

National Schools Poetry Award 2020 – Judge’s Report

Airini Beautrais August 2020

It was a great pleasure to judge this year’s Schools Poetry Award. On a professional level it was heartening to see so many entries, indicating that young people are engaging with language and genre and finding ways to express themselves. On a personal level it was refreshing to read the words of these young writers. It’s been a difficult year for everyone. It’s easy to feel despondent and jaded. As we mature in our writing careers we can get bogged down in theory, in fashion and influence, and even in the constant back and forth of the literary social media world. Reading these poems took me back to an earlier time in my life when poetry was something new and exciting: an uncharted ocean I could explore in my own peculiar ship. It also took me back to a different point in my emotional development, when the world was vast and confusing, but also so close-up. That is what I love about young people’s writing. It speaks from a genuine, heartfelt, unadulterated place. As established writers and as teachers, I think we need to remember the importance of ‘ako’ or reciprocal learning. From reading the work of beginning writers, we can re-learn how to come to the art form with fresh eyes and ears. I believe this is what the best writers do as they approach their peak.

There are a wide range of styles and subjects among this year’s entries, encompassing personal events, politics, history, humour, and current events such as the seemingly ever-present Covid epidemic. I’m impressed at anyone being able to write a poem (or anything at all) during the months of lockdown and accompanying stress. There are poems that give vent to big and terrifying feelings, and poems that take a comical slant.

The poems that stood out for me did so for a range of reasons. One of these was the use of strong imagery grounded in the physical senses, using concrete experiences to convey abstract concepts. Another was the willingness to play with words and push beyond the ordinary, making use of sound features and figurative language.

The winning poem, E Wen Wong's 'The house that Saturn built' is full of surprising language: the image of Saturn as a hoola-hooper, the Subaru Foresters sowing seeds in the night. The poet uses unusual syntax to convey visual imagery: 'cachous loop black-ribbon moons.' There's a strong sense of place and of the interaction between the human built environment, such as the blue hockey turf, and the natural environment such as the 'nitrogen streams' polluted by agriculture. All this takes place against the superhuman background of cosmology: Matariki and Saturn, the Milky Way. It's a powerful and beautiful poem.

Another factor in choosing the finalist poems was the fit between form and content. 'Blue belongs to her' reads like a song lyric, with a traditional rhyming structure and simple yet evocative language. I would love to hear this poem cast as a piece of music. Isabella Lane's 'Used women' is a great example of a prose poem, its sentences angry and unrelenting, incorporating references to historical literary figures, and building to a defiant final line, 'i will prowl the streets like I wanted to.'

There were some strong narratives present; stories of friends, family, and heritage. 'graduation' by Victoria Sun paints a very evocative picture of friendship and the parting of ways; the exhilarating yet bittersweet tipping point between childhood and adulthood. Xavia Hayward's 'The women in my family' tells the varied stories of female ancestors, and is also packed with visual imagery: 'Yellow car, yellow blouses and sunflowers.'

Several of the finalist poems were firmly grounded in a cultural context. 'A Syrian Christmas' by Campbell Wilson depicts Middle Eastern scenery with some very poignant images such as 'snow... falling on head-scarves like icing-sugar / falling on ma'amoul.' 'Tagalao-lagi' by Allegra Wilson tells a creation story where every word feels vital and creative typography aids the depiction. 'Ngā ata' by Abraham Hix shows us a more familiar, suburban New Zealand environment, through the eyes of a child.

'Cerebrum' by Marijke Hinton makes use of nonsense, the strange imagery building to a strong overall mood. This is a great example of a fresh approach to language.

'The Colonel' by Robin Kunwar is a strongly political poem that skewers the multinational corporations behind the fast food industry, likening them to modern-day evangelical churches. There's a strong anti-colonial sentiment here, and a well-articulated anger.

There were more poems that came close to making the final ten, and in the end, what I was looking for was something that made me think differently, that surprised me in its language or imagery or story. The quality of these poems is high and I hope the writers are proud of their work.

I would like to congratulate all the entrants for writing their poems and for entering the competition. Please keep writing, keep being creative, and keep expressing yourselves in a way that is true to who you are.

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