

## Martha Richardson Poetry Prize 2022

Every year is a good year for poetry. The many ways in which a poem allows us to compress experience, thought, emotion, dream and reality into such a small space, yet with a voice that can contain multitudes, that can invite other people in, is perpetually relevant. But this year, it seems to me, poetry is proliferating, and so it should.

This year's Martha Richardson Poetry Prize carried the theme "Inflate". Immediately, this made me think of breath, how the lungs inflate with air to keep us alive and connected to the world. The pandemic, as well as the numerous unnatural climate-fueled disasters we've been experiencing, have certainly reminded us of our vulnerability, and how precious breath is. But inflation is also economic, the accelerating cost of living, the fear of homelessness or going without necessities. Of course, so many other things can be inflated, enlarged through calculated exaggeration or simply through breathing. Stories. Bodies. Offspring. Pain. Love.

Over sixty entries explored these themes and dynamics, through sincere, carefully crafted language. It was a pleasure to read such a diverse and heartfelt collection of poems. The hardest part of judging is always narrowing the field, and there were many fine poems that have not been recognised. I could only choose five. These were the poems that I kept returning to, whose human presence and linguistic pleasures only became clearer with each reading.

The two highly commended poems are "Burnt Up" and "The Numb Drug". The former is an elliptical yet convincing poem that brings together troubled country and the precarity of hope. The latter, a heartbreaking, uncompromising account of a daughter watching her mother's deterioration and pride.

Third prize went to "When my sight has gone". A love poem exploring the loss of sight could easily be maudlin or cliched, but here the sense of place is vivid and tactile, the voice naturally lyrical and at times humorous, and the ending tender and genuinely moving.

Second prize went to "The Flame". Through a litany of surprising similes and visual metaphors, this poem presents us with the tenacious fecundity of the huntsman spider. This would have been enough to make it an uncanny, intriguing poem, but somehow we're also ushered into a kind of familiarity, if not empathy, with a being who persists in the face of destruction.

The winner of this year's Martha Richardson Poetry Prize is "Every Heart". Here, Skywhale and Skywhalepapa, the inflatable sculptures by Patricia Piccinini, are hot-air balloons inflated by our collective anxieties. This audacious yet entirely apt premise is brought to life through an agile, probing poetic voice, the lines arranged so as to move the poem forward in waves. Throughout, our fear and vulnerability are given air, with compassion and insight, yet not without critique. It's a real achievement.

Thankyou to Ballarat Writers for entrusting me with this fascinating responsibility, and for facilitating the competition. Above all, congratulations to all the poets, and may our words continue to breathe.

*Andy Jackson.*