



## Dorothea Mackellar: totally popular poetry

The long running poetry competition is attracting more entrants than ever

Anyone who thought poetry's popularity with the young was waning forgot to tell the 10,000 plus entrants from over 700 schools – a significant increase over last year's number – in the 2012 Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Competition.

Entrants from primary and secondary schools around Australia submitted a plethora of passionate, evocative work, enough to excite the competition's judges about the current rude health of the form.

Young poets were given freedom to write to a suggested topic or on any theme they might desire, imparting a large measure of creative leeway. As such, the poems covered a range of topics and were written in a range of poetic forms, from the highly structured and traditional to the avant-garde.

Reading the entries suggests that the judging was a difficult but pleasurable task for the judges, as they worked through submissions written in cinquains and haiku, sonnets, ballads, free verse and experimental forms.

"It should be noted that whilst some poetic forms, such as the cinquain and haiku, may seem to be very simple to write, it is a rare pleasure to find one which is superbly crafted, showing adept use of poetics to make it speak to the reader. And, whatever form chosen, those

poems which had been well crafted really stood out, with every word, every rhyme (where used), every line break carefully chosen and adding to the whole.

"I'd like to stress how excited I was by the breadth and depth of the poetic talent among Australia's teens. Throughout the judging process my desk was the scene of laughs, sighs of bliss, tears, and utter amazement as I wondered at treasure after treasure. Wonderful things

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indeed," says the judge for the secondary school submissions, the writer Sally Murphy.

Poetry submitted to the primary section was no less interesting, showing a surprising level of craft and sophistication.

Glenda Millard a much awarded and prolific children's writer who judged the primary school submissions said: "Wheels have been set in motion and imaginations have winged their way to new heights to produce an astonishing array of marvelous entries! It is always a source of great pleasure to me to observe the extraordinary range and variation of work produced from a

single topic or theme.

"This year's awards have been no exception in that respect. And among those many students who chose their own topics I'd like to ask each one the question that writers are so often asked; 'Where did you get your idea from?'"

"There were humorous poems that made me laugh out loud, poems that expressed love of friends, family, pets and place. Some expressed great sadness and longing.

While some poems rhymed, others didn't. Poetic devices of all kinds; simile, metaphor and alliteration were used, and used well. Extensive vocabulary, comprehension and knowledge of poetic forms were evident in many of the upper primary entries."

The winning poets and their families were flown to Gunnedah to attend the awards ceremony held at The Civic Theatre on 31st August to coincide with National Literacy and Numeracy Week activities. Winners received an attractive cash prize, trophy and merchandise.

The winning poems were recited by their authors, the atmosphere enhanced by a recording of Dorothea Mackellar reading her iconic work 'My Country'.

The competition has links to the very early days of poetry in this country, Mackellar a seminal figure in Australian literature, spent



much of her time near Gunnedah at her family's property.

The overarching purpose for the awards is to get kids writing poetry. The resources page at The Dorothea Mackellar website [www.dorothea.com.au](http://www.dorothea.com.au) has an invaluable series of 'how to get started writing' pieces by writers who have been or are involved with the awards. They are some of Australia's best so a visit to the site is worth it, if only to gain some insight into their creative processes.

## Award winners

### Senior Secondary

**Merry Li** *Presbyterian Ladies' College, Peppermint Grove WA*

### Junior Secondary

**Beth Downing** *Campbell High School, Campbell ACT*

### Upper Primary

Salina Ai *Able Education Australia College, Eastwood NSW*

### Lower Primary

Holly Grainger *St Michael's Collegiate School, Hobart Tas*

### Learning Assistance And Special Education, Secondary

**Josiah Toft** *Wycliffe Christian School, Warrimoo NSW*

### Learning Assistance And Special Education, Primary

Dergam Salah *Redeemer Baptist School, North Parramatta NSW*

### Community Relations Commission Award

Alexander Maloof and Rhys Halkidis *Trinity Preparatory School, Strathfield NSW* **ET**

### Merry Li

#### *An afternoon spent at 39 Mandowie Road*

In the back room of our old house,  
in front of glass walls saturated by sunlight,  
sat my father's desk.

On it, a computer monitor and a keyboard  
with the a, s, f, j, backspace and return keys  
eroded to shiny plastic.

On the other side of the glass  
my mother watered her fig tree,  
with the fingery branches that bled white sap,  
and the furry leaves that would have made  
very prickly undergarments.  
Snaking the hose under the handprints of shade,  
she plucked the figs with a twist of the wrist,  
handed them to us, heavy with rain  
and impregnated by the seed of summer.

We tore them in half,  
squeezing from the little hole at the bottom,  
revealing the flesh: pink-tipped,  
perfectly, artfully graduated to white.

Fig flesh, I thought, was like the alveoli of lungs  
that I had seen illustrated in the  
faded watercolours of Dorling Kindersley's  
*The Human Body*.

The alveoli came off so easily,  
we slipped our tongues and teeth between  
the soft rind and bitter skin,  
white blood dripping into the webs of our fingers  
until we were left with seeds between our teeth  
and two halves of a heart-shaped shell.

When the mosquitoes came,  
my mother slapping at her bare arms,  
we hurtled through the sliding doors.

On my father's lap,  
our faces white in the Microsoft glow,  
I pulled at the levers of his office chair  
and pointed at the graph of Fig1 on the screen.  
My father explained that it meant 'Figure 1',  
and explained to me the nature of science.

### Dergam Salah

#### *Fear*

He is unaware that he is the prey,  
Stalking him is a silent killer  
Ready to pounce the beast waits,  
In an instant he attacks,  
Fear's dagger-like claws tear at his throat,  
His heart racing,  
His skin wet,  
The battle is on.

Feeling the shock of the surprise,  
Feeling the beast's breath on his cheek,  
The strength of his muscles on his neck,  
The predator never gives up.  
But the prey is also determined,  
To win the battle.

Drawing strength of a source so deep,  
With shoulders squared,  
He rises from almost certain death,  
To win the battle.

### Josiah Toft

#### *Dancer's Feet*

The spring of floor boards  
Under lightning feet  
The graceful movement  
Of a dancer's feet  
Flying high  
In crazy leaps  
Amazing strength  
In a dancer's feet  
Impressive balance  
In dizzying turns,  
The swiftly moving  
Dancer's feet  
Ballet turnout  
And graceful technique  
The inspiring and poise  
Of a dancer's feet