

Katharine Susannah Prichard Poetry Prize Judge's Report 2022 - Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

In reading over 200 entries for this year's KSP Poetry Prizes I was impressed by the breadth and depth of material covered. Topics in the poems for this year's entries covered the climate crisis, nature (with lots of bird, butterfly, landscape, and tree poems), modern beauty standards, social media, myths, identity, mental health, loneliness, cancer, death, grief, and the law. State of mind and mental health were the sub-text of many entries this year, undoubtedly a result of our collective pandemic experience and climate change anxiety.

Being a poet and writing teacher, as I began the judging process, I knew I was looking for; a precise use of words, playfulness, avoidance of cliché, the unique voice of the poet to shine through and a clear through-line in the poem from beginning to end. From my view, each successful poem is diamond, which may have begun as a lump of coal — or an unpolished rock — that through pressure, time and shaping (re-writing) with a sharp tool (editing or poetic skill) is cut and made to shine. For with a diamond when it is held up to the light each facet sparkles, and as such if a poem is a diamond not a word should be wasted or out of place - each facet, stanza, line, word should shine. Here are the poems that shined this year:

Firstly, for the Youth Section the **Mundaring Encouragement Award for a Poet Under 14** years goes to **Willow Dunlop for 'The Library'** - a gorgeous poem that avoids the trap of easy rhyme and extolls the virtues of visiting the library, ending with the line that likens a visit to the library as a "A journey waiting to be continued." I must award **Highly Commended** to the haiku **Autumn** by 9-year-old **Eliza Sharry**, which on first reading had my heart: "A leaf all alone / Nothing will get in its way / A survivor stands."

Next, is the **Youth Category (up to 18 years)**; overall the work by youth was outstanding and a pleasure to read with young writers unflinchingly confronting ideas like mental health, beauty standards, exam pressure, identity, and love. I'm sure many adult writers could learn from youth writers by using an economy of words to convey ideas. There are four **Commended** poems: **'Nothing Oriental'** by Isabel Gong, **'Paradise Lost'** by Mehvish Mehboob, **'At the Blank Wall a Turning Point'** by Zara Pereira and **'The Death of a Procrastinator'** by Guo Ru. For **Highly Commended** I could not go past this menacing and

excellent poem by a 10-year-old, ‘**Secrets**’ by **Ellie Yang** and the playful abecedarian ‘**Alphabet of Love**’ by **Madeleine Zeng**.

In **Second Place** is ‘**Four**’ by **Jasmine Cullen**, an incredibly mature free verse narrative poem where a fifteen-year-old looks back on their four-year-old self. With the opening lines “You told me a story / from when I was four / when my mouth was too young to wrap around each syllable of your name” the reader is drawn in immediately to the poet’s world and Cullen expertly builds the poem from there.

First Place is awarded to ‘**drowning in front of a white man**’ by **Sharon Zhang**, a biting poem examining identity and emerging womanhood. With lines like “waterlogged my / chest is a 300 word / Insta bio quote” this poet surely has a bright future. Their use of visual elements to offset each second line adds a discordant note and heightens the underlying tones of racism and sexism examined in the poem.

Congratulations again to all the Youth Category winners and Mundaring Encouragement Award poets. I do hope you all continue to write poetry and hone your craft. Those diamonds are not always found or cut so easily.

Turning to the **Annette Cameron Award for an Unpublished WA Poet** three poems stood out. **Commended** in this category is ‘**Everyday Alchemy**’ by **Jennifer Catalano**. This poem plays with colloquial language and everyday failures such as when windscreen wipers stop working with a laconic result. Yet the poet’s message is deep: “we want to make it good for our kids.” ‘**Calling Hecate**’ by **Jo Hanna** is **Highly Commended**. This poet has a spirited approach to language and ‘**Calling Hecate**’ reads like a modern-day prayer that should be performed as a spoken word piece. The poem leaps off the page with repeated “Ahhh-men’s” and “Cha-ching\$\$,” challenging the patriarchy and our colonial past the poet calls on Hecate to save us from “the tears of a vanishing earth”. From the first line of ‘**The Third Trimester**’ by **Ella Tan** I was immediately gripped: “Together we have lain on the dark floor of the earth’s crust.” A modern lyric poem written from the point of view of a woman in her third trimester, this poem encompasses the dread and fear of losing a baby. Using the metaphor of the ocean without cliché Tan’s poem invokes the “courage / on the tip of the tongue” that those who have experienced or fear infant loss hold within us. This is a beautiful poem that

examines how fragile life is, without a wasted word, which deserves to win the Annette Cameron Award.

Moving onto the **Open Section**, the three **Commended** poems are **Rhian Healy's 'Things That Mooch'** - a postmodern pastiche that gripped with Plath allusions, **Jan Napier's 'I Start to Tell You'** - an enthralling pastoral on loneliness and grief, and **Scott-Patrick Mitchell's 'Hold, Release'** - an artful, spare love poem citing the work of a graffiti artist.

Highly Commended is **Claire Reberger's 'Segments of Grief'** which explores a self broken by grief in tight stanzas. The poem contained these powerful lines I returned to and re-read several times: "Each phrase / laid down like gauze; warmth to the wound, / caressing my heart..." Also **Highly Commended** is Claire Hampson's 'Scar Tissue' that examines the physical and psychological results of a mastectomy. This poem cuts and heals, with the opening line speaking its intention with this powerful metaphor; "If you could see the one across my right breast / you'd think it was a smile". I have no doubt this poet has more to say.

In **Second Place** this year is an incredible poem by **Jan Napier, 'Body and Soul'** that I returned to read many times. 'Body and Soul' uses visual tools to break up lines, reflecting the disjointedness of being in a hospital room as a loved one passes, yet light breaks the dark subject matter with these lines, an "off the shoulder gown worn with grace / unmatched by catwalk Naomis and Heidis." Having made both the commended category and second place this poet has a strong voice and command in their poetry. I do hope she publishes this powerful work soon.

First Place in the Open Section goes to a stunning prose poem. This poet's work is a complex exploration of the power and impotence of the legal system that appears to come from deep knowledge of the workings of the system. Dividing the poem into stanzas the poet builds the narrative from what we can guess is a family, proceeding from "before we walked into the courthouse" to "when the presiding judge entered." The strength in this poem is in the building of its narrative, the precise use of language and that it offers no easy answers; "for one second only we stood as silent as an army before a call to war as / quiet as a village before a ransack." There is tension throughout, artful use of narrative and an expert combination of both poetic and prose devices. This is an epic yet intimate poem that takes us on a trip from an "alcoholic womb" to "kiss the gnarled hand of a priest." Congratulations,

Angela Costi for your incendiary poem ‘**Swapping One Dysfunctional Family for Another.**’