

2024 KSP POETRY COMPETITION – JUDGES REPORT

by Scott-Patrick Mitchell

The 2024 KSP Poetry Competition was incredible to judge. This year, there was so much talent across all three sections. Thank you everyone who entered.

This competition was akin to opening atlases. Each poem was a destination in of itself. Sometimes the poet would take me to actual places, signposted in the title of the poem, sites within Australia and across the globe unfamiliar to myself. Unfamiliar, that is, until reading their poems. Sensory details, deft language and vivid images folded into each other to create visions. At other times, these atlases would open inward, to the soul. These poems were delicate examinations of familiar emotions, shifted slightly, seen through different eyes, excavating tension, fear, loneliness and anger or letting joy bloom. They were miraculous moments, each different, each bringing their own light to the frame.

This is the joy of poetry: how we see ourselves in others' words. How the world pivots, ever so slightly, to reveal something new. There were many instances of that this year, and I commended every poet who entered on showing me something wonderful, something personal, something unique.

I would like to mention that Darrelle Spenceley, Susan Fealy and Brendan Craig all entered moving poems. Of note is Nick Mills' *Adoption Day* which captured the raw blazing spirit of poetry. To these four poets: your poems sang with an intoxicating light that made me so grateful that you are writing, are exploring the world through your own words.

And to the poets in the Youth section who wrote about difficult topics, from ideation to abuse, know you are seen, know you are heard, know that your words are essential. Poetry can help us heal, and I encourage these poets to keep crafting poems.

Ultimately, all the finalist's poems exhibited three traits: ingenuity, craft and that je ne sais pas or "wow" factor. To these finalists, thank you for making my judging experience a blessing, a marvel, a moment where I could sit with your words and feel embraced.

YOUTH

Commended – Ophelia in grist by Lucy Griffiths (NSW)

To write of muses is to give life to inspiration. Griffiths' poem gives agency to Elizabeth Siddal, muse of Rossetti, in a manner that is wrought with elegance, empathy and an ear for language far beyond the poets 15 years of age. Contained magnificence, brilliant poise.

Commended – hiraeth by Isla Constantine (QLD)

Poetry can encapsulate yearning with such delicate energy, as is the case in Constantine's poem. Here, needlecraft becomes an act of gathering distance, of "(f)itfully stitching memories / together again". The poem weft and weaves down the page, capturing "a melody of a place no past" with aplomb. Sparse yet detail rich, this poem is a delight.

Commended – Winter Flower by Annie Zhou (VIC)

Zhou's poem is a masterclass in voice. This poem examines invasive vines—resilient, determined—before the poem pivots and we are reminded we are "crocus, camellia". The tone of this poem is almost holy, reverent. Another constrained poem, here language is stripped back, and we are reminded that "(w)hatever fuel it found / is spent, is over, is ash".

Highly Commended – The Toilet by Jayden Woo (NSW)

Have you ever wondered what might happen if Hera Lindsay Bird and Chen Chen collaborated? The result would be Woo's poem, which takes toilet humour to a new level. A hilarious yet deeply profound poem that reminds us of how much time we waste (literally) listening to the unkind voice inside of us. At the age of 14, Woo shows incredible promise as a poet who is capable of making the seemingly absurd into a delightful revelation.

Highly Commended – this morning i stood by the lake by Varona Chen (NSW)

Chen's poem uses a clear, deft voice to bring us into a spiritual space where there are "dewdrops of spicule and speck, / an auburn nest North, a naked tree West". Here, the speaker of the poem is called by the lake to baptise themselves. And they do, using the life and colour of the water, of the landscape, to be transformed. A moment of divinity, this poem sings with originality and freshness. An absolute blessing.

Highly Commended – Positive Space by Angela Yang (NSW)

This year, many of the prose poems submitted read like prose. But not Yang's poem. This piece jolts and fizzes with an inner temporal elasticity and associative rhythm where phrases like "Cold thighbacks", "Mercury geography" and "You are a special toothache" co-habit. Yang's poem is the epitome of play and eloquence. Experimental, alive and bigger than life with the closing line "It will look something like nothing, which is even more beautiful."

Mundaring National Encouragement Award for Poets under 14 – Beautiful Blossoms by Angela Wu

In six lines, 11 year old Wu conjures an image of stillness and endurance. A tree, winter-barren, is thinning into the landscape. Wu's observation of snow gently falling feeds the tree full, transforms it into "a sugar-covered dessert". Delicate and tender, this poem speaks of hope and perseverance. A brilliant example of constraint by an inspiring young poet.

2nd Place – indigo by Sara Jiang (NSW)

Jiang's poem has an inherent complexity that is undone by the musicality of its imagery. Here, it feels as though Death or some other force is calling us on, through a flicker-show of life, "another heart echo amongst / 2.5 billion cross-stitches". This is a liminal poem where "dew-caked silk webs weave, unweave" and "the myth of dawnlight cast halos". Haunting, grand and resolutely self-aware, yet also wonderfully abstract and almost fragmented, this is an incredible piece by 12 year old Sara Jiang who shows unparalleled promise as a poet.

1st Place – The Antidote for Desire by Ruby Stephenson (QLD)

As a performance poet, I keenly looked for poems that used rhythm to propel the poem on, and this poem achieved this in spades. Ingenious rhymes add a flippancy and astuteness to this piece, a clever circumvent from the poem's content, it's wrestling and restlessness between desire and Thanatos. "But do not talk about death. / Only the want- / neon lights / movements in the tide". This poet tugs and pushes the reader until the exact moment before revealing the antidote to desire... which is exactly where the poem ends. A sustained, intelligent piece that reaches outward and draws in. The effect is sublime and beguiling.

ANNETTE CAMERON ENCOURAGEMENT AWARDS

Commended – Souvenirs by Jake Dennis (WA)

A tender poem, *Souvenirs* recounts love through shared objects as the poet's wife awaits a transplant. Full of yearning, this poem lulls in a liminal space made stable by the poet's wit and how they "craft origami / petals of poetry". Nostalgic yet resolutely present, this piece is an "odyssey through objects" which "is everything for us, for now".

Highly Commended – All Souls' Day by Jenifer Hetherington (WA)

With its startling yet frank opening lines "My father died this morning / at first light in the season of / amethyst trees", this poem captures loss and grief with astounding vision. Buying sushi as a distraction further compounds grief – "My father is not a fish // my father is dead". The poet reaches for comfort again and again, but one simple fact remains: "My father is not". Brutal, tender and necessary.

1st Place – Time Lines by Gaye McPhie (WA)

Using tercets, this poem recounts the poet visiting her estranged birthmother in hospital. This is a tactile poem that reaches as the poet recognises herself in her birthmother's "short fingers // dimpled knuckles" where she "find(s) my exiled body in hers". The ending leans into

palmistry, where Children Lines confirm the poet's existence as she "take(s) my place in one of those / grooves". Concise, moving and haunting.

ADULT / OPEN

Commended – Tea Ceremony by Melita Masters (WA)

This poem draw parallels between the outer and the personal. A pelican "with wings like a paintbrush / swollen with colour" descends to pierce the "skin of river". This matches the ripples in the poet's teacup. The final stanza blazes with tight internal rhymes to "reveal how this massive earth / offers rest". A simply gorgeous poem.

Commended – UNADULTERATED HONEY by Ann-Marie Blanchard (WA)

This poem is magical, revels in temporal elasticity and a gyroscopic narrative. A meditation on love and fidelity where "our marriage / is a mystery-our bed teeming with bees". Here we "climb the apirary ladder" to "behold the memory of honey / production" before being consumed by thoughts and rituals of Rome. Magnetic and intoxicating.

Commended – Cement by Damen O'Brien (QLD)

"We are averaging / the Earth, grading it flat". Who knew a meditation on pouring cement could be so profound. As the poet lays a path, this potential prose poem mimics the act with its clever mirroring of white space. We move out toward Disney World, nano-objects and cityscapes of "concrete squaring the Earth". And yet that one paw print in the cement remains. An absolute delight, this poem is inventive and unique.

Highly Commended – Blood Stained Shame by Meg Mayger (NSW)

I was moved by the honesty of this poem, how the act of hanging a "Blood stained / Thrice washed / Soap scrubbed / Sheet" could be so moving. This poet lets us into her world to reveal a universal insight into how people who menstruate navigate such a situation. The lines "see where I'd lain / the night before / in what positions / I'd bled, alone / in my dreams / see / it / here / blowing in the wind" absolutely floored me. Just incredible.

Highly Commended – New Landscapes for Five Year Olds by Cathryn Strickland (NSW)

At only 20 lines and 54 words, this poem is a masterclass in constraint. The aging of the poet's face, seen through the eyes of a 5 year old, is captured in the way water moves, through "river/-lines" and "sediment / deposited in smiling / beaches / where tides / have risen then / fallen". The beauty of this poem is not only the still it conjures, but the humour of the closing lines "if / I turn this way / I become a craggy / range". Such heart and simplicity made this poem an absolute stand out.

2nd Place – Flowers my mother gave me by Ross Belton (WA)

We so often speak of intergenerational trauma, but what of intergenerational power? In this poem, the poet is in-utero, awakened as his mother challenges Parliament House from the public gallery "like some immigrant Boudicca". This poem leans into performative techniques, leaps of the page, whips up a vigour and verve in the reader. The tone is poised, yet riotous, building, building. The final five lines deliver beauty and breathtaking elegy in equal manner: this is not only a poem about the exuberance of life, but the cold shocking reality of death too. Absolutely brilliant and devastating in equal measures.

1st Place – Seeds by Ronald Atilano (NSW)

As the tension between Ukraine and Russia increases, this poem seems timely. Based on a 2022 news report of a Ukrainian woman taunting a Russian soldier to put sunflower seeds in his pocket, so that when he dies, flowers will grow, this poem extrapolates that moment outward, addressing the dead Russian soldier directly. The poem acknowledges the detritus we all carry but tells the soldier "sunflower buds will gently shoot up / from your damp trousers, your frayed fatigues / your cracked boots, your intestines". There is an intensity in this poem that grows and, quite honestly, brought tears to my eyes with each reading. The horrors of war are something that we, as poets, can make sense of, and I congratulate Ronald Atilano on creating

a piece that speaks to the past, the future and the present with such assuredness, such calm, such beauty. Bewitching and essential. Congratulations Ronald Atilano for your poem *Seeds*, which has won the 2024 KSP Poetry Competition

- *Scott-Patrick Mitchell, Judge, November 22 2024*