

KSP Poetry Awards 2017 — Judge's Report by John Kinsella

With over 130 submissions, and many of a high standard, 2017 is a standout year for the KSP awards. I was delighted to find myself challenged, sometimes surprised, and often interested in what I was reading across the four categories of the awards.

I have not been one for strict categories and, indeed, this competition has seen me up to my old tricks. There are two seconds in the Open section, and two seconds in the Youth section. Further, though the Mundaring prize has a straightforward winner, I've added a commended because a second poem in the '14 and under' category showed particular promise.

I was also pleased to see, across the entire competition's entries, a great diversity of formal approaches — from what we might call 'open form' exploring the field of the page, to strict rhyming stanzas, from parataxis and language-play, to traditional forms given new life, such as the sestina. In terms of prosody, it was exciting to see poets working across the artificial boundaries between 'tradition' and 'experimentation', and willing to introduce disparate language and 'materials' into the poem. This was especially true of poems involving the natural world, and certainly the rural world (which is really a very different thing from the 'natural' world!).

One of the things I look for in judging a poem — that most dubious and subjective of acts — is the ability to control and maintain the language register of the poem, yet also be able to disrupt it at salient points. In conventional terms, this might be the substituting of feet in a metred poem to relieve the tedium of the same register — the great users of metre know how to do this. In more innovative terms, it might be to thread seemingly disparate and abstruse material together with a subtle language-play — say a pun, or a metonym for an act or word. Over the whole poem, a varied picture builds. It might be the combination of both these approaches!

From the level of technical accomplishment, and the ability to weave such modes of poem-building as I allude to above, it's my guess quite a few entrants this year are practising, published poets, and those who aren't (and will no doubt become so!) have either read widely or paid careful attention in creative writing classes. But it's

also much more than this — there's a desire on the part of so many poems from this year's gathering to come to grips with what poetry can do, what it can achieve.

I am not one to shy away from poems that are confronting in the name of (what I consider to be) a worthy cause, and that might be said of this group of poems. But how I ended up making my preferences was usually because that confrontation melded with an expectation that language itself, that the component parts of the world around us, life itself, had some say in the poem. To show what I mean, I will start by announcing the winners of the **Open section**.

First, the commended poems, which includes one special commendation, the poem 'deus ex machina' by Kathleen Dzubiel — this poem uses a prose poem rolling effect to accumulate detail of judgement over a child and social certainties that are gradually revealed for the insensitivity and marginalisation they contain. The poem moves from distress to affirmation, and the rolling p(r)oem form perfectly suits the content, the intent. The conversational language draws us in, and it almost takes over its own course of movement and action. The other commended poems in this section are: 'transnational' by Josephine Clarke, 'Wild Ducks' by Julie Watts, 'moth words' by Kevin Gillam, and 'the First Drug' by Natalie D-Napoleon. All technically proficient, all allowing language to do some of the work of the ideas.

Now the second prizes, for, as I've said, there are two I could not separate: one poem is 'at the end of the road is country' by Scott-Patrick Mitchell which, as a deconstructive pastoral with a strange, almost uncanny realignment of the country (as if by the city?), is a disturbing embodiment of why no pastoral can really maintain itself in Australia; and the other poem is 'First Blood: A Sestina' by Natalie D-Napoleon, which is an equally unsettling poem. In it, the body is constantly reconfigured in the ironic light of its own formal creation — a critique of self and society in terms of the female body, a strong undoing of form working hand-in-hand with the application of that form, the sestina.

Now, the winner of the Open section, tightly contested as it was, is 'figue' by Kevin Gillam. This is a superb poem of interiors and exteriors, of the distractions as much as the focuses of language — the music of the poem fuses with the making of music, and the discomfort it engenders in complex social ways. It is honed, balanced,

modulated, intertextual and also disturbingly personal. It's how to write the intimate with a harsh kind of subtlety.

Next we have the **Youth category** for poets aged 10-20, which was a revelation. There was terrific work across the age range. I have two commendations, '8/10' by Kate Benjamin, which shows great control over conversational lines, with a nice twist at the end, and 'Yatting the Crumming' by Hugo Borbilas with its Carrolllesque, energetic wordplay. Again, we have two second places — one is 'Fire Ecology' by Connor Brown, with its sophisticated ecological and domestic-personal politics working in tandem to make something quite impacting. The other second place is 'The Smoky Lens' by Liam Howe, which bothers the reader with its domestic disturbance correlating to the actions of a hazy outside world — we get the sense of smothering and desire for escape contained by irony. First place goes to the highly controlled and accomplished fusion of language and music to make something that includes but is outside both as well, 'Otello Cabaletta' by Yanika O'Brien. 'Their', 'His', 'Her', move around the music and scenery, around the bleak reality of disturbed relations(hips), to offer a piece of art in their place. Again, the disturbance, but contained and waiting to burst out of the skilled, measured lines. Art and symmetry aren't always easy.

And to finish the Youth Section off with a flourish, from such a strong field, the **Mundaring National Encouragement Award for a Poet 14 or Under**. I have selected a highly commended, though there is no category for this, and it's 'La Primavera' by Natasha Nguyen, for its controlled and evocative movement. The winner is 'Not yet' by Damya Wijesekera, which is witty, smart, and determined to take its own path. Of course, if the persona is 'crashing' in or out of 'the bushes', please take care only to be metaphoric, and not damage the bushes in any way!

Finally, we have the **Annette Cameron Encouragement Award** for an unpublished WA poet. I think this is an essential award because it shows the truth of poets among us we likely don't know because they're working outside the usual venues. I have two commendations in this category: 'Bindings' by Katie Mills and 'Domestic lepidoptery' by Helen Thurloe, but for the winner, I have chosen 'attempts at containment' by Helen Thurloe, because of its skilled use of defamiliarising ways of seeing — the mixing of registers of certainty and distortion. Thanks, all!