National Schools Poetry Award

2017 Judge's Report by Ashleigh Young

When I was writing poetry as a teenager, there were certain images I'd come back to over and over. Stars. Hollow trees. The sea. Horses in the sea. Lonely and forgetful grandparents who'd lost their keys. Astronauts. Disused farm machinery. Dead pets. Elton John. These things were invested with a great and mysterious sadness, and therefore, I thought, they belonged in poems, preferably all at the same time for maximum impact. A poem was never complete until someone looked up at the stars and, for example, thought about a dead horse. (As I guess it is for many writers, unhappiness is the creative spark of many a poem.) Such images held the power of seriousness over me, and it took a long time for me to pry their fingers from my jugular and start asking whether maybe other things in the world could belong in poems too.

When I read the nearly 200 poems entered in the National Schools Poetry Award, I was happy to see young writers putting things in poems that I would never have thought to. A cheap greasy meal. String theory. Bodily decomposition. Tauranga. An intercity bus. Melania Trump! It takes gumption to cast these things in a poem, because they're so *themselves*; they don't immediately mean anything worthy in the way that abstract themes like injustice, heartbreak and misery do. And although, yes, I was reminded as I read the entries that some poeticisms – eyes that glitter like stars, cheeks that blush red as roses – are eternal, I noticed that when a writer shrugs off those received poetic ideas and language, even just for a moment, they get closer to a poem that's really alive on the page – alive brightly, weirdly, insistently. It's as if the writer breaks through into a clearing. You can almost see them brushing themselves off, looking around, taking a few steps. And I think that more than ever, we need to know what young people can see that older people can't. And so it's no surprise that the poems that stood out to me most were those that were concise and concrete in their detail, that showed me something of the lives of young people in New Zealand right now. As well, poems that led me through scenes, encounters or conversations – poems that suggested a story – were often more compelling than those poems that stayed in one place, describing.

Antonia Smith's 'Tauranga' is made of the bright shards of a story: the 'many splendoured street lamp', 'the tattered edges of the Mount', and, more oppressively, the hints of adult predicaments that have cast younger lives into disarray. The poem blurs the interior and the exterior – 'I mould my clay thoughts / and push my brown fingers into the dirt' – in a way that beautifully captures not only a traveller's weariness but also the struggle of orientating yourself when you are vulnerable.

In Logan McAllister's poem 'Circles', there's coping of a different kind: a group of boys riding their bikes together at night. They look like a bunch of troublemakers – 'We never plan what we get up to on these nights' – the sort of kids a police officer would eye over. But no, they're just hanging out together, only this time they've been to the funeral of a close friend. The poem is subtle in its narrative details, from a fast-food joint to a black funeral scarf, but it's direct in the way it conveys the warmth and sorrow of that night. Remarkably, too, I think Logan's poem was one of perhaps three that dealt with feelings of joy. One of the cruel truths of poetry is that happiness is really hard to write about well.

(I should note that none of the finalist poems use a rhyme scheme – but I did read a lot of entries that *did* rhyme, sometimes in elaborate ways. A rhyming poem can be a fun thing to make – it's satisfying, like filling out a crossword. But a good rhyming poem is very hard to pull off – unfortunately, rhyming too often sounds stodgy and old-fangled. I think that some poetic forms that don't depend on regular rhyme can result in sharper writing. The constraints of a pantoum, for example, or an abecedarian, can lead you into a poem you might not otherwise have conceived. There's also the opportunity to listen for the musicality of language in ways not as harsh as end rhymes tend to be: internal rhyme (rhyming within lines, rather than at the ends) and slant rhymes ('almost' rhymes, such as 'home' and 'none').

So many of the poems I read moved me in their bold confrontation of experiences intensely felt: abuse, mental illness, the loss of loved ones, the cruelties we enact upon one another and upon ourselves. But again, the poems that stayed with me were the ones that illuminated despair through small details, and the ones that were most powerful to me were those that were able to withhold emotion even when dealing with shocking subject matter.

Tessie-Rose Poutai Tipene's poem 'Stitches' is one of these, with its vivid metaphor of stitches that are supposed to hold a person together but that make them come apart. Its power is in the writer's circling around that simple metaphor, and her plaintive, songlike appeal to a mother: 'I need fixing, stitches / stitches you say will hold me together'. It's often the simplest ideas, and the simplest language, that animate a poem. Anna Doak's 'The gift' shares this direct address to a parent, but in this case the speaker is able to shift her perspective and find some measure of comfort in the wake of a traumatic event. For me, its spareness and calm is what makes this poem affecting. In the end, I think poetry is as much about withholding as it is about holding.

> We'd run between the hedges
>
> and you'd count to 45.
>
> 'Ready or not?'
>
> I was not ready.

Poems about parents – about children looking back at their parents – are almost a sub-genre of poetry in itself. But how to write about parents without letting our feelings swallow our writing whole? How to stop ourselves just starting a shouting match? In Katie Rata Gotlieb's poem 'Dad', the central character, who is suffering from a delusion or disorientation, is seen at a remove. The speaker stands apart from him, trying to coax him home. The colours of a sunset seem to fuse with

the father himself, with his language and his mannerisms, and in this way we can see his welter of confusion, the chaos he must feel. Although in the poem itself he cannot be reached, it's as if, through her account of him, his daughter is finding him again. So in this poem, the speaker is not just passively looking – something is happening under the surface.

Poetry can be overwhelmingly personal, especially for younger writers. But as poetry readers we're taught that the 'speaker' of a poem is not automatically the writer themselves. Far safer to assume that the writer is concealed behind the writing. In other words, we are taught to separate the artist from the art. It's sensible advice; it helps us stay open to the question of what a writer is expressing and how. But at the same time, it can be immensely powerful when a person writes openly as themselves – especially if the opportunities to do so are few, and especially when there is something at stake. That poetry can offer an outlet and a mode of connection for young people speaks to its enduring power. So I want to acknowledge the writers who sent poems expressing feelings of frustration at a world that seems increasingly to teeter on the abyss. They wrote of their desire for political, social, and environmental change. And I read those poems as young people speaking boldly for themselves. Their writing reminded me how courageous and how determined they have to be as they approach uncertain futures. Their words also filled me with a huge hope.

Emily Rais's 'Alright' is one such courageous poem, but it is crafted. It homes in on the empty reassurances that adults give one another when making foolish, potentially life-changing decisions – 'She'll be alright' is their refrain. We see how people become oblivious to thoughtlessness, as if tragic outcomes were inevitable. By pushing this self-soothing refrain to its extremes – 'Still those rough, tanned hands pat on in a sympathetic rhythm, / and she'll be alright / they promise' – the poem expresses its moral without special pleading or hectoring. Indeed, much of its power comes from its conversational language: perhaps we don't expect this language to deliver such a message.

Other writers moved away from the personal altogether and crafted character portraits – as in the terrific three-part poem 'Three views of the Rakaia' by Millie Hulme, which frames the Rakaia in the viewpoints of a fish, a fisherman, and the river itself. In effect, each part of the poem translates the other two. I loved the simplicity of language, syntax and of detail, and the ways in which the river is evoked as a living character, endlessly cycling through states. Others yet grappled with aspects of philosophy and maths and even astrophysics, like Hannah Wetzel's 'The Astrophysicist and the Mathematician', which is a meditation on the timeless themes of the universe and 'why are we all here?', but Hannah comes at it in a surprising way, by evoking a peculiar relationship between two scholarly characters:

> I like to think of the way that trees grow and how we all decompose into nothing but the soil – but most of the time
> you tell me that I'm indulgently metaphysical
> though I know you only learnt that word last week.

And like the two bodies of knowledge, the poem branches irresistibly in different directions, at one point the speaker imagining themselves breaking into blossom, a potently beautiful and unexpected image.

Of the finalist poems, the most daring in form is Piper Whitehead's 'String Theory', which opens with the admission: 'I don't know very much about physics, but here's everything I know about string theory, more or less.' (I should admit that some of my favourite poems open with such frank and unexpected statements. It's a great way to get the reader onside.) It looks like prose, but the way in which 'String Theory' leaps about, connecting such disparate items as 'a bundle of wheat with a cinched waist' and 'cats in boxes' and Joni Mitchell's 'song about clouds', is irresistible. I can almost imagine it reforming as an essay, or even a short story, but in its current form and approach it most closely resembles a poem. In contemporary poetry collections we're seeing more and more short prose pieces that are at home among more conventional-looking poems. So: why not?

When I came across Zora Patrick's poem 'Dampening', in which we see a man at the seaside, oblivious to everyone else, diving under and sticking his legs up in the air, I saw someone watching a small, ordinary moment in time and holding it up. It would be so easy to overwrite this, demanding we see the charm and the wider significance, and yet the language is plain, and we are left to think and feel about it as we choose. I think 'Dampening' demonstrates that it was often the poems with the more modest ambitions – to frame the everyday, to suspend a single moment – that were the most compelling. It helps that at surface the poem is funny – there are the bikini grandmas, the man's frog legs, and then the man's trunks and the small of his back seeming to come alive as they surface out of the water and speak. (I always warm to a poem that hints at humour.) Zora's poem does that marvelous thing of telling us just enough that we can imagine the possibilities of the day. I found myself thinking of stories that might surround the poem. What else had the man been doing that day? Was his family on the beach, watching him? What was his life like? There's joy in the scene – the man totally absorbed in whatever he's seeing down there under the water – and something else, too. Someone staying stubbornly, jovially in the world even when they're submerged and upside down. At the same time, I get the feeling another reader will see something different. It's Zora's deft handling of surprising detail that allows for myriad possible interpretations.

I'm really looking forward to meeting the writers of these ten poems during our masterclass at the International Institute of Modern Letters, where we'll be talking about these poems and others. Workshopping is a terrific way to develop your writing craft, to discover work by poets you haven't come across before, and just to talk poetry in a way you mightn't often get to do at school.

I was also really glad to be able to include a group of Highly Commended poems. These include those that I wanted to acknowledge in the hope that the writers will return to their poems and keep at them. Rewriting is usually the most rewarding part of writing a poem: in their first draft, very few poems are as strong as they could be. You have to chase them down.

Highly Commended

- ‘Blue’ by Mia Andrews (Christchurch Girls’ High)
- ‘Suburb Sunset’ by Honor Richardson (Pinehurst School)
- ‘Endless Sea’ by Victoria Ivashkova (Avondale College)
- ‘Familial’ by Charlie Shirreffs (Mt Roskill Grammar School)
- ‘Pacific Soaring – A Flight’ by Jonah Franke-Bowell (Hillcrest High School)
- ‘Battle’ by Jessica Swarbrick (Lincoln High School)
- ‘The Talky Man’ by Robert Russell Brodnax (Hamilton Boys’ High School)
- ‘Not Yet’ by Meché Shannon Phillips (Melville High School)
- ‘Post Mortem’ by Lisa Poole (Burnside High School)
- ‘Cobalt Hills’ by Airu Teng (Auckland Girls’ Grammar School)
- ‘She is Silent’ by Rosie Wojcik (Whangarei Girls’ High School)
- ‘Cézanne Summer’ by Maya Neupane (Wellington High School)

Happy writing, and reading,

Ashleigh Young