



## ESU Formal Verse Contest 2025 Award Winners

**Winner**

**TUMUT**

**By Kevin Klein**

*Wiradjuri for "a quiet resting place by the river"*

Call it Ithaca, Hobbiton or Tatoonine,  
the face framed by a doorway in the opening scene  
squints through sunset past the shoreline, hedge or dunes  
that block the glint of arms and strains of martial tunes  
because there's nothing folks here fight against or for  
except themselves. And when the film's rhapsodic score  
fades to a single lonely note, another face  
appears, equally troubled, scanning the same place,  
but oh, how disparate their visions! Our hero's eyes  
meet our other hero's, and we recognize  
their quests: one doesn't want to go but cannot stay;  
the other will not move but must change anyway.

So, kids and chastened man in tow, the woman leaves  
her mum, who bears her own abandonment, who grieves  
each loss as a betrayal. This firstborn daughter weeps  
with her sisters and their kids, hugs her brother, keeps  
rehearsing to herself why she's left them behind.  
And if still in the desert, prophetesses find  
the hero's road to death that promises rebirth,  
they'll cross red hills and rivers toward the sands of Perth  
in a van with no aircon, where her own daughter in turn  
discovers who she is and isn't. Loves to learn,  
the very first of anyone on either side  
to finish uni. Snagged a good teaching job, so why'd  
she keep studying? Who does she think she has to be?  
And why the bloody hell a graduate degree  
in America? See what happens? The family sufferings  
fester: she's gone for three full years, and then she brings  
home a Seppo husband. Well, he could be worse.  
Respectful to a fault and doesn't seem averse  
to moving here. Gives it a go in family games  
of footy and cricket. Delighted by the ticklish names  
of country towns, particularly this palindrome:

Tumut, with Nanna in the musty family home  
for a week one May. First night, after a drive past trees  
in autumn red and gold, she takes them to Chinese,  
reciting, course by course, with consummate belief  
the sacred tales in her mythology of grief:  
of when her husband breathed his last, and how he left  
a dog that when she's lonely snores like him; the theft  
of grandsons' pushbikes by the bugger-all police  
because the boys forget their helmets; then her niece  
losing to cancer that the doctor should have caught.  
The granddaughter worries that her husband's scared. He's not,  
just needs Nanna to pause. She isn't looking up.  
So, painfully polite, says "Sorry to interrupt,  
but I've got to go and find the loo. If that's okay."  
Unfazed, she waves him off and answers, "Fire away."

Truth is, you can't step into the same river twice,  
a fact so tragic some offer the sacrifice  
of never stepping in a river again, and some  
of never stepping out. One day, when we become  
rivers ourselves, with no desire to stay or go  
because we all connect, and everything is flow,  
we'll understand those visions and each other's faces:  
to find, become, and offer ourselves as quiet places.

**Runner-up**  
**BEACH**  
**By Leon Trainor**

*after Ken Done, January 1, 1998*

A beachscape, squiggly brush-strokes, dots:  
perhaps a T-shirt or a hat  
with someone in them, mark the spot  
they chose to understand – or not –  
what's around them, where they're at.  
An ocean loiters out of sight,  
where every wave's an afterthought  
hissing over another's tracks  
with white noise, washing, wiping out  
what is to come before it breaks;  
so anyone who contemplates  
must come back to a golden beach  
where countless blissful bodies bake,  
believing they are on the edge  
of truth, in a predestined space  
where every one of them and we  
(transfixed before an utter fake)  
confirm the impenetrable  
expression of artistic will  
that promised more than we can see.

**Best Victorian Entry**  
**SWIMMING WESTERNPORT BAY**  
**By Tony Lintermans**

Swim for the father in oceans of memory, gone into smoke.  
Here in the bay where his ashes sank, my constant stroke  
brings the reef closer where he stood chest deep  
in a frayed straw hat readied for leatheries, unlipped  
from his fishing rod before the swim to shore. Holding  
our dinner in his hat, the tide cajoled him in.

Swim for the rancorous waves that smack, and straighten my line  
between beach and grassy sea floor, where stingrays align  
their wide wings to tremors of swell — a gliding flow  
to hunt and haunt under splashy human rococo.  
The yachties' marker buoys glimpsed further out  
alarm the lifting eye, a dorsal fin of doubt.

Swim for the arm reaching forward, dragging mind away  
from cogitation, stretching the spine to Hideaway Bay  
and towns up north where siestas make more sense.  
As the other arm pulls, feel the muscles tense  
like a day-drowsing dog twitching its skin,  
dreaming the rabbit, waking a rhythm within.

Swim for the winter joy and jump of it, breath snatched  
from indoor lungs stung by ice but given back  
slowly, in crawling distance as heart rate grows.  
Swim towards pleasure, the light within snow.  
A mother's ashes too, wind-cast, so long flown.  
Her voice a missing whisper with a wetsuit on.

In the slick of immersion to vanish from self, to find  
what world is, why sea hankers and chafes, the blind  
dice throwing us a life — swim for the call  
and haul of it, particular, unequivocal  
when the only air to breathe is gratitude  
at making the reef, where pied cormorants collude.

President's Choice Award

ABYSS

By Jakob Ziguas

I

Bronze surfers, gleaming with the light of Hellas,  
stride past as on a frieze. A gaze arrests  
the flux of foam. Offshore a swimmer breasts  
a wave. The girls beside their taut umbrellas  
embrace the sun. While cafe patrons pore  
over the news, unroll an endless scroll—  
distracted doom, mimetic rigmarole.  
The tide, receding, leaves a wilting score  
of sea-weed, driftwood, coins of polished glass.  
Aeolian ripples lace the shifting dunes.  
Upon the venous distance heaven swoons.  
The bone-caressing wind makes one more pass  
and shivers in the green and goldenrod  
of palm fronds—some to dryness droop,  
and fold in brittle strands. The sea gulls swoop.  
Across a vast abyss, God praises God.

II

What can be said about the whistling bones  
and the desolated advent calendars  
of bombed-out buildings under falling stars,  
as the destroying angel's epigones  
fade beneath a constant veil of ash.  
Emerging from dank basements, other shades—  
their vision wounded by the spring's first blades—  
see the aurora open like a gash.  
The mouths of infants burst—a bloom of wails.  
By grief each soul is to its body pinned  
as by a falling wall. A wanton wind  
bestows its ghostly burdens on blank sails.  
High atop the tree, the orphaned Dream  
awakes at last in darkness without source.  
A death march parallels the watercourse.  
The desert still has echoes to redeem.

Reader's Choice Award  
THE PHILOSOPHER  
By Thomas McKendry

A stiff wind blew me through a small town called Giru,  
Where the pub is the best in the nation.  
I was looking for work, so the post office clerk  
Recommended I ask at the station.  
"All the workshops are shut, and the mill is full, but  
The Philosopher's out on the muster.  
Though he don't drink or smoke (he's a church going bloke),  
He's a tough one and braver than Custer."  
So I made my way down past the cattle-yard rounds  
Where I'd heard I was certain to find him.  
Sure enough, by the wood the Philosopher stood  
With two stock horses saddled behind him.  
He was wiry and short with a smile that was caught  
Behind eyes of mysterious forces.  
As he held out a hand that was leathered and tanned  
He said "Young man, I hope you ride horses.  
Whether four-stroke or two, I'll be cold-dead and blue  
Before any bike musters my cattle.  
It'd scare them to death, so while yet I draw breath,  
All you'll hear is the ring and the rattle  
Of the stirrup and bridle while tanned leather hide'll  
Hold tight to the whither and flank.  
Check your straps ere we go; first we'll just take it slow,  
Then we'll run 'em all down past the bank."  
We took off in the fog of the morning; the dogs  
Ran around us and snapped at the tails  
Of the Brahmans that ran in a cluster of tan  
Through the paddocks, past fences and rails.  
And I looked on amazed as he galloped, unfazed,  
By the tempest of hoof beats resounding.  
With grace equal to none, man and stock-horse were one  
In the fray, in the leaping and bounding.  
As we rounded the bend the dance came to an end,  
And we closed the gate firmly behind them.  
Bathed in sweat and in foam we all headed for home:  
The mares didn't need us to remind them.  
As the morning fog lifted, the dawning sun gifted  
The flower and feather it's flame,  
And we slowed to a walk, and he started to talk –  
And I knew why they gave him his name.  
In terms simply profound he began to expound,  
Without hubris nor with hesitation,  
On what one man could hear if he lived in the clear  
Silent sound of the land's revelation.  
Though I took it all in I could never begin  
To do justice to all that was given;  
Every hard lesson learned, every battle scar earned,

All that comes from a life's worth of livin'.  
But one thing he said stuck, and if I've any luck  
I've remembered it here to a word:  
"When the first pair of eyes saw our bright southern skies,  
Something deep in the deep places stirred.  
We don't sing of our cities. No banks or committees  
Inspired a poem or a song.  
It's the bush has the voice that makes poets rejoice:  
It's out here where our artists belong."  
By the edge of the Bruce, where the old mills produce  
A king's ransom of golden molasses,  
You'll find something more sweet running under bare feet  
Through the cane fields and shoulder-high grasses.  
Something greater than gold, something ageless and old  
That's the cure for all things that ail'ya –  
It's the fire in our heart, it's the source of our art,  
It's the soil of our blessed Australia.