



National Schools Poetry Award 2021 – Judge’s Report

Tayi Tibble August 2021

It was a great privilege and pleasure, and kind of a flex, to judge the 2021 National Schools Poetry Award this year — mainly because placing in this competition was my highest aspiration as a teenager circa 2013, but my transparent teenage rock’n’roll fantasy epic about drinking at a beach with a mysterious and emotionally unavailable Lana Del Rey type male in a leather jacket didn’t make the cut, which was highly traumatising for me and I am lucky to have continued writing after such a devastating loss.

Reading through this year's entries, over 200, I was happy to see similar awkward and adorable attempts to imitate adulthood, implanted into the susceptible teenage brain by the pop stars and social media, were still going strong. I was delighted at the juicy servings of teenage angst dripping throughout the submissions, which is a powerful, wonderful and highly respectable emotion. Being a teenager is such a weird and divisive time; an 11 year old obsessed with dinosaurs and a 37-year-old divorcee with two kids and mortgage are both valid and respectable states of mind that can be found in a 17-year-old, given the day. Poems ranged from wholesome and innocent tales of family dogs, favourite colours, school bus rides and first loves, to racism, suicide, terrorism and climate crisis especially.

Whenever I have the opportunity to work with teenagers, I always have a small hesitation. It’s a trauma response, because I know how much of a little horror my friends and I were back then; too cool, disruptive, disengaged, dumb and with a bad attitude. However, every time I do, I am blown away and completely inspired by how freaking cool teenagers are these days. They’re whip smart and passionate. They’re generous, thoughtful, keen and respectful. They are funny and warm. They write beautiful and thoughtful sentences and are always brave and keen to share them. What always impresses me the most, like, literally makes my jaw hit the floor, is their socio-political awareness and responsibility. They care about the world around them and the people that society effects, targets, isolates and disenfranchises.

'South' by Caitlin Jenkins was the standout and winning poem from this year's entries. It opens with a line that I kept repeating to myself for days after I read it: 'our streets grow tread marks in the pattern of tapa cloth.' The opening sentence alone contains everything that, as a poet with my particular positionality, I connect with, and it sets the tone for the rest of the poem, which is filled with references that honour a diverse but distinctive set of cultural histories: 'police siren jams but not the jawsh 385 type' and 'wake them up at dawn with our cheehoos.' It's both ancient and modern. It's cultural and urban. It is very localised and rich in specific details — 'who knew that your last meal would be a \$2.50 Big Ben pie' — but it also leaves room for the fantastical — 'a \$2.50 Big Ben pie and a bottle of stars?' Caitlin cleverly explores the relationship between people and place, tangata and whenua, by personifying South Auckland, while also challenging the reader to understand that to many outsiders, the inhabitants of South Auckland are 'but a direction of Auckland's map.' The poem reminded me of a chant, or a prayer. It hit a perfect chord of being both staunch and critical but also forgiving and hopeful. Out of many incredible and powerful entries, it was the poem that felt most in conversation with itself, and in that sense complete. Congratulations and much admiration to Caitlin.

Yes, a sense of place was one of the things I read for. Maybe it's the native in me, but when I read poems written in Aotearoa, written by people of Aotearoa, I want to get a sense of where we live, what we are like, of our culture and the land we live with. Another excellent poem was 'Westside Stories' by Ruby Buffett-Bray. It had similarities with 'South', this time set out in West Auckland, as the narrator of the poem describes life out in the wild wild west. I was impressed by the movement and rhythm in this poem: "Stealing Mama's money / we bought Big Macs at the mall / consumers of capitalist agenda / always tryna be right / signing petitions and tiktok til midnight / we're all witches.' Furthermore, I was really impressed with Ruby's ability to recognise and acknowledge her positionality and privilege in relation to some of the material in this poem. 'Trying to fight that good fight, use that privilege where it counts / but if my white saviour complex only sticks where it suits.../ can I really call myself an advocate?' I think Ruby was able to acknowledge her privilege and relationship to the land she writes about in a way that felt very respectful, intentional and considerate — which is a very impressive and brave feat that many grown pākehā NZ poets are too scared, shy or lack the skill to do! Well done.

Many of the poems that stood out to me wrestled with multiculturalism in New Zealand. 'Cultural Tripartite' by Angelina Zhou Narayan explores the tensions of having mixed whakapapa. Sometimes it feels awkward — saying grace at a fiafia night and recognising that you don't look like anyone else, or only wearing your kameez on school culture day — but it is also delicious and full of flavour too. The whole poem is full of

luscious images of cultural dress — ‘flowing hanfu’ and ‘proud patterned layers of the hanbok’ — as well as delicious descriptions of food that reminded me of Nina Mingya Powles’ writing — ‘trays of tuna swimming in coconut milk, an entire pig rests upon crumpled foil, mountains of bread slathered in butter, I gravitate towards the scent of the curry.’ It also has one of my favourite endings among the submissions: ‘Can you speak mandarin? / Not really, but I can say what fried rice is.’ Endings are so important in poetry. I often looked for poems that ended in the right place. Satisfying, but not overstating. I looked for endings that seemed deft, and left the poem open, rather than closed.

‘4 tha Kulture’ by Grace Fakahau is another poem that understands and explores the relationship between culture and food. The poem opens with grandchildren waiting for both breakfast (I’m obsessed with the description ‘the pan of eggs seethe’, so good!) and also their grandfather’s stories of life back in the islands, stories that trigger both cultural pride but also climate anxiety in the speaker. The title of the poem refers to the climate change collective, and spoken word poet Aigagalefili Fepulea’i-Tapua’i, which made this poem stand out as being in conversation with other poets in the world around it. The poem also has a killer opening line, ‘As the stars twinkle in the night sky, they twinkle like us, the grandchildren in my grandparents’ eyes’, which is not only beautiful, but contains many layers of meaning and cultural significance; whakapapa, the past, present and the future, and the Pacific’s heritage of great voyagers and migration.

‘Some of all the parts’ by Ella Paterson is a highly direct and political poem. In the poem, the narrator unlearns how society and mainstream media has taught them to define hate, greed and racism while reckoning with events like the March 15 Mosque shooting, Dawn Raids and billionaire corporate greed. ‘You lied to me about hate / I was told guns belonged in action movies / for Batman to chase away the bad guy.’ It’s kind of like a coming-of-age narrative, but in the Gen Z landscape of social media information dissemination, precarity and accountability, where the loss of innocence is a loss of ignorance. The anger and frustration is palpable.

‘Who’s a dog’s best friend’? by Darcy Monteath is highly political as well, though the tone and premise are humorous and bizarre. It kind of sounds like an old cowboy — ‘I aint ever seen a dog walk a man / imagine him; chained up ankles, sand rubbin’ raw on the peak of his knees’ — and the voice stood out among submissions. But alongside the humour is an intelligent and sophisticated exploration of man and the abuse of the natural world. ‘I aint ever seen a dog walk a man / but I tell ya what I have seen; big metal mouths that slobber on seeds / watching our ma grow cysts of concrete and chemtrails.’ Contrast, or juxtaposition, is something I’m always drawn to, and look for in poems.

'Laughing' by Holly Willis is full of off-beat observations of how nervousness and anxiety manifest in the body, demonstrating the kind of keen observation that is essential to writing poetry. 'I mouth my sentences after I say them. Nervous tick mmm' and 'I hate my room and everything it stands for / when it is messy I cannot go in there.' It's an intentionally reserved and quieter poem that I gained more from with each re-reading.

'Bus Stop Morning' by Janet Guo is an ode to friendship set on the morning school bus. It's funny, fresh and young in tone. It also had one of my favourite endings out of all the submissions: 'the Clock ticks past 8:45, every second herding more students into their classes / the Shepherd will beat us with yardsticks made out of detentions for our tardiness, but / you press the button for every stop anyway.' So funny and full of fondness!

'Dirge' by Jackson McCarthy is a beautiful and mature meditation on life and death set at the funeral of the speaker's grandfather. In the poem the speaker observes his Māori grandmother and recognises that she is attuned to something beyond this physical realm (matakite): 'at the moment she saw / the next few months of her life laid out before her ... and she knew that when all was said and done / we'd be back at work chopping beans and pastries / *this is how we honour the dead.*'

And finally, 'Today My Sister' by Penelope Scarborough is a tender, heartbreaking and gorgeous poem exploring the memories, pain and regrets one experiences after having lost a loved one to suicide. It's a difficult and terrible subject, yet the poet still manages to write beautiful sentences: 'let the moon press its face up against the window and stare down at me with pity' and 'I'd fill my sister's room with smoke/ inhale deeply and close my eyes / taste her laugh on my tongue/ how it lingered raw in the air.' It's a very sad poem, but the attention to language and beautiful images demonstrates the degree of admiration and reverence the speaker had for their sister. Really well done, and thank you kindly.

Overall, I want to say a massive, phat, congratulations to all of the winners of this year's School Poetry Award. Your poems, like all good poems, have stayed with me in my throat, chest, pit of my stomach, cupped in my hands and in my heart since I have read them. I hope you feel really chuffed and proud and do something cute to celebrate. You deserve it.

Big thank you and congratulations also, to everyone who submitted to this year's School Poetry Award. I know I said it was a pleasure to judge this year's competition but it was also a huge and horrible pain. Selecting only ten winners was very difficult. Weighing up

the entries took me ages and deciding was such an ordeal that I was late on my deadline lol. So many poems came close. So many poems were worthy of recognition. There was so much talent and insight in the submissions, and I am very proud that the next generation of writers is so thoughtful and funny. Do not feel discouraged, and please keep writing. Real writers live off rejections (and soul-crushing part-time jobs). This is your first rejection of a great career to come.

Acknowledging too, all of the submissions from Māori and Pasifika writers this year. Thank you for entrusting me with your words. We come from a line of orators, creators and storytellers, and our stories are our whakapapa, our connection to our source, so you must keep writing. It is your inheritance and your duty. Our whakapapa needs your voices.

Tayi Tibble
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