

KSP POETRY AWARDS 2018: Judge's Report by Lucy Dougan

I encountered poems entered in the KSP Poetry Awards 2018 on All Hallows Eve, one of the old hinges of the year, and a day on which the separation between the living and the dead is said to become porous. This specific reading moment made me aware of how well the lyric mode can handle abrupt time-shifts, how nimbly it can negotiate such counterpoints, and more than that—such mysteries. It's not for nothing that poet Tess Gallagher has called poems time machines. Gallagher writes:

[t]he poem...is like a magnet which draws into it events and beings from all possible past, present, and future contexts of the speaker. It is a vortex of associative phenomena.¹

So, I travelled the time portal of these entries looking for poems that make a world, and stay true to that world; and that encapsulate something through the contract between subject and sound in each line. Raymond Carver likened this to laying down courses of bricks in the building of a wall.

The hand-made is always the hand-made with all of its human beauty and striving. I don't believe that there are definitively right and wrong things in poetry but here are some traits to consider avoiding: poeticisms and clichés, excessive abstraction, excessive sentiment, preachiness, big subjects, and spelled out or stagey endings. Whilst a poem is not a formula, it is always a balancing at any one moment of the different ways that sound can mean. It is also always an act of noticing something specific: little things matter. Ultimately, I was drawn to poems that showed me the poet has been reading, not through subject matter or learned allusion, but attention to diction, line, image and rhythm. And I was also keen to find that attentiveness to making a world that holds up in the time of the poem. Along with this, I was drawn to poems that honoured a noticing specific to the poet—that were not generic but particular, quirky and grounded in that specific.

I was struck particularly by the freshness and energy of poems entered in both the Annette Cameron Award and the Youth Category.

Open Section

Commended: Flight by Carolyn Abbs from WA: Another time machine of a poem in which observation of a fellow air traveller teleport the persona into a lush past. There is much delicacy of observation and a particularly strong ending.

Commended: In Urumqui by Barbara Dennis from WA: This pared back and carefully staged poem meditates on the then and now of a journey on the Silk Road finding commonalities as much as difference. It handles its time transpositions with a hard won simplicity.

¹ Gallagher, Tess. *A Concert of Tenses*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989, 96.

Commended: Who? By Graeme Butler from WA: With the wild simplicity of the old ballads and a good ear for half rhymes (confusion/horizon) this small gem of a celebrates that most poetic of birds—the raven.

Highly Commended: Time Flies by Karen Atkinson from WA: As it's title suggests, this poem is a time machine if ever there was one. It skillfully weaves a reading of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* with experiences of the WWII in two hemispheres with the spectre of Woolf's wartime suicide hanging over it all. It is unsentimental but very moving. It is very much in control of its longer lines, a hard think to achieve.

Highly Commended: Happiness is a colouring book and a jar of pencils by Jenny Blackford from NSW: This sad yet joyous and agile rabbit-hole of a poem explores the experience of dementia. It really hits its stride in its beautifully modulated third section in which the world of the colouring-in book turns blue.

Second Place: Desert Island Records by Damen O'Brien from QLD: This beautifully controlled mature love poem counterpoises profundity of feeling with the banality of modern communication. Largely unadorned and pared back, it holds its powder on some stunning later imagery that packs a large emotional punch without ever being cloying.

The poem that has won First Place is a poised meditation on the ways in which we can feel proximate to other times and other historical personages. Through precisely handled imagery it yokes together women's domestic labour and creative work with great skill and subtly reminding the reader that for women artists, in particular, that creative labour is nearly always interleaved with domestic life and work. It is an excellent example of showing over telling. Congratulations to Carolyn Abbs from WA for her poem, Two Women.

Youth Awards

Mundaring National Encouragement Award for a Poet 14 Years and Under: Artemis by Suzannah Katherin Dwyer-Frost from QLD: This miracle of a poem creates its own pristine world that seems entirely in keeping with this subject matter. In it, the mythic figure of Artemis appears to live and breathe and be involved in earthly matters that matter very much now. I cannot praise it enough.

Commended: Letter to My Brain by Leila Heinrich from NT: This inventive self-dialogue takes the reader on a journey of self-discovery with great economy.

Commended: Cobalt Hominoid by Hannah Patterson from WA: In this noir-like futuristic world repetition is used with a driving force and striking imagery helps to create a sense of menace and tension.

Commended: The Big Bad Wolf by Mikayla Capel from WA: This controlled piece refreshes a well-worn fairy tale motif to write about difficult things. It has both wit and 'teeth'.

Commended: Small by Tai Pickering from WA: This seemingly simple poem marshals thousands of years of poetic thinking into its four graceful stanzas.

Highly Commended: Song for David Bowie by Ethan Dodson from WA: This poem comes out of such a strong base of Bowie Fandom. It interweaves all its allusions with both skill and wit.

Second Place: Now That I'm Older by Tehlia Kerr from WA: This quirky, warts-and-all trenchant love poem is a cascading song to wising up on what it really means to care for another.

First Place: Monarch Avenue by Jae Brieffies from WA: This is a highly sophisticated and structurally controlled meditation on the hardships and inhumanities faced by those feeling violence and persecution. This young poet is very much in control of challenging this subject matter. The poem's documentary mode, structural repetitions and building tension avoid any unwanted sentimentality. A tour-de-force.

It has been a great pleasure and a privilege to spend time with each poem entered here. My congratulations to all the awarded poets and my best wishes to all entrants, especially for their writing.

Annette Cameron Encouragement Award

Commended: Eleven by Susan Wemyss: This poem captures the freshness of a youthful voice and way of thinking without any excessive faux naivety. It's almost documentary style and specific detail (the cut out shoes, the cactus, TV shows) is especially appealing.

Commended: The Bride Doll by Jennifer Magann: Dolls, containers of times past and the feelings bestowed on them, are always a fascinating subject. This poem skillfully builds up to its quietly devastating final tercet that manages to encapsulate so much about the construction feminine roles through early play.

Highly Commended: Whenever You Need to Start Again by Natalie D Napoleon: Particularly strong in aligning a self-rejuvenation with ecstatic descriptions of West Australian wild flowers, this poem wealds a powerful healing narrative and uses repetition to great effect.

First Place: Bhreus by Natalie D Napoleon: With its inventive and painfully embodied strands of imagery around sexual development, this poem is a true war cry. This unpublished poet is already in possession of a distinctive voice and they have really struck on a subject matter that engages both them and the reader.