



2016 Bruce Dawe Poetry Winners

Winner

497 Small Disappointments

by Jenny Pollak

My dear cell follicles,

I apologise for keeping you
in suspense for so long
and for any false promises my body proffered.
For not granting you the long-lived opportunity
to leave home. For the inconvenience
of being

perpetually on hold. Also,
for not having considered how easily
the long trajectory of the past (the undocumented
lineage of lovers) would be lost. Their scent
gone cold,
like old blood.

Today, I apologise for the inconvenience
you had in being on time, every month
without exception; congratulate you
in the face of such stoicism —
497 minor disappointments
released without rancour

into the dark. If I think of you
it's as imaginary
pearls — impotent jewels
cradled in the safe
harbour
of my fortified canals.



**Did you try out names for size?
Slip on gender and disposition like so many
well-fitting jeans. Lie in my warm salts
dreaming of the infinite
bath. David, Sonia, Pedro,
Sally?**

**When the waves of blood stopped coming,
did you weep? Will we keep company
until the dead end of the road?
Eggs? Are you still speaking to me?
Are any of you still here?
(Sincerely),**

Yours.



High Commended

Bandilngan (Windjana Gorge)

by **Steve Armstrong**

The land is like poetry: it is inexplicably coherent... Barry Lopez, Arctic Dreams.

THIS MORNING a lap-steel
play of light on limestone. The gorge is vascular, bleeds ochre-pink through
gunmetal grey. Gaudi's free-forms shaped

by The Wet; labyrinthine
caves and crevices, pillars and folds. I'm thinking of Jandamarra now, his hiding
places here in the walls. Rifle shots ricochet;

battles fought, for this
is Bunuba country. High up, fine-boned figs and birdsong falls in slow-time
for the mirrored water. The wind quickens

in the silvered throat
of the gorge, is moved to celebrate and the river cannot resist, kicks up its
Cuban heels, no matter how fleeting the mood.

Water like the rocks—
where the Wandjina dwell—remembers all that's over-written; bodies in a
bloodied river, people chained by the neck and driven

on their dreaming paths;
locked behind bars in the belly of a sacred boab. This prison tree, stands within
shout of the longest trough for watering cattle.

I CAME AS THE CATTLEMEN



had come, riding over the land, failing to announce myself or ask leave to enter.
I came and I camped for a week at Windjana Gorge

National Park. Each
day on the bank of the river, busloads of tourists pass; their gorge according to
the guidebook or for some, it's a New Age Jerusalem.

At close of day, an artesian
welling; doubt I'll ever belong. Camp bedding, dry grass and red earth written
in silver. Above my head a blood-wood, a bare stencil

printed on the sky.
Night wind—a Chinese dragon—swoops, rattles the leaves of trees with its tail,
then it's gone. Stars—and no escaping an unblinking

moon; she holds my face
and won't let go. Gravity loosens its ties and when the moon beckons at her
zenith, I lose my nerve, pull the wool beanie over my eyes.

NOTES like tumbled stones,
sink through clear water. A morning solo, high in the half-lit cliffs. Suddenly,
song and darting flight, birds thrill at being earth and sky.

Bare feet, buried in the silt
of the riverbank—now all the selves I bring fall quiet. Play in the dirt, dance and
stand in the clouds of dust and slanting light.

I'm no longer possessed
by a mind that tells me what I do or don't deserve; it's an instrument loosely
held, with breath for brilliant cockatoos, the undulating

line they scribe. Laughter
flies off the walls, I'm caught in the motionless eye of a freshwater croc, rooted
to the ground. Tonight, my branches brush the stars.



Notes

1. *Windjana Gorge* the name settler cattlemen gave to the place traditional owners, the *Bunuba*, call *Bandilngan*.
2. *Jandamarra*, a *Bunuba* man, led a lengthy guerilla campaign against cattlemen and police in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. He was shot dead in 1897 at Tunnel Creek by Mingo Mick a black trooper.
3. *Wandjina*: Dreamtime Creation Spirits who are said to have retired to the rocks of the Kimberley.