



Judges' Report Newcastle Poetry Prize 2023

This year, there were over seven hundred poems entered in the Newcastle Poetry Prize. All submissions were considered blind, and we read every one of those poems. It was an arduous but extremely rewarding process. We were advised to each submit an individual long list of one hundred poems to the Hunter Writers' Centre. On the submission of these individual lists, we were provided with each other's lists, which were divided into two groups of poems: those in which there was consensus and those in which there wasn't.

Then the fun began. Meeting in the renovated Catholic church surrounded by bushland which has become John's home on the NSW Southern Tablelands, we spent an entire sunny spring day comparing our choices and working towards a final list. Happily, but not unexpectedly, the poems nominated by both of us were numerous. But we also found there were poems that each of us felt the other had missed, and this meeting gave us the opportunity to argue for poems which had impressed us individually. After much lively and generous debate, we settled on the poems which comprise this anthology. Sadly, though, given the slimness of this volume and the number of excellent submissions, there were many fine poems which did not make the final cut.

We were struck by the high standard of so many entries, but there were traps into which many poems too readily fell. The most prominent of these was too much emphasis on meeting the maximum two-hundred-line limit that was a condition of the competition. Poetry, in its nature, is condensed; there's a reason the poems that affect us most deeply rarely cover more than a couple of pages. Many serious contenders seemed to feel their poems would not be seen as 'weighty' enough unless they approached this maximum length. Consequently, although they had impressive passages, many longer poems did not maintain sufficient intensity or quality. Many could have done with a good edit. In the early stages of his writing career, John recalls sending a multi-paged poem to the inimical Les Murray, and Murray responding, 'Ah, it's a bit long for its length, if you know what I mean.' Yes, Les, we know what you mean.



Many poems seemed to be primarily therapeutic. A good poem can help its maker understand and manage trauma, but the poem itself is often lost when the self becomes its rationale and focus. There's value in restraint, in leaving some tension in the pipeline rather than letting it burst uncontrollably across the page. A good poem engages the reader as part of the process and lets the resonance of well-chosen words do the work. The ability to bring a reader with you into difficult territory, rather than simply demanding sympathy, is one of the hallmarks of good writing. A poem isn't a lecture either, and many of the less successful submissions here seemed to be doing the work of an essay rather than poetry. In our experience, poets rarely know what they want to say until they use the poem to dig into the unfathomable, as Seamus Heaney suggested. Many submissions seemed to be using the poem to express an already formulated concept rather than letting the poem explore something below the mind's surface. Many assumed the 'right thinking' of their makers rather than approaching the poetic experience with tentativeness and humility.

This doesn't imply, however, that good poems are necessarily opaque. We were sometimes disappointed that potentially effective poems were marred by a tendency to be self-consciously obscure; poetry is an inherently difficult art and there's no virtue in making it less approachable than it needs to be. Sometimes the complexity of an experience necessitates a kind of murkiness – Mark O'Flynn's 'D.I.U Eulogy' or Jake Goetz's 'Internal Climates' are good examples of this – but more often than not we felt there was a kind of laziness in the resort to gestures of convolution. The poem on the page is, ultimately, an act of communication. It must be said that, unfortunately, a number of poems appeared to have been AI assisted, or wholly created by AI. It seems that some contributors may have hoped for an Ern Malley moment, where it would be revealed that the winning poem was created by ChatGPT. We'd have enjoyed that moment too – but, at least on the examples we saw, AI is still a pretty terrible poet.

But the poems in this anthology are impressively crafted, demonstrating clear evidence of forensic drafting; they are obviously the result of a process which has been seriously undertaken. The winning poem, Kevin Smith's 'The Crossing' shows a sure command of language and form. In lines spread out across the page like the random rocking of the sea, the poem describes an



ocean crossing undertaken by the narrator, his ailing partner, a young girl at the beginning of her life and an old man facing mortality. The crossing in question, then, becomes metaphorical, but the poem never overstates its premise; it is deeply moving due to its gentle restraint, the power of its imagery and the plain but elegant language it employs. The poignancy of its final lines remain with us both.

The bird soars, and the weather soars—
a coming storm against it. How reverent my beloved,
the wind raging in her face, when the kite finds at last
the dying light—the ferry pushing
hard into what waits.

Mark Tredinnick's 'Lines for late Winter; Or, the Reef Heron' took second place. This poem also considers mortality, the narrator walking his dog along the seashore while noting the small signs of his body's diminishing. This is a resonant, daring poem, its jagged lines and vivid rhetorical gestures holding a tension between the narrator's sense of entropy and his delight in the physical world. Ultimately, it's the poem itself, the act of its creation, that gives the poem its sense of exhilaration, that keeps the poet from despair. It is beautifully balanced. Tredinnick's poem is not simply another ecstatic example of eco-poetry, it warns as much as it praises. 'Tell yourself,' (it begins,) As a reef of cloud swims in low / Across the estuary, like a contrapuntal tide, / Only that the weather is changing, / And the world is not yet coming / To an end. Tell yourself . . .'

Jo Gardiner's 'A Country Childhood' was third. Despite the innocence of its pastoral title, the poem is searingly anti-Romantic. In grim tercets, it plots the narrator's experience of the savagery of a country childhood, where the slaughter of natural things is both horrific and ordinary, and where a child's complicity in this brutality seems inevitable. The evocative, original imagery of the poem is both confronting and oddly beautiful. As with Smith's and Tredinnick's poems, its strength comes from tension and ambiguity. The craftsmanship of this poem is apparent in every line, the form providing an effective scaffold for otherwise free language. There is nothing complacent about these three poems.



Two poems were highly commended: Dženana Vucic's 'My father sits in a room alone' and Todd Turner's 'On the Vale of Soul-Making'. Vucic's poem uses spare, unadorned language and clipped, blunt sentences to paint an uncompromising portrait of a man scarred by war, a country still bleeding from a decades-old conflict. From the outset, Vucic combines split-second imagery with dramatic enjambment to build collages of increasing intensity. The poem begins, 'A boy drowns in the lake. Another steps on a / landmine. Years before, a man cocks his gun. / My father sits in a room alone. The village is / empty. My father tells a joke. A man hangs himself.' It demonstrates so well how simplicity does not equate to being simplistic.

Turner's poem juxtaposes Keats' loss of his brother Tom and his own slow movement towards an early death with the narrator's loss of his brother. By placing his own experience of death in the context of an iconic one, the universality of human loss is both elevated and made mundane. Descriptions of the landscape are skilful and evocative—evidence of the poet's deep understanding of nature. 'The mangroves link limbs,' he writes, 'and breathe the night's white blaze.' And later 'Green is the colour of the blood in the soil. "A buckskin horse,' Turner observes, 'watches with deer-shy eyes.' This is a work of extraordinary imagery.

We wish we could comment on each of the poems in this anthology, all of which impressed us in various ways. When the identity of the writers here was revealed to us, we were delighted to see strong works from familiar names in Australian poetry, but just as pleased to find names we've not come across before. To Chat GPT, we only have this to say: keep trying. Practice makes perfect and it won't be long, no doubt, before you crack a prize like this.

The great value of a competition such as this is in its levelling: no matter what a poet may have previously achieved, all are reduced to only this poem, all are equal in anonymity. When we read these poems, we, as judges, are starting again.

John Foulcher and Judith Nangala Crispin October 2023