

12th Annual Fred Cogswell Award For Excellence in Poetry

Judge's statement

It's been my honour to judge the Cogswell Award for Excellence in Poetry. All ten books selected for the longlist are intensive and enduring works—many with pockets of levity, revelation, and wit that ain't easy to come by. Wrangling entropy with refined craft and purpose, the three finalists especially gripped my heart and have left me still marvelling at the work involved. In these worrisome everydays it is no small feat for a book of poetry to carry the reader away for a while.

3RD PLACE *Precedented Parroting* by Barbara Tran (Anstruther Books|Palimpsest Press)

In the poem “Teetering Under Telos” in *Precedented Parroting* Barbara Tran unfolds,

*In the beak
of a bird
is a sunflower*

*seed weight
or energy? Effort
in flight*

*increases with increases
in load Light
as a bent*

*feather
Refraction refers
to the bending*

*that occurs
between one medium
and another*

Mesmerizingly, it goes on. This whole book manages a swooping arc of familial and avian narratives, suffering, touching—shining, singing with many slight decisions reinforcing emphasis and syntax. I was swept up in the cadence. “What would it be without birds” Dionne Brand contextualises unforgettably. Tran’s considered poems extend such attention and reverence.

For the winged, and with careful accounting in the aftermath of viruses, I find myself grateful for the insight of Tran’s *Precedented Parroting*.

2nd PLACE MIDWAY By Kayla Czaga (House of Anansi Press)

There is nothing about Kayla Czaga's poems that are nonchalant. How the poet manages to land this cool tonality and irreverent and disarming kind of charm in the face of grief, nonetheless, is a feat. Given the work of surviving and still loving, and the presence of critical chops required to interrupt normative thinking at the level of the line, constantly, MIDWAY operates in persistent revolution. What this poet is able to observe and render, deepens with a layering of horrific, absurdist (honest), and stunning detail. This collection is a triumph, from a poet of remarkable poise and wit.

DEAR BRENDA (excerpt)

*In the bottle that washed up on the beach
instead of a note I found
my father's false teeth*

*smashed into pieces
like pills for me to swallow.*

*They fell from the bottle single file,
shiny airplane passengers
evacuating via the emergency slide*

*and I scattered them in the sand for seagulls
to pick at like popcorn kernels.*

*The sky was grey. The sand was darker grey.
The sea was darker still
with flecks of green between its teeth.*

1st PLACE – *The Flesh of Ice* by Garry Gottfriedson (Caitlin Press)

I have struggled to put into words my reflections on Garry Gottfriedson's *The Flesh of Ice*. I cannot separate the work out from its generational knowledge as these poem's profound dedication to *le estcwicwéy* (the missing) require a reader to honour such enduring relations.

In "My Body as Storyteller" the poet, "breaks / elegantly / 215 times / repeatedly / infinitely" (p26).

What to do with such strength and generosity. After "The River" and "Water is Life", comes "Granny" and "Mom" and twenty-eight stories/poems of experience, witness, and account. Then "When Yellow Leaves Detach" and "Dad". Then thirty more stories/poems, until "Garry". And Garry is adjacent, intelligentsia, conviction onto "The Vatican" ('fathers' and 'sisters')—"God's Shame." Eventually the poet facilitates a portal, opening to "...Us" "You" "I" and "We". Understand, this is just the table of contents.

The work is difficult,

Texting Dead Loves (excerpt)

*dull headspace
fixated and full
of compunction*

*logic
doesn't thrive
in the heart*

*a mouth full
of strawberry love
spat out*

—pp27-28

the poems persist,

The Flesh of Ice (excerpt)

*river's frozen face
gnarled and jammed
thick ice skin
clear and sharp
reflections
stagnant in winter
crisp
crunching
snow
echoing footsteps*

*215 times
tromping
deceptive intentions
from the dorms to the river*

—p37

This book holds the careworn recollections of survivors and descendants; each devoted poem crafted to suit a narrative that has been shared for this purpose. Each page is a place for a reader to pause and reflect.

Joanne
*your name
will be
spoken
by people
who don't
even know
you
in rooms
that you
will never
go in
becoming
a symbol of strength
where weakness blooms
tattoo this
in the hearts of girls
following
your name*

—p57

The Flesh of Ice, indeed Gottfriedson's substantial body of work, is grounded in ongoing contributions to Secwépemc language, sovereignty, and community. This book demonstrate the possibilities of poetry with humbling and galvanizing momentum. The people are steadfast, "juniper scent fills and lingers / the breath of nightfall" (p37) and in the morning, there are poems.



January 17, 2026

Cecily Nicholson