic imaginations. Poetry has a striking way of cutting through to the 'heart' of the matter, overriding dualistic ways of thinking about each other; the everyday 'us' and 'them' habits of our thought patterns. To everybody who entered the award, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks for taking the time to imagine the world from another person's perspective, and to the refugee entrants, thank you for your courage and willingness to share your experiences publicly. My hope is that this competition (in both the writing and reading of the works) has created many small bridges between ourselves and the world, connecting us more intimately to one another.

It was wonderful to see the number of entries received; there were around one hundred poems submitted to the award. When approaching the poems, I could not help but bring my own lens of working within

Australia's detention system. Those poems that spoke of both the suffering and resilience of refugee people really resonated with me. I was also looking for works that avoided a predictable rhyming scheme. The most striking poems were those that really captured the shining humanity of many refugee people, poems that saw being a 'refugee' as an expression of only one aspect of a fuller personhood. It was this shimmering humanity that I witnessed in the winning poem, 'Meteor Shower' – even the title suggests to us that this work may resist what we expect from a poem about people fleeing violence and war. 'Meteor Shower' weaves together rain, the cosmos and the domestic in a beautiful rhythm of leaving and returning; the speaker leaves things of beauty that spoke of home, only to find them once again reinvented, from bright pyramids of fruit to luminous bedroom rugs. Some lines were so striking (*mum traces the golden moon with a careful finger, so as not to displace it*) I had to check and double-check that the entrant was also in the under eighteen section!

I once read that poetry 'breaks the habits of words', and it was this kind of fresh imagery that I was searching for as I read through the many entries. In 'Small fragments of Seeking Deliverance', the work is ordered into stanzas that begin with the repeated pattern of a question, inviting us to a new reckoning with ideas of 'home' (that skillfully avoids cliché). Each section invites us to a different part of the globe, culminating in the striking final stanza set in Darwin: *Bare feet, plastic bag,/ Long grasser looking for shelter, /In another Country.* 'Jar and Light', by contrast, is organised into six stanzas that capture a former life squeezed into the suffocating space of a detention centre (*the room's a jar/ where we breathe/ lidded months*) where one's own future is written by another *behind reinforced glass... in Times New Roman* and hope is carried like *a clot in the gut*. In the last stanza the first steps toward freedom are finally taken, but hesitantly, as the speaker finds a new voice in a strange land, in the wonderfully understated last lines: *Intimate speech/ broaches new accents.*

In the under eighteen category, I was deeply moved by the work, 'It's going to be okay'; it broke my heart each time I read it. The poet does not tell me as the reader how to think, but lets me witness the painful tension between the speaker's memory of their mother's words (*That is what she had said./ That all would be fine*) and the reader's overwhelming experience that everything is not fine (*the unerasable memory/ of my past... to forget/ to live on*). The unresolved tension in this poem appears to mirror the unresolved conflict between what the speaker's mother wishes for her daughter or son, and the reality of the speaker's experience. This poem stayed with me for some time.

The winning award in the refugee category went to the poem 'Trap'. This poem stood out in the way the speaker acutely identifies with the natural world as a result of their own suffering. This poem also 'breaks the habits of words' in the wonderful couplet, '*Sitting, I have been waiting for this moment for years,/ to dress up in my ironed clothes*'. Here again we read the tension between the speaker's will to enter their new life while they are haunted by memories of the past, even when witnessing scenes normally associated with beauty (*Oh God! What does the butterfly experience in this moment?*) We are not reassured that everything will resolve at the end of the poem, yet the reader feels that the speaker's identification with the natural world carves out a fullness in him or her, an openness to all that is good and difficult in the world.

Thank you once again to everyone who entered the award and congratulations to all of the finalists. May you long continue to bring your craft and compassion to the world!

## Overall First Prize: Meteor Shower

i.

When it rains the / rain people come out. Beautiful / calliope, boats singing on the /  
shore when it rains / it pours, maelstrom on the sky a star / comes crashing down. /  
Then another and the stars keep / raining down like a / red meteor shower / smashing  
this life / losing my glow. Smashes / this poem with / nowhere to go.

ii.

When it rains we / leave home, fire and deadly / smoke of persecution on our heels /  
months of old and / fresh blood in our mouths / salt builds like quicksand on our / skin  
we wear the wind / for warmth / my mother's name worn out like persian rugs from  
stepping / over. Dank, noxious scent / makes a new roof smell old and safe / for a  
while, getting used to sleeping and eating in shoebox portions / then dancing, singing  
in sixes. Learning / to build myself up like earth / bursting from the shadows / and into  
orbit. Guy on corner / peddling baubles of fruit I had never seen / so bright, like stars.  
Pears / turn to pyramids at home / home long battled and sought.

iii.

At home I see rain / sluice down ghostly terraces and waterfall over / this palm sized  
window over my bed. Next to me mum traces the golden moon with a careful finger,  
so as to not displace it. / I watch and the younger ones not yet asleep squirm over  
with half lids, keeping their elbows tucked in the tight room. / It smokes and quivers,  
lighting our faces with warm glow, gentle / starlight, provides the quiet harmonics for  
slow eyes to slumber. Fruit / glitters on the corner like jewels, and after months we  
have this beautiful new rug that flares under the bed like a kaleidoscope / even in the  
dark.

SELINA DECARLO

## Overall Second Prize: Jar and Light

1.

The room's a jar  
where we breathe  
lidded months,  
fractious, gasping.

2.

In squeezing memory  
streets and buildings  
we used to inhabit  
are hallucinations—  
flowers vining  
our prickling play,  
and chants at festivals  
washing on skin  
as clammy humidity.

3.

We can't live within  
insistent probings  
of 'name' and 'identity'  
as our bodies discard  
their closest places,  
and though language would stand  
apart from paperwork  
the airless words  
won't translate,  
curling and shrinking.  
Behind reinforced glass  
our futures are written  
in Times New Roman.

4.

We're haunted by shreds  
of implosive memory,  
soldiers running  
through sleeping villages—  
shouts, arrests,  
strafing bullets.  
Trekking for days  
on a valley floor  
below a grey snowline,  
we carried hope  
like a clot in the gut.

5.

We've counted days  
by scoring brickwork—  
and still we're counting.

Time hangs like a shirt  
on razor wire.

6.

At last, a meander  
of roads and dry wind  
where our children's names  
catch at branches.  
Our language crowds  
doubtful mouths  
as some of us scuff  
the turning dust  
with hesitant steps.  
Intimate speech  
broaches new accents.

PAUL HETHERINGTON

## Overall Third Prize: Small Fragments of Seeking Deliverance

What emancipation is there in a dusty apartment block  
in Durban,  
From a village, from violence to the north,  
With no hands, no home,  
You found you were an artist,  
Creating an escape.

What do you sing for your supper on a cobblestone  
street in Dublin,  
Carrying the past, in the voice of a gypsy child,  
Dirty face, strong eyes,  
His sister said it's from Romania,  
And that they were hungry.

What joy can be felt perched in the high Himalayan air  
of Darjeeling,  
Far from the familiar peaks that filled your horizon,  
Overpass, not under,  
The Dalai Lama on the wall,  
While threads come together.

What direction are you headed under storm clouds in  
Darwin,  
Not back to community, back to crumbling walls,  
Bare feet, plastic bag,  
Long grasser looking for shelter,  
In another Country.

TROY WALSH

## Under 18 years Old First Prize: It's going to be okay

My mother's  
Voice rings through my head,  
The image of her back so vividly  
Did it remind me  
Of the past I used to know.

I don't think I remember  
Anymore  
The place I used to call home.  
Or the home I used to know.

What is a home?

Hiding below the dark,  
Pungent smell of fear,  
The haunting shadow of life.  
Was that my home?

I have been held  
Hostage by my own country,  
Traitor by my own blood.

But that is all behind me.

The unerasable memory of my  
Past, I am free now

That is what she had said.  
That all would be fine.  
To forget.  
To live on.

YUNA CHO

## Refugee and Asylum Seeker Prize: Trap

I sit beside a wooden window, feeling old,  
listening to the rusty squeak of a door hinge  
and watching a beautiful butterfly fly by  
bringing a message of freedom.

Sitting, I have been waiting for this moment for years,  
to dress up in my ironed clothes.

Suddenly, the butterfly disappears in front of my eye  
and searching the sky, I spy  
a black and ugly spider dancing,  
dancing towards its web.

The good-message butterfly is trapped,  
fluttering for its freedom.

Oh God! What does the butterfly experience in this  
moment?

Its death is in the hands of that blackface spider.

My heart trembles in my chest with horror  
and tears fly from my eyes.

I well understand the pain of that butterfly—  
I too have been trapped in my cage for years.

Oh God! I do not want this message of freedom.  
Let it go! Release the butterfly from the web ...

MOHAMMAD ALI MALEKI