

A total of 131 entries were received in this year's Ethel Webb Bundell Poetry Awards, and the quality of nearly all was very high. The themes and topics embraced varied from nature, illness, social commentary, childhood memories, love and relationships just to name a few. Suffice to say that each poet and poem chose a stance, style and poetic 'voice' to match. To describe good poetry is a near on impossible task, but the main features are precise diction, choice of form to match content, imaginative use of metaphor, simile and imagery, careful editing to avoid over-writing and, probably most important, a palpable voice which speaks from page to reader. It is also important to name some common errors that writers make when entering into competitions such as this. These are as follows, and not in order of importance:

1. Poetry is not cut-up prose. Poetry is more concise, illusionary, less plot driven, more engaged with enjambment and form and uses language in a multi-faceted manner.
2. The choice of voice needs to be considered for each poem. Is first person best suited, or third person, or even second person, which if appropriate can produce a very profound and intriguing text?
3. Explore the use of form, and there are many. Sonnet, villanelle, sestina, pantoum, ballad or free form. However, free form still requires some care and consideration, and needs to be seen almost as invented.
4. Beware the dangers of rhyme. Poetry needs rhythm but not necessarily rhyme to enhance the reading experience. Becoming trapped in a rhyme scheme can very often limit word choice and stunt clarity and imaginative use of diction.
5. Avoid clichés – these well worn phrases are exactly that, and the reading experience is dulled by their presence.
6. Edit and cut, and keep editing and cutting. Less is more is very much required in effective poetry writing.
7. Proof read your work before submitting. Several poems entered contained obvious spelling and grammatical errors.

And so, on to the award winners for this competition. I whittled the entries down to a possible 15 'best', and any of these could have been within the award winning 9 poems. But poetry judging is a subjective pursuit, so here are my choices for the 2020 prize.

Commended – “Rosa” – an elegant and very effective poem, infused with excellent diction – “She skips, twirls, pirouettes light,/ tiny steps matching tiny feet;/ kicking the slide of water/ into a shining aureole”. Additionally very well edited, the imagery of a woman dancing along a beach beautifully captured.

Commended – “Sydney to Perth: chasing dusk” – thoughts during a plane journey, sewn through with excellent visual and colour imagery – “...flying into colours of/ an Italian ceiling, dust layers float on each another, make/ like horizontal tree rings. colour grows luminous/ tears itself way from earth, to become atmospheric// rings of Giotto blue dust.” Very effective use of half finished thoughts and observations, much in the manner of thinking. The poem concludes with a very engaging last stanza where “autocorrect is killing my words”. A vivid reimagining of a journey all too familiar with many West Australians.

Commended – “School Seasons” – Excellent use of form and enjambment here, with a mixture of single words and phrases stringing down the page. The jump-cut imagery is also very effective, enhanced with colours, sounds and smells of the school-yard and classroom. Some wonderful images throughout – “Those unbitten by boredom/ Lose themselves in play” and “Sunshine ricocheting off each slimy surface in your head”. A poem that evocatively maps out the school years, with all of the accompanying moods, structures, strictures and rhythms. A very tangible reading experience.

Highly Commended – “How to Win and Argument” – A dense and deliberately unremitting poem, akin in presentation to the subject matter. The poem employs very evocative diction – “gnashing water and obstinate stone” – as well as employing a number of near repeated lines – “The sea is always a mouth/ and the night is always an ear”, and “The beach is a blessing and the wind is a curse” – which enhance the mood and unforgiving nature of the sea. Alliteration and other imagistic techniques create real depth.

Highly Commended- “In the arm chair” – A sparse and fragmented poem, fashioned into terse stanzas of 2, 3 or 4 lines. This form helps create an understanding of the mental state of the main character – “He sits in a field of memories”. Repeated images underline this angst and turmoil – “and restless/ as a bear/ looking for a den”, and later “Now he is restless/ as a bear/ looking for a place/ to die”. The opening and closing lines “The gills of the house/ rattle/ with children’s laughter” frame the foreboding mood so well captured.

Highly Commended – “Husbandry” – A poem peppered with brutal imagery and fine diction choices. The scene of the calf being castrated acts as both a singular image in the first 2 stanzas and then a

wider more disturbing metaphor in the 3rd stanza. Lines such as “penned and fetched and dragged and yoked and broken” vividly describe the tumble of thoughts in the mind of the young woman watching the proceedings, and the last line “I watched you watch me too, like a dirty secret” closes the poem darkly but brilliantly.

3rd Prize – “Lament for Elizabeth” - A traditional rhyming poem with 4 line stanzas in iambic pentameter. This form well matches the subject matter – a young English woman buried on Norfolk Island at the age of 24 in 1847. The poem uses excellent diction throughout - “And the lash whistling, the leg irons’ dull ringing/ The clang of the mallets as wretches split stone/ Harsh squeal of the crank mill, the tramp of men bringing/ The wet-quarry rock won by lost sobbing moan”. The last stanza leaves the poem with a suitably plaintive and sombre tone – “We leave you the whistle of sea-birds a-wheeling/ The sougning of winds in the up-reaching trees/ The swift-flying clouds in blue skies for a ceiling/ And round you the unfettered song of the seas”. A wonderful example of historical details informed and enhanced in a poetic context.

2nd Prize – “Music in the Gorge” – A beautiful opening line “The people spread like moss across the gorge” uses the simile of landscape and humanity, in this case the different groups within an audience gathering for an out-door performance. The poem employs superb diction and flow – “Tapering to yellow as its wet rims lick the dry,/ the intense stain that is the waterhole/ concedes to translucence in the shallows”. The focus upon the varieties in the shapes of human calf muscles widens towards the poem’s close to the vast number of activities being undertaken – “for our Sunday arvo crowd/ as we read, swim, chat, sit,/ float, nibble, scurry, flit”. The final lines, where the Gorge is depicted as “some breathed musicality/ of nature’s amphitheatre” create a suitably evocative finish.

1st Prize – “The Night of the Dog” – This poem, in the form of a sestina, is a moody, dark and at times confronting piece of text. The scene in which a young woman is taken on a first date in a rural setting, uses the repeated end of line words “dog”, “lives”, “sound”, “shot”, “wound” and “night” in an extremely effective, almost visceral, manner, adding greatly to the power within each stanza. The opening line “The bullet entered my brain the same time as it did the dog’s” sets the tone, and the double meaning on the word “wound” is very effectively exploited – “A shocking moment in a life which has shaped our lives,/ When I know that this man had wound// Himself around my heart but all I saw was the wound/ his action made and all I heard was the sound/ Of the street emptying itself of noise, as two lives/ Bled in the heat and dust and blood in the black of night.” A wonderful piece of writing shedding light on the plight of many rural women. A very worthy winner of first prize.

I would like to thank all of the poets who entered work into this competition - thanks for your honesty, artistry, bravery, creativity and belief in poetry as a wonderful means of communication. Thanks also to the Society of Women's Writers WA for the invitation to judge this year's awards.