



Somerset Poetry Prize 2018

Judges' Report

Junior Category Winning Entry

Untitled ("Giving but not Loving")

Hon. Mention

The Dream

The Truth of Writing

Emu

Family Snapshot

When Sorrow Was a Boy

Senior Category Winning Entry

Genetics Only the Half of It

Hon. Mention

Shadow

Seeing/Believing

Rain Song

A Lesson on Love and War





Notes for all Entrants

Congratulations to all entrants. You have already discovered the joy of writing—that much is clear from your efforts. Each entry had something important to say, and a sincerity in expressing that idea. I would very much like to sit down with each of you who submitted a loved poem to this competition. They are all worth writing, and they are all worth talking about, both the great things about them and the ways you can improve as a writer. Even the most established poets struggle with their work, such is the nature of the art. Poetry should not be easy to write, because it is the medium that attracts vague feelings that are intractable and evasive. We try to articulate that which is hard to quantify or even qualify.

There are no rules for poetry, so it is one of the hardest art forms to judge. Critics make mistakes all the time. These mistakes are something to do with taste, or with inevitable expectations we have as readers. Sometimes we critics get things terribly wrong: one called Beethoven's music the product of a "barbarian"; the truly great poet Walt Whitman was dismissed as "unacquainted with art as a hog is with mathematics": and yet another wise critic called William Faulkner a "minor writer" at best. These artists are rightly considered giants of their trade, so how can people get it so wrong? As writers we all have to be very wary of accepting advice or dismissal. If readers misunderstand your writing at times, you are in good company. Don't expect everyone to like what you write: the important thing is that you like it and feel what you are saying has to be said.

The other reason I am telling you this is to stress that as the judge of this competition I am simply one critic. Another judge might well have chosen different poems as the winners. Yours might well have been there. You might be disappointed not to win, but if we only write poems to win, then there is no point writing at all. You already know the odd sense of satisfaction you get when writing a poem, editing it, and seeing the final product. Some people are going to love it, some think it OK, and others won't like it at all. If you enjoy writing that is the most important thing—just keep doing it no matter what anyone says, good or bad!

There are no rules for the writing of poetry, but there are conventions. For example, if you write a sonnet you automatically follow the conventions of the form. It has the same number of syllables and lines as other sonnets. If you write a poem and give it 25 lines and call it a sonnet, no matter how good it is, it is not one except in your imagination. Young writers need to work out the difference between rules and conventions. If you choose to give your work a particular conventional rhythm you need to be loyal to that, and not allow some lumpy lines to interrupt the pattern (unless that is deliberate). If you have a regular rhyme scheme, you need to watch out for moments of desperation where you force feed rhyme into the poem. I call that the tail wagging the dog. Both regular rhythm and rhyme should not draw attention to themselves for the wrong reason.



The Somerset Celebration of Literature



Somerset College Limited Somerset Drive Mudgeeraba Queensland 4213 Australia
ABN 54 010 343 227 CRICOS Provider 00521G



If you are 100% sure of what you want to say in a poem, you should probably write prose instead, for poetry is best used for things that are very difficult to say, evasive and hard to articulate, even contradictory. Just because you feel strongly about something does not make the product necessarily an effective poem. Your strong feelings, opinions, and even arguments have to be changed into art. You have to be careful not to preach. For example, every year there are entries in all poetry contributions about the horrors of war. We all hate war, so you're simply pointing out how bad it is might well be sincere, but is it more than preaching to the converted? We all agree with you before we read your condemnation. Somehow you have to look at war from one angle, and change your opinions and feelings into an image or set of images. Here is a memorable example from Wilfred Owen from "Futility". He is describing a single soldier, obviously seriously wounded and probably close to death (though he doesn't say outright):

Move him into the sun—

Gently its touch awoke him once,

At home, whispering of fields half-sown.

Always it woke him, even in France,

Until this morning and this snow.

If anything might roust him now

The kind old sun will know.

There is something so poignant and gut-wrenching here it describes one casualty in WW1. The waste of war, the futility, and the needless pain are all captured in these images, but nothing is overtly stated. Once you read the first line and read on you will never forget it. As talented young writers you need to stop lecturing your readers, and spend more time thinking not just WHAT should be said, but HOW to say it. Poetry lives mostly the in HOW, and rarely on just WHAT.

I have been involved for the last two years in a poetry-writing workshop in one of the world's top universities. Participants in the workshop are required in their first year to read 100s if not 1000s of poems, ones from universally accepted great poets, and also new poets like you. The participants are not reading the poems as critics would do in an English class—they are reading the poems as writers. And that has a completely different intention.

So I have to ask you, how many poems do you read in year? Do you read them aloud? If the answer is no to both questions, then you will hold back your development as a poet. It is not enough to read poems in your class at school—your life as a writer depends on wider reading. If you admit to only reading and studying poetry in English class, that is better than not reading anything, but once again once again I'm sorry to say you will never develop as a poet. You have to read 100s of poems aloud, because the vocal and musical qualities of verse make it what it is. Poetry has to sound right. Sometimes the sound is even more important than the meaning. It should not be just ideas on a page that you care about.

Somerset Celebration of Literature

Somerset Events Office
Tel +61 (0)7 5559 7377
events@somerset.qld.edu.au
www.SomersetCofL.org.au





This brings me back to the Owen example above. Here is another example of evocative writing, which makes the reader work towards his or her own conclusions.

Muriel Rukeyser is an American poet who hated the idea of inequality, racism, poverty and unfairness. She really deeply cares about these things. The poem that follows, “The Boy with his Hair Cut Short”, was written during the Great Depression, which was a set of economic disasters that led to huge problems of unemployment and poverty for millions of people around the world. But in the poem that follows, Rukeyser doesn’t lecture about poverty and inequality—she shows us what it is like for one family in trouble. The poem is set in a poor apartment built next to the elevated railroad (the El of the poem) that runs through the city. Across the street from the apartment a neon sign keeps flashing. Occupying the apartment is the fragment of a family, a sister cutting her brother’s hair so he can go job-hunting the next day. There are no parents present—there may well be none. We find out that he has tramped the streets many times to try to find work to no avail.

Now read this poem as a writer, paying particular attention to how the poet conveys what she feels through situation, image. Look at the subtle ways she reveals aspects of the emotional life of the boy and his older sister, and of the dramatic situation around them. She never tells you what to think about poverty and inequality. She shows what it feels like from two personal points of view: the sister’s and the brother’s.

Boy With His Hair Cut Short

Sunday shuts down on this twentieth-century evening.

The El passes. Twilight and bulb define
the brown room, the overstuffed plum sofa,
the boy, and the girl's thin hands above his head.
A neighbour radio sings stocks, news, serenade.

He sits at the table, head down, the young clear neck exposed,
watching the drugstore sign from the tail of his eye;
tattoo, neon, until the eye blears, while his
solicitous tall sister, simple in blue, bending
behind him, cuts his hair with her cheap shears.

The arrow's electric red always reaches its mark,
successful neon! He coughs, impressed by that precision.
His child's forehead, forever protected by his cap,
is bleached against the lamplight as he turns head
and steadies to let the snippets drop.



The Somerset Celebration of Literature



Somerset College Limited Somerset Drive Mudgeeraba Queensland 4213 Australia
ABN 54 010 343 227 CRICOS Provider 00521G



Erasing the failure of weeks with level fingers,
she sleeks the fine hair, combing: "You'll look fine tomorrow!
You'll surely find something, they can't keep turning you down;
the finest gentleman's not so trim as you!" Smiling, he raises
the adolescent forehead wrinkling ironic now.

He sees his decent suit laid out, new-pressed,
his carfare on the shelf. He lets his head fall, meeting
her earnest hopeless look, seeing the sharp blades splitting,
the darkened room, the impersonal sign, her motion,
the blue vein, bright on her temple, pitifully beating.

Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006.

If you look you will find so much in the poem which reveals the poverty of the girl and boy: the naked light bulb in the room, "cheap sheers", the location next to the elevated railway, the flashing neon sign across the road, the "brown room", radio from next door heard through thin walls. The fragility of brother and sister is conveyed in words like "thin hands" "clear neck exposed" "earnest hopeless look". But the main thing that gives the emotional charge to the poem is the heroism of the two characters: the sister manages just to find the financial and emotional resources to support him. Her brave attempts to cheer him up gives him the courage to persevere even though he knows it does not change much: the boy has the strength of character to keep going and going even though he has faced many rejections.

I have spent time on this example show you that once you have something important to say, then you must think of the best way to say it, to present it to your readers dramatically not just to tell them. If Rukeyser had told us that many decent people are made victims in an economic crisis and that this neither fair or just, we would believe her but soon forget. However, once she speaks through real people in a real place in a real situation—all through the artistry of the poem—then we will never forget.

Good luck with your continued writing! There is a lot of talent out there, and each one of you possesses a part of it. Keep writing. It's good for you, and it is certainly good for your readers.

Somerset Celebration of Literature

Somerset Events Office
Tel +61 (0)7 5559 7377
events@somerset.qld.edu.au
www.SomersetCofL.org.au

