

**Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre
2016 Poetry Awards**

Judge's Report: Prof Dennis Haskell AM, Chair, writingWA

It was pleasing to find a high standard of entries across all sections of the 2016 Poetry Awards. Particularly in the Open section I had an initial long list of Commendations which I reluctantly had to cut down. However, in each section the winning entry stood out: these were entries with emotional and intellectual content produced through technical skill. In the Youth category works by the under 14s were especially striking: I detect the hand of a very capable teacher since so many of the poems were about birds and the spread of the suburbs. In each section of the competition there was some tendency to express predictable attitudes; for example the young writers invariably lamented the loss of rural areas and environmental degradation. While this is understandable it would have been interesting to read a poem about the need for affordable housing.

Runner up in the Bendigo Bank Award for Under 14s is Tom Kinsella for "Expansion and Contraction", one of those poems about "urban expansion". It is less forced about its message and makes good use of the imagery of flocks of ibises that "fly over / and under" industrial "giant pylons". The winner is an inventive poem about an eternal worry of poets and poetry lovers: "Is Poetry Dead?" The poet plays with rhymes, maths and techno-speak ("Xbox's, Wii's and PS3's") before moving to a declaration of poetry as something other than words on paper. Well done Kai Lovel.

In no particular order, the Commended winners in the Youth category are:

- 1) "Quartz Corvid" by Tim Kinsella, WA
- 2) "Sunshowers" by Malavika Panicker, WA
- 3) "Able's Story" by Kai Lovel, WA
- 4) "Homeland" by Daheng Ou, VIC
- 5) "The Recurring Dream" by Celine Ng, WA

Second in the Youth category is a writer who is 12 years old; I find it hard to believe that anyone is 12 years old, much less the author of "Slumber", a beautifully unforced poem in four quatrains, perfectly metrical and rhymed a-b-c-b. It is a poem of social observation, if anything written from an old man's point of view. Despite the second generation of the Romantics (Keats-Shelley-Byron) dying young, poetry is not generally an art form that produces child prodigies but the author of "Slumber" seems a kind of Mozart! Congratulations again, to Kai Lovel.

The first prize in this category is given for the best poem by an author under 21, so the winner is a 17 year old, Radheya Jegatheva, for "Seven Billion". This is also a poem in quatrains, twelve of them, with strong couplet rhymes. Rhymes so close

together in our time tend to produce humour, but here we get a mix of humour and serious critical commentary about life in the digital age. It begins poised between praise and satire:

Welcome to paradise, don't put down your devices
Or else you might notice our addiction, our vices
Social media is plenty, an online cornucopia
Seven billion people: it sounds just like utopia

An idea of the territory covered can be given by quoting the final, contrasting couplet:

Social media is plenty, an online cornucopia
Seven billion sheep: it sounds just like dystopia.

Time restrictions prevent me from commenting on the four Commended poems in the Open section, partly because they are diverse poems with different subjects and different strengths. These winners are:

- 1) "Ape Man" by Christopher Konrad, VIC
- 2) "Western Meridian" by Christopher Konrad, VIC
- 3) "Some Small Things" by Gail Willems, WA
- 4) "October 31 (Samhain Festival)" by Gail Willems, WA

Diversity also characterises the three main prizewinners. In third place is Jan Price for "Closing Time", a delicate poem about loneliness and set in a café, where the main character finds "You'll reach for your coffee - / swallow its isolation". Second place goes to one of the few poems in the Open section that rhymes, "The Fallen Bull". The poet bravely states the subject in the title, and the twelve quatrains that follow observe the bull in exacting detail:

His majesty was gone, no defiance
Or rejection of life so easily spent –
There was nothing, only an emptiness,
Only a terrible bewilderment.

Like A D Hope's classic "The Death of the Bird", this poem never loses the specifics of the animal but simultaneously conveys concepts and a poignancy that apply even more to humans. Well done to Allan Mackay.

The winner, Damen O'Brien from QLD, submitted an outstandingly energetic, intelligent and forceful poem that also focuses on an animal. The crocodile in "Facts and Fantasies" is anthropomorphised but partly to show how animal-like humans are. That's the "Fantasies" element, in which the crocodile is smarter than the

“fools” of humans and “can’t believe his luck”. This is mixed with facts (“Salt-water crocs / ... possess 24 teeth”) that toss the reader between different sorts of awareness, much as a crocodile might roll him or her in a river. It is also a poem that provokes a good deal of authoritative statement: “Everybody is always prepared to play the odds, or ignore the facts”; “The wide jaws / of destiny are full of teeth”. This is a powerful, sophisticated and very Australian poem that might win any competition around the world.

Flora Smith Encouragement Award for an Unpublished WA Poet

The new WA poetry award for 2016, generously donated by Flora Smith in memory of Annette Cameron, sees commended “Cherry-red Daihatsu Hatchback” (a title I’d like to hear the Beach Boys sing), by Tiffany Hastie, and “Wild Mare” by Julia Horncastle.

Second Prize goes to Veronica Lake for “Memory”, a simply and directly expressed poem about Alzheimer’s Disease. (The poem’s first line is “Who I am, he has forgotten.”) The poem’s simplicity seems a guarantee of authenticity.

The winning entry is also a poem that doesn’t strain for effect, “Nunc Stans”. It is a quiet, thoughtful poem on the subject of transience that requires a number of readings to recognise its subtlety. The poem is conveyed almost entirely through the painterly image of a tulip slowly fading “in a glassy water jar”. Congratulations to Julia Horncastle for winning this inaugural award.