

Kathryn Purnell Poetry Prize 2021

Judge's Report

It has been an honour and a delight to judge the Kathryn Purnell poetry prize this year. The submitted poems were diverse, including lyrical, narrative and formal entries that ranged from philosophical and psychological contemplations to recollections of small, lived moments. Among these, an unsolicited theme emerged—there were a number of poems about movement. Poems featured roads and paths, swimming and gardening, and encounters with wilderness—perhaps expressing our desire in 2021 to get out, move about, and live.

I made my evaluations based on the polished nature of the poet's method and execution of their poetic intention—that is, their control of language, which itself is evidence of a refined sensibility. Control of language allows the poet to curate the emotional experiences of the reader.

I looked for language and imagery that was minimalist, yet effective. Often, this was achieved through attention to concrete details—what Eliot called an object or objects correlative.

I paid special attention to choices regarding stanza and line breaks throughout the poem, and the poet's ability to end the poem in a satisfying manner.

The first place poem, 'Solace', was a clear stand out in all these regards.

The poem moved through scenes of camping in the Australian bush, from nightfall until morning. The poet's compressed lines and stanzas and the non-traditional use of the white space of the page showcased her precision and expressiveness.

Tone and mood were skilfully conveyed through elements of light in the poem, from the primal excitement of the campfire: 'We stoke the fire / launch spark attacks / on stars woven into the leafy canopy' to the poet's reluctance to leave the location the following morning: 'the ash of a dead fire / the sky-stretching trunks of the gums / and our abandoned camping spot / basking in a square of sunlight.'

Emotional control and restraint made the poem well balanced—flights of fancy such as 'dreams lingering in moon shadow' were contrasted and grounded by 'possums scavenging.' The description of kookaburras 'perched in sentinel pairs / observing the possibilities of breakfast' was a personal favourite.

Overall, the poem showed a keen awareness of each word's impact on the audience, and conjured the relatable human paradox of being both in commune with, and a step apart from, the natural world.

The second place poem, 'Cliff Paths' took a winding journey along the English cliffs and beaches of the poet's childhood. The poem was written in regular, six line free-verse stanzas, well-suited for relaying narrative.

The poem offered the keen observations of a bird-watcher: ‘A skylark explodes from the ground / and up and up on a spiral of song. / I mark the spot, and find its nest, / four brown and blue-grey mottled eggs.’

Wonder was contrasted with wry anecdote: ‘High on a clifftop by the Devon coast / a kestrel hovers, quite un-noticed by / the watchers in the bushes, their binoculars / trained on the nudists on the beach below.’

Control of imagery and tone was adept throughout the poem, especially evident in the excellent closing image of the poet’s memories ‘strung on a thread of birdsong and the tang of the sea.’

The third place poem, ‘Wild Swimming’, depicted an excellent poetic moment—the uncertainty of something unseen brushing against one’s leg whilst swimming. The poet’s irregular lineation and use of truncation created drama and flair.

The description of swimming free-style laps was evocative, especially the controlled enjambment: ‘Long lengths of me / cut through the water / framed by arching arms...Mouth gaping open, looping / in continuous shock.’

The poet’s underwater imagery was vivid: ‘Dark green bottleglass’ and ‘the silver treasure of a trout illuminates’ showed fine attention to colour and light.

Honourable mention goes to two poems, ‘Understanding’ and ‘Hindsight’. The psychological scope of these two poems meant the poets had set themselves challenging tasks.

‘Understanding’ was notable for the clever links drawn between the presentation of Mary’s story in Christian scripture with the poet’s emerging understanding of her own mother: ‘At our weekly rosary circle...tied to the chair by my mother’s faith and eyes that threatened – *do not embarrass me* – I thought about her...I wanted to hear *her* story; not John’s or Paul’s or Luke’s or Matthew’s.’

‘Hindsight’, considered family loss and estrangement after the death of the poet’s father. The poet’s aphoristic qualities in lines like, ‘a lamb’s bleat is a universal language’ and ‘a lone bird rides the air waves so high / it is the shape of an almost squashed lower case m / I long ago drew with crayons on butcher’s paper’ proffered complex realisations about childhood.

Congratulations to all who entered – offering a poem up to another’s scrutiny is not an easy business, and there were lines throughout each of the submitted poems that showed real deftness and poetic sensibility. Many of them are no doubt destined for future success.

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