

National Schools Poetry Award 2018 Judge's Report by Louise Wallace

The writers behind the 175 entries received in this year's National Schools Poetry Award have all done something that many of us fear to do. They have put a piece of themselves on paper. They have spoken up about issues that concern them, or have shared heartbreak or hurt with an audience beyond themselves. The common topics remain – love, pain – and the poems that were most successful used specific details from daily life to ground these, like weighing down a large balloon. These young poets are engaging sharply with the world around them, writing about gender, culture and identity, feminism and #metoo, our changing environment and political systems and their implications. Many investigated the sense of an uncertain future, and many conveyed a strong sense of who they are. These writers should not give up on their work or saying what matters to them. A competition is always subjective. The key is to keep going.

This year's winner and nine finalists allowed me to grapple with and sample language in new ways. They presented words and concepts to me on platters like new and exotic fruits. Their voices were original and often urgent. They challenged me and surprised me. These young poets conveyed their own unique perspectives; a slice of life from their point of view. I travelled from the computer

lab to Vietnam, from maunga to Antarctica. They gave me a specific picture – although I’d never been to any of these places, I knew exactly where I was.

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*say dewdrop. say honeysuckle. say your own
name, over & over...*

The voice in Cerys Fletcher’s ‘Ballad of the Computer Lab’ is striking. It’s commanding, instructional and somewhat eerie or strange. Often I’m not one hundred per cent sure what each line is about, but I like that mystery. It does a great job of getting a mood across by using specific imagery – ‘the knots they taught you in an old scout/ den’, ‘a first kiss,/all tongue & no air’ – and because the voice is so confident, I’m very happy to go where it takes me.

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*He loved the smell of the air,
And the glistening water.
Sadly leaving behind
His wife and his daughter.*

I am always slightly wary of poems that rhyme – as many of this year’s entries did – as the rhyme often comes at the cost of the narrative, descriptions or flow of the poem. Rhyme can back poets into a corner, with limited words to choose

from. So I was very happy to see Kushla Siemonek's poem 'He Sailed Away' follow an enjoyable set rhyme scheme, without having to compromise on the wonderful story being presented of a fisherman's journey to provide for his family and the excellent twist at the end.

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*am i a glass thing, changing within every fire i am placed?
can i ever be more than they've made me?*

Patricia Alcartado's 'honest pleas in crude crayon' is a really interesting poem with a unique structure. There is a prose quality to it, and although I would normally advise against using such direct questions in poems, they have a great effect here due to the imagery contained within them, in lines like 'when the sky unfolds above me i misremember my own name/ is it woman? is it immigrant? is it youth?'. It is a challenging poem that questions the speaker's identity and then asks that question of the reader themselves.

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*I am waiting for you
in the shadow of the maunga,
in the cold damp bush.*

Stella Stevens' poem 'I Am Waiting For You' does not shy away from being a New Zealand poem and I love that. Every local detail she uses contributes to that scene-setting element, as well as being a poem that addresses environmental issues – specifically the destruction of native bush by the possum population. That broader layer of meaning gives the poem great depth.

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The fruit plummets.

For the first time it is alone,

free-falling to an uncertain future.

'Mother and Child' by Catherine Davidson uses an extended metaphor of the karaka tree and its falling seeds to stand in for the relationship of a mother and her child. At the end of the poem, the seeds fall and it's noted that the tree has no influence over what happens to them after that. This emotional investigation adds weight to the poem.

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Half-caste;

A Countdown 'pick and mix'

of Europe, East Asian and the Pacific.

Ruby Rae Macomber's poem 'Pasilangi: Pasifika and Palangi' addresses the speaker's identity and culture, the idea of trying to find a place in the world, and the impacts of colonisation. It has a storytelling quality, recounting 'the four-day trip/ from the islands to Otorohanga' where 'British missionaries adjusted the screws of my ancestors' voice boxes'. I can imagine this being a great performance poem as well. It is a powerful narrative piece.

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*I bridge the Antarctic Peninsula to the echoes of mounting temperatures
and see my tribe of Adélie penguins conga line to the Southern Ocean.*

Another location poem, Anna Doak's 'Summer in Antarctica' uses specific imagery to really transport me to that place. Lines like 'glacial peaks find the cavities of my mind/ of senseless nights' and 'the wind flights me into Paradise Harbour/ against the shards of ice' all contribute to conveying a landscape where time has no meaning – there is a sense of humanity's helplessness when compared with the enormity and vastness of the surrounding environment.

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cradled lullabies choke

bruised words;

private school brotherhoods

wear ignorance like lynx

Harriet Carter's poem 'they ask why i don't wear makeup' is a strong, assertive and contemporary piece. The poem addresses harassment and feminism, the voice is unafraid and unaffected, stating at the end that they won't cry because 'crying smudges eyeliner'. The work is pared back, every word essential, and I am particularly struck by the description of 'cactus eyes', so visceral in its imagery.

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*Come summer and my grandmother is five-spice again,
as in she is the bà ngoai
whose vowels bow deep
into pork fillings and star anise...*

I loved the sensory nature of Cybella Maffit's poem 'Việt Nam Departed'. It is an excellent study of family and culture, immigration and feelings of displacement. I was most impressed by the specific descriptions and imagery – language 'blossoms' and 'curdles', kettles 'whistle out the immigrant prayers' and consonants 'clatter dry as the river bank'. Wonderful stuff.

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strobing through capsules of life

entombed in windows at night

Finally, the winning poem, ‘Vignettes’ by Ilena Shadbolt is a beautiful observational poem, and as the title suggests, captures small glimpses of life. It is presented in the author’s natural voice, nothing feels forced, and as much is conveyed in what the poem doesn’t say, as in what it does. There is a nervous tension in this relationship, some sort of distance exists between the subjects, whether lovers, friends or family members. Everything in the poem works towards subtly building that emotional weight: the ‘trembling/ quivering light pins’, the pair ‘skirting round the edges of ourselves’. It is night-time and the city is alive with energy. Specific images are offered to us: ‘a woman all bent/ over piano keys’, ‘a man/ spilling yolk,/ spitting shell/ into the receiver’. It feels as though we are on the verge of *something* happening. Yet, there is also a distance present between the speaker and the city – they are an outsider, looking in. A superbly crafted poem.

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It was lovely to be able to choose a few more poems as a group of ‘Highly Commended’ pieces. These poems all struck me as innovative in terms of voice, imagery or structure. Being able to reach out and grab a reader is a great starting point for any writer.

Highly Commended

- 'Consent' by Isabella Leddy (Carmel College, Year 13)
- 'defining home' by Isabel Ayora (Aotea College, Year 12)
- 'Hawkestone Street Anarchy' by Ruby Hooper (Wellington Girls' College, Year 13)
- 'The Load Out' by Benoit Wynn-Williams (St Andrew's College, Year 13)
- 'Opus' by Molly Oldershaw (Cambridge High School, Year 12)
- 'The Serpent's Garden' by Serena Rowe (Napier Girls' High School, Year 13)

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The National Schools Poetry Award is a fantastic way to get students into writing, enjoying and learning about poetry. I hope it will continue to be supported as an opportunity for young people in literature, and that all of the young writers who entered this year feel encouraged to keep on with their work.

Louise Wallace

Louise Wallace is a poet and editor of Starling magazine for young writers. Her most recent poetry collection is Bad Things (Victoria University Press, 2017).