

Keri Glastonbury reports on

THE 2009 OVERLAND JUDITH WRIGHT POETRY PRIZE FOR NEW AND EMERGING POETS

NETWORKED COMMUNITIES



The *Overland* Judith Wright Poetry Prize for New and Emerging Poets is made possible by the generous support of the Malcolm Robertson Foundation.

The winner of the 2009 *Overland* Judith Wright Poetry Prize for New and Emerging Poets is Derek Motion for his poem 'forest hill'. It is somewhat similar in style and theme to last year's winning poem, 'emoticon' by Tim Wright, in that it deals with fractured personal archaeologies. In 'forest hill' the poet goes back to his primary school:

& it's obvious. i'm unearthing the school's
time-capsule, secretly, after nightfall.
the balaclava didn't even involve a choice.
i edit scathingly. i mock the other raaf kids'
dreams. i make a claggy pulp out of their
failed foundation cursive. at the bubblers i
consider sobbing for their facebook realities,
but instead do this. i prance
through the half-formed stimulus buildings
like non-threatening catacombs. biggles-like.

Although all entries are judged anonymously, I had a strong inkling that 'forest hill' was written by Derek, whom I first met in 2005 at a launch of 4W, the magazine of the Wagga

Wagga Writers Writers. Like Derek, I grew up in Wagga and therefore made an association with the tiny Forest Hill public school on the outskirts of town. I'm also familiar with Derek's poetry from his blog Typing Space (<www.typingspace.wordpress.com>). Derek still lives in Wagga, and last I saw him he was floating down the Murrumbidgee River with his partner and kids in inflatable tyres. Yet, in many ways, Derek refuses to become a 'post-er-boy' for regional poetics ('& no one lives anywhere anymore') and his work is a rethinking of place and identity in an era mediated by the internet.

The runner-up for this year is Duncan Hose, for his poems 'SOUTHWEST' and 'lyrebird'. Duncan's poetry also played right into my subliminal sensibilities, with 'SOUTHWEST' perhaps making an overt reference to Frank O'Hara's 'Why I am not a painter'. With Duncan's poems, I had no clue as to the author, but it was obvious that the poet had a certain literacy in poetics and was not afraid to invoke mimesis (as is only fitting for a 'lyrebird'). While one poem is decidedly American in its

references, the other questions the more local mytho-poetic of Ned Kelly.

Both the winning poets this year are completing PhDs in poetics, as is last year's winner. It's a debate that tends to flare up on poetry blogs: the academicisation of poetry. Most recently, there was a heated discussion on Pam Brown's blog The Deletions (<www.thedeletions.blogspot.com>), after a post where Pam speculated about a 'new lyricism' in Australian poetry, with reference to first books by younger women writers that have been dominating the awards lists. Pam mentioned that many of these younger women poets were university graduates and implied that this particular return to formal or well-crafted lyricism was possibly institutionally incubated. As is perhaps fitting for a blog called The Deletions, this post has since, unfortunately, been deleted!

I mention this only because in the two years I've judged the Judith Wright Award, both winners have been male and neither are lyrical poets. Rather than debate, however, which particular poetics are dominant in universities (a reductive exercise when new poetics are constantly

emerging) I am interested – especially given my position as a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle – in reflecting on the impact that universities are having more generally on the new and emerging poetry community.

I think that it is a mistake to set up an oppositional space when it comes to universities and writing communities. I don't deny that universities are institutional spaces, and with them comes elitism and exclusion (that said, neither is community a necessarily inclusive alternative). I am more interested in how universities are being used in practice, in this case by post-graduate poetry students (as it seems unfair to conflate them with the institutions they inhabit). What I'm arguing for is a more networked sense of poetic community, which may range across a number of provisional affiliations.

Poets are obviously enrolling in research higher degrees for many reasons, but one of the results is that they spend some time examining the context of their practice. In the contemporary university, this could range from the highly rarefied (my favourite thesis title is Dan Disney's 'The archaic shudder: Toward a poetics of the sublime') through to my more lowbrow: 'Shut Up! Nobody wants to hear your poems!'. That said, most of what I've learnt about poetry has come through engagement with poetic practice at a participatory level, which has, in turn, led heuristically to engagements with poetics debates (both internal and external to the academy).

The three highly commended entries this year are Aden Rolfe's 'Exchanges', Sarah-Jane Norman's 'images of surgery' and Ella O'Keefe's 'glaze'. 'Exchanges' seems to open up a dialogue with Derek's poem, in that both have a similar sense of mediated experience:

We expected more from the twenty-first
century. Some direction, some push, some
instruction
for living in the present continuous. A cure

for boredom,
perhaps, self-annihilating or otherwise.
Instead we set the scene,
take the photo, update our status

as well as the shared sense of oblique
geographies:

forcing us onto the side of the road,
somewhere near
_____.

'Exchanges' is almost a perfect generational anthem. In fact the only parts I stumbled over were perhaps a little too intellectualised: 'It was neveralways / phatic with you, but always never a broken fiction'.

Sarah-Jane Norman's 'images of surgery' is a more embodied performance of self and displacement: 'drinking from bone/china, biting the tip/of a leather glove/in a city known/for its history of decadence/pornography has become/ as banal as toothpaste,/and caviar is cheaper/ than peanut butter', with Ella O'Keefe's 'glaze' full of fragmentary phrases that hold a certain weight, like 'sopping pant legs'.

This year, all the winning and commended poems are by people whose work I am familiar with through their participation in the broader new and emerging writers' community (and both Sarah-Jane and Aden have now been in the prize-winners or commended poets list two years running). What makes their work stick out from the pile (this year a whopping 925 poems high!) might have something to do with the cross-fertilisations that are happening between poets as readers and writers, as they participate across a networked community of practice (that may include, but is not exclusive to, formal study). For me, this loose-knit community is where a lot of the energy and action in Australian poetry is, and I look forward to seeing these poets release first books (in whatever form 'the book' takes in early twenty-first-century publishing).