

KSP Poetry Prize Judge's Report

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood," wrote T. S. Eliot. There are moments as a reader when, through words alone, we find ourselves suddenly elsewhere, in another life, another room, another feeling, and that quiet act of transport is the great privilege of reading and judging poems.

I felt deeply honoured to be invited to judge this year's KSP Poetry Prize. Across the entries, I was struck by the range of voices, the confidence of craft, and the courage with which poets tackled intimate, historical, and social themes. The overall standard of writing in all categories was exceptional. It was a genuinely tough task to separate works that were often only a breath apart in quality.

In the end, my choices came down to poems that stayed with me: pieces that spoke to me deeply, that felt both poignant and clear-eyed, and that were unafraid to express complex emotion without flinching or dissembling. I was looking for work where form and voice felt inevitable, where each image, line break, and sonic choice worked in service of a living, breathing poem.

What follows are a few comments on the awarded works.

Adult Category

First Prize: *Shallow Burial in Hamilton Hill* by Ross Belton (WA)

Shallow Burial in Hamilton Hill confronts how colonial violence remains just beneath the surface, letting paperbark ghosts, white-tailed cockatoos, and a shrouded massacre swamp show that Country remembers what suburbia tries to forget. It won first prize for the way it holds these conflicted layers of history in spare, resonant images, trusting silence, and implication to carry a deep, haunting emotional power.

Second Prize: *Sculpture by the Lake* by Rose van Son (WA)

Sculpture by the Lake invites us to see the lake itself as artwork and poem. It brings the reader into a scene that feels both still and charged, where sculpture, water, poem, and observer are in subtle dialogue with one another through many paths that meander. The poem won second prize for its finely controlled, quietly luminous attention to the more-than-human world, where precise detail and musical phrasing turn close observation into a contemplative act.

Highly Commended: *Nesting Tables* by Angela Costi (VIC)

Nesting Tables is an inventive, deftly structured poem that turns an everyday object into a rich metaphor for memory, inheritance, and the layering of lives. Its domestic focus is anything but small; the poem uses the stacking and unstacking of tables to explore the ways we hold and rearrange our personal histories.

Highly Commended: *Flying Over Stone Country* by Jan Napier (WA)

Flying Over Stone Country sets a brief plane flight against the vastness of stone country “where all the rivers begin”. The poem hints at deep time and enduring culture beneath a transient, privileged vantage point, aware that what lies below is older and larger than the traveller can fully grasp. It was highly commended for this sweeping yet respectful perspective, and for imagery and cadence that hold awe, history, and responsibility in a single, resonant moment.

Commended: *The Lemon Arrives Uninvited* by Laura Rowan (WA)

The Lemon Arrives Uninvited turns a piece of fruit into an intrusive, surreal force: “a light too yellow to bear that splits the table”, “a listening lemon”, and “a prophecy written in rind”. The poem shows how one sharp, sour truth can seep into every corner of life. It was commended for its dark humour, inventive imagery, and the way it balances playfulness with an underlying emotional sting.

Commended: *Spangled* by Jenifer Hetherington (WA)

Spangled transforms jellyfish in the shallows, coruscating river ripples, and a moon snail egg sac into a tiny, glittering cosmos, a “gelatinous gleam ripe with constellations held up to the sun”. The poem suggests how temporary and tender the universe can feel when glimpsed through these fragile, luminous lives. It was commended for its vivid, shimmering imagery and the way it turns close observation of water and light into a moment of quiet awe.

Commended: *Chasing the Moon* by Jenifer Hetherington (WA)

Chasing the Moon follows a “mother-of-pearl disk” over a “black-glass sea”, through “dimpled pink-gold veils” and the “dead-moon eye of a fish”. The poem suggests how hope and longing keep circling back through our days. It was commended for its striking lunar and oceanic imagery, and for the way it braids cosmic motion with intimate, human feeling.

Youth Category (U18)

Reading the Youth Category was a particular joy. The range of subjects, the willingness to take risks with form and imagery, and the emotional intelligence on display were arresting. These young poets are already thinking deeply about the world and finding inventive ways to translate that thinking into language. Many of these pieces would sit comfortably in an adult competition, and the final decisions here were often very close.

First Prize: *The Invisible Man* by Su Nguyen (SA)

The Invisible Man is a compelling and beautifully controlled poem that explores invisibility in both literal and metaphorical ways. It handles themes of marginalisation, self-perception, and the desire to be seen with a maturity that never feels forced. The central conceit is clear and strong, yet the poem allows for nuance and ambiguity, inviting multiple readings.

Second Prize: *Phases of Love* by Tanishqa Cheeran (NSW)

Phases of Love is an elegant and thoughtful poem that uses its central metaphor, of Moon phases, to full effect. By structuring love and the mother-child bond through phases, the poem captures the way relationships sometimes undulate and shift—through tenderness, uncertainty, distance, and return.

Highly Commended: *Turn of Years* by MARRS (NSW)

Turn of Years uses a doorknob as its central metaphor, turning “through lifetimes” from the “warm-butter touch of a young couple” to sticky-palmed children. The poem reflects on how ordinary objects carry whole histories of love, safety, and change. It was highly commended for this tender, perceptive concept and for the deft, sensory images that make time and memory feel so immediate on the page.

Highly Commended: *Hyacinthus and Apollo* by Yumi Takusagawa (NSW)

Hyacinthus and Apollo is an ambitious, richly imagined poem that re-engages with classical myth in a fresh, personal way. It shows a strong grasp of narrative and symbol. And, there is a confident handling of tone as the poem moves through the many facets of beauty, longing, love, and grief.

Commended: *Pretty Natural* by Anabel Liu-Mu (VIC)

Pretty Natural traces how self-judgement and pressure can feel strangely “natural”, reshaping the inner landscape in unsettling, organic ways. It was commended for its bold, visceral central image and the emotional honesty carried in such compact, arresting lines.

Commended: *Orange Memories* by Tristan Beale (VIC)

Orange Memories traces how colour, light, and small movements in nature can hold memory and comfort, then tip us back towards the future. The focus on “orange” becomes a way of tying together moments, feelings, and fragments of story, giving the poem a strong internal coherence. It was commended for this simple yet resonant arc, and for its quiet optimism.

Commended: *Unfolding* by Zetara Bheem (VIC)

Unfolding follows a girl who loves a sport. Moving from “No I can’t play” to “Why can’t I?”, and finally “Yes I can”, the poem traces a powerful arc from doubt to solidarity and self-belief. It was commended for its clear, uplifting narrative and the way it turns a familiar moment of self-doubt into a vivid, empowering declaration.

Annette Cameron Award for An Unpublished Poet Category

The Unpublished Category brought together poems that felt close to the page—intimate, searching works that trusted language to carry complex feeling without the scaffolding of prior publication. The standard here was extremely high, with many pieces showing strong control of voice, image, and structure. The awarded poems are ones I kept returning to, each offering a distinctive emotional and imaginative space.

First Prize: *You Spoke to the Ghost of Your Friend Who Died in Hospital* by Duc Dau (WA)

You Spoke to the Ghost of Your Friend Who Died in Hospital is an intimate, unguarded poem that approaches grief with a rare mix of tenderness and restraint and shows grief's strange, shifting shapes. The poem honours the small, untidy miracles that remain after loss. It won first prize for its fearless emotional honesty and vivid, surprising images that make mourning feel at once intimate and quietly profound.

Highly Commended: *Rain Music* by Jenifer Hetherington (WA)

Rain Music whispers to a mother who sleeps "in a honeysuckle nook in my heart". When rain comes as a soft susurrantion, it feels like both benediction and release, giving sound to a grief that has long been held inside. It was highly commended for this tender fusion of weather and mourning, and for its gentle, finely tuned music of image and line.

Commended: *The Art of Reconstruction* by Laura Rowan (WA)

The Art of Reconstruction is a thoughtful, layered poem that considers what it means to piece a life, a body, or a story back together. It navigates memory and disruption with clarity, and there is a strong sense of care in how it approaches this subject matter. It was commended for this lucid, hopeful meditation on remaking a life after fracture, and for its graceful, luminous imagery.

Shire of Mundaring Encouragement Award (Under 14)

It was heartening to see poets under 14 working with complex ideas and strong emotions, often with a startling clarity of image and feeling. The Shire of Mundaring Encouragement Award recognises a young writer and a distinctive emerging voice whose work shows particular promise.

Encouragement Award: *The Silence of Death* by Isla Ullman (NSW)

The Silence of Death is a bold, atmospheric poem that steps into difficult territory with striking assurance. It leans into stillness and quiet rather than drama, allowing the weight of its subject to build through carefully chosen images. The poem explores death and silence, vulnerability, and a heavy emotional existence, through stark, distilled language. Although unsettling, it is a courageous and powerful piece for a poet of this age.

To all the poets who submitted to the KSP Poetry Prize: thank you for entrusting your work to this competition. Even in poems that did not receive an award, I found lines, images, and turns of thought that caught at the heart. It was a genuine privilege to spend time with these poems, and I hope every entrant will continue to write, refine, and share their work with the wider world.

—Lakshmi Kanchi (SoulReserve)