

Judges Report, KSP 2021 Poetry Awards.
Caitlin Maling

I judged the KSP poetry awards according to my son's breastfeeding and nap schedule. It meant that every two hours, or so, for a month I was able to sink into poetry, to find my own type of sustenance. For sustenance is indeed what I found in these poems, varied as they were. There's something alchemical to poetry, it takes the ordinary language we consume and produce day-in, day-out, and renders it something that nourishes us and – for me personally – sustains us when we are awake at ungodly hours like 4am when the baby decides simply not to sleep.

The poems that I've chosen to award prizes to were only a few of the hundreds of entries which, through their particular poetic nourishment, made my nights and days more rich. There were poems that delighted for their wild abandon, those who risked obscurity and there were those who demanded in their precision that every poetic decision be knowable. Subjects were as varied as the alphabet itself, but nature was probably the dominant theme. Understandably there was a sense of unease and even rage in these poems, many of which reflected the aftermath of last year's painful bushfire season and the anticipation of many more to come. This was particularly acute in the Youth Categories, although it was paradoxically encouraging to see the both the passion of the next generation and their talent.

There were of course poems that were less strong. Often this was a case of the poet relying on familiar images, or at worst clichés. There was also the unthinking, and again clichéd, use of rhyme or form. One thing I would encourage poets to consider is the idea of juxtaposition and counterpoint, how can you place the elements of the poem in contrast to one another to add or complicate meaning. If you choose to place all the elements working towards a singular meaning, it needs to be a choice, one you as the poet are making to signify the intensity of the direction of your focus.

All the poems that have placed or been commended displayed this type of poetic thought and complication.

I'll begin with the Youth Section:

In this section I have commended two poems in no order:

“red” by Katie Andrews, WA, 14 years, International School of WA: A surprising meditation on the colour red with a sting in the tail.

and

“bedtime” by Josephine Marston, WA, 14 years, Hope Christian College: Almost a parable, the swift variations of a rhyme scheme keep us unsure of the fate of the boy in this poem.

Highly commended was: “lessons” Kyla Rajkumar, NSW, 16 years, Westbourne College. A brutal ars poetica which displays the real promise of a voice in the process of being discovered.

Second Place was awarded to “I’ve just shaved for the first time” Zara Vale, NSW, 16 years, Melba Copland Secondary School. Perfectly balancing anaphora and a conversational voice, the poem negotiates tenderly the right of passage named in the title.

First place went to “the box” Bella Rose, WA, 15 years, Halls Head College. In my notes while I was reading entries I wrote “oblique tale about a boy trapped in a box”, which the poem definitely is but is also so much more than. Largely in rhymed couplets, it’s a poem which asks us to consider how we the distinctions between nature, order and man, while refusing to resolve the questions it raises.

I also chose to award the Mundaring National Encouragement Award for a Poet Under 14 Years to “A forgotten dream”: Brianna Elvish, VIC, 14 years, St. Peter's College. Told from the unexpected perspective of a forgotten god, this poem renders the cosmos in finely wrought images.

We will now move on to the Annette Cameron Encouragement Award for an Unpublished WA Poet. I would love to see more people entering this category in future as I know we have many fine unpublished poets in the state. I always say to people I meet who say, I’ve written a poem but I’m not a poet that of course they are a poet. So to all those not-poet poets who aren’t entering their poems to competitions such as this, please throw them in the ring. However, I am pleased to have found three exceptional poems in this category.

Commended went to “Nobody Home” by Carolyn Parker, WA. This poem stuck out for how it sharply shifted between large statements on adolescence and the very specific of “Nobody’s home at Olga’s place”.

Highly Commended went to “Baby” by Shahnoor Nina Gregory, WA. It’s a hard task to write a poem about cancel culture which moves beyond being a diatribe or a pun, but the specificity of this list poem which ends on the image of “eating slowly with both hands” being cancelled is impossible to ignore.

First Place went to “Impossible Jeans” by Lisa Collyer, WA. There’s a contained fury in this poem, established through the very careful and precise deployment of diction and lineation. It allows Collyer to shift between architectural scene, historic moment and the all too fragile human body.

In the Open Section were many, many, fine poems. From these I whittled down my commendeds to three:

“The Birthing Room” by Carolyn Abbs, WA. This was actually the poem I read the most times. It resists giving us anything other than concrete description, apart from

the image of a “shade sail” that “could take off like an albatross”, but it’s a deliberate lack of imagery that keeps us trapped as the speaker is trapped in their body.

“A Blackbird by Any Other Name” by Paula Jones, WA. Offers us almost the exact opposite of Abbs’s poem, a luxuriance of images as befits the *warding* with its “iridescent purse-sized evening dress”.

“Haruspicy” by Chris Armstrong, TAS. A macabre and rococo depiction of roadkill that is impossible to unsee.

I offered two highly commended to:

“Suburban Summers” by Scott-Patrick Mitchell, WA. An incredibly evocative prose poem that shifts from nostalgia to elegy.

“Regrowth” by Jan Napier, WA. Every syllable is measured for sound and impact in this startling tree-bound villanelle.

Second place went to “Peach” by WA’s own Jan Napier. In a muscular twelve lines that reveal no narrative but everything of heartbreak, Napier demonstrates that a small poem can be a winning one.

First place went to “Failures” by Damen O’Brien of Queensland: I kept returning to the opening line of this poem wherever I went “Somewhere even now, a man is failing a woman”, I thought about it when I observed couples in cafes the waitresses, as O’Brien says cruising “by like grey nurse sharks”. It’s a wry poem, crafted from experience and honed by poetic craft.