

The Ada Cambridge Poetry Prize 2021: Judges' Report

When Ada Cambridge and her husband came to live in Williamstown in 1893, she recalled that as a child when she first saw the sea she had burst into tears. After twenty-three years in the Australian bush, she was relieved to be again near 'the salt breath of the sea'. She wrote that for her health she would only ever exchange the sea for more sea. Williamstown was not a fashionable suburb then, nor a holiday destination, nor even a particularly 'fishy' place, but she loved it because in it she found 'something that does not know how to advertise itself, or want to know.'

How perfectly this describes the world of poetry, for though it is one of the quietest arts, those who have sought it out and even perhaps cried in its presence would only ever exchange poetry for more poetry.

It was a great pleasure, again, for the judges of this poetry competition to spend time with over a hundred poems on love, on loss, on landscapes, suburban life, family relationships, children, old age, and meditations on the experience of Melbourne's 2020 pandemic lockdown.

We judges celebrated the opening-up of the city in 2021 by meeting together over lunch to negotiate the outcomes of the competition. We awarded recognition to poems that were original, vivid, well-structured, aware of nuances and music in language, and that offered the reader emotional impact. It was difficult to separate the final few poems, for these were the ones that met and exceeded our criteria. After much discussion, we are deeply pleased to announce the following prize-winning and shortlisted poems.

First Prize

Sonali's Detour

This brightly complex poem recounts a journey back to Sri Lanka to make contact with the poet's grandmother. Throughout, the descriptions are precise and evocative, while the handling of difficult emotions is mature, sensitive, and even uncertain. The long lines of the poem broken by white spaces aids in expressing the poem's self-doubt, and its stuttered runs of varying thoughts and feelings. The final image of the grandmother is beautiful as an image of the care a woman takes for the lives of her family, but also as an acknowledgement of the context of politics and a history of violence for contemporary families in this nation.

Runner-Up

Hawaiian Spangle

This 28-line poem set out in couplets manages to keep its observations and thoughts balanced within one sentence as it unfolds. The poet is in her tent at the Port Fairy Folk Festival, listening not to a staged performance, but to impromptu music that calls up for her a sudden strangeness, echoes of the history of slavery, the passing on of music from father to son, and the landscape itself around Port Fairy. This is a delicate, multi-layered, moving poem unified by a listening ear and an alive mind.

Highly Commended

Love Like

A free verse poem of adventurously long lines, 'Love like This' leads us with a talker's charm through images of a father, a childhood memory, and on into a present time which is fraught, though still shadowed if not shattered by that luminous childhood memory. This poem will leave you gasping at its gesture towards tragedy even as you admire its skill and dexterity.

Commended

Get Lit

Pure playfulness is at the heart of this poem, a delight in literature's characters, a puzzle of a poem waiting for you to figure it out, and jokes galore for those of us who are readers of all sorts of books. Even the title is an inspirational joke.

Commended

You are Not Your Poetry

Possibly a performance piece, certainly a wonderful play on the ways that words can mean more and more, and even move outside the realm of everyday thinking if you play cleverly enough with their order. This is a love poem to a lover, as well as a love poem to language—and a love poem to poetry.

Commended

Illumination

'Illumination' is a spare, extended metaphor of self-validation. It is a striking realization that one's life is precious and to be treasured. A small gem.

Commended

The Whelp

A clear-eyed exploration of male youth, peer pressure, and violence seething barely below the surface in small towns. The poem carries a strong feel for narrative, emotion and image in a plain-spoken style.

Shortlisted

Changing the Sheets Before Lockdown

One of the best of the 'lockdown' poems, this poem records for Melburnians the shift from the first to the second lockdown with the kind of humour and verve only possible because we did come through it and out. The jumpy format of the poem on the page gives some idea too of the scatteredness we felt during that time of severe restriction and prolonged fear.

With Lorenzo Lotto Awake in the Early Hours

There is a long and worthy history of ekphrastic poetry—poems written in response to artworks. This poem takes off from one of the more eccentric Annunciation scenes of the sixteenth century. In neat tercets it plays havoc with a sometimes too pious tradition.

Sparrows

A gentle poem in a prose style, offering resistance to the argument of a gardener with the wilder paths taken by nature. Both sides of the argument are presented with grace and wit.

Judges Kevin Brophy and Helen Cerne