

National Schools Poetry Award 2019 – Judge’s Report

Chris Tse August 2019

When I was handed the package containing this year’s National Schools Poetry Award entries, I was in a bookshop surrounded by poets and writers. One of them had just had their first book published that day; another, more seasoned poet had recently returned from a residency in the deep South. Others had even been previous judges of this award and gave me some tips on how to approach the task ahead. It felt somewhat ceremonious for this exchange to take place in this setting, as opposed to receiving the entries in the post or via email.

We were all gathered at Vic Books in Kelburn to launch Paula Green’s latest collection with a reading featuring some of her favourite Wellington-based poets. The energy in the shop was a warm poetry- sized hug as each reader took the stand to share a poem on the theme of ‘surprise’. I clutched the package of entries – which was heavier than I was expecting – and felt this energy seep into the poems contained within. I left the launch enriched from the readings, and started making my way through entries that night.

The ‘surprise’ theme of Paula’s launch was the perfect headspace to be in to frame my approach to judging this year’s entries. I’m constantly looking for a poem to surprise me in some way as a reader and a writer of poetry. Many of poems entered this year had an element of surprise – whether it was the subject-matter, a hard-hitting line, or an image that made my head spin – these were the elements that made me want to re-read the poem immediately.

This year’s poems covered a broad range of topics that reflect the interests and concerns of young people today. I was taken backwards and forwards in time, into the privacy of the homes, the stillness of churches, art galleries, and the streets of the poets’ hometowns and cities. There were poems about friends and families, the frustration of wanting to grow up faster, and the desire for the world to slow down. I was also impressed by the breadth of style in this year’s entries – there are many young poets who are already experimenting with form, and exploring the boundaries of poetry.

Earlier this year I revisited some of my own teenage writing for an essay about how I learned to write poetry, and I came to that conclusion that – despite the overwhelming angst that permeated my writing back then – I was using poetry as an outlet to make sense of the world and my place in it. This is something I saw happening in many of this year’s entries – some of the most powerful entries turned their attention to issues and current events that are defining the world we live in today. Some of these were very personal responses, others took the opportunity to step out of their own experiences and worlds to consider things from a different perspective.

This year we’ve seen young people take to the streets in awe-inspiring numbers to protest inaction on climate change, as well as contributing their voices in support of Ihumātao, LGBTQIA rights and decriminalising abortion. Poetry, along with other art forms, is a valuable way of engaging with what’s happening around us, and I was deeply moved by many of the poems entered this year that focused on these, and other, issues. Many of them blurred the line between the personal and the political. Part of me wants to send these poems to the condescending politicians who refuse to take these young people seriously.

Judging a poetry award is an incredibly subjective process. When you have to start making the tough decisions, whittling 181 poems down to 50, then 10, you start getting very nit-picky about individual words and lines and how they contribute to a poem holding itself together. I can’t say it’s a particularly enjoyable way to read poetry, but it definitely revealed to me what I value and look for as a reader. Ultimately, what led me to my final ten is simple: these are the poems that I kept returning to, the ones that I couldn’t stop thinking about the morning after as I walked to work or while I cooked my dinner, distracted by the worlds they transported me to and the lines that kept turning in my head. They also showed some sort of technical proficiency or daring that lifted them above the other poems.

As I expected, there were a number of entries about, or inspired by, the terrorist attacks in Christchurch. All of these spoke of the pain and uncertainty that many of us have felt in the aftermath of the shootings, and what this means for the future of the country we call home. In her poem ‘the bonds of love we meet’, Pippi Duncan captures that feeling of dizzying helplessness and tempered anger with clarity and empathy. Pippi’s poem is contemplative, incorporating small but powerful details like the ‘chalk vows/ clinging to school grounds/ like blue to clouded sky’ and the ‘still of the prefect’s shoes’.

The opening lines of Emily Blennerhassett's poem 'March 15th' draws you in with two contrasting images – the ordinariness of the speaker eating a peanut butter sandwich while school children clutch hand-painted signs at a protest, 'little gods, standing defiantly atop the Godley Statue' in Cathedral Square. This disorientating juxtaposition is used again to moving effect at the end of the poem, closing the gap between an extraordinary event and an otherwise unremarkable fact of daily life: 'I sat in the bus exchange/ while there were twenty gunshots in Christchurch/ and the #17 bus took me home'.

Both Pippi and Emily's poems succinctly demonstrate the impact an event like the shootings can have on our day-to-day lives. They also address the complications of language in times of tragedy, particularly when it is intended to bring people together. The speaker in Emily's poem says, 'I will write a poem, but it will feel counterfeit...because my language is beginning to feel like a weapon'. The title of Pippi's poem is of course a reference to our national anthem, which is contrasted with the use of 'kia kaha' throughout the poem and how it can be represented in different ways. Both poems ask us to consider the words we reach for in times of support, and how they may or may not contradict their representations of national pride.

E Wen Wong's 'one world sleeps in an apple' views the events in Christchurch through a more global lens. She forces us to consider how the shootings have placed New Zealand on an international stage, and what it means to grapple with the fact that we aren't as removed from the atrocities that take place in other countries, namely America. The curious abstraction of the title, a phrase that is repeated throughout the poem, sets up a number of apple-related terms and associations, beginning with apple varieties through to the Big Apple itself, New York City. The clarity of the images in this poem is startling, with some details creating a sense of something being not quite right: 'you are the Christmas colours in September streets...you are the yellow taxi exchanging clouds/ for chambers of memories'. In these lines, and others, the poem suspends the reader in a disorientating dream-like state, 'lost in our own city'.

Another poem that made me feel like I was tripping through a feverish dream was 'Orion's Rust Belt' by Charlotte Boyle. This intriguing poem brings together the Greek myth of the hunter Orion with the pattern of stars known as Orion's Belt in the constellation Orion. For her reinterpretation, Charlotte has chosen a contemporary setting, beginning with her huntsman being picked up at a bus stop before stopping at a steakhouse for dinner. I was instantly drawn

in by the poem's tantalising drama ('we get married by empty pews/ and we die in our own beds/ and her father disapproves') and epic, cinematic scope with its desert setting and a road that stops 'seven miles out/ from Olympus'. I could picture this all unfolding as a dark, gritty film with a lush soundtrack. This poem packs a lot of punch with the controlled use of a few evocative details.

We now turn our gaze from the stars of Orion to look upon the moon, which is captured so wonderfully in Maia Armistead's poem 'A Long Drive Home'. This extended description of the moon reimagines it as 'a freckled cheek/ Pressed to a dark window./ A soft, careful creature with/ Skin like milk and tired eyes'. There's a soothing calm to this poem as we watch the moon drifting through the night sky with 'the world outside fogged away', and the image of the moon as a cheek pressed against a car window is delightfully absurd and comical. There's also a tinge of sadness to the final stanza as we are told 'She will never/ Get home to a warm bed'. There have been so many poems written about the moon, but I appreciated how Maia's poem presents its subject in a fresh new light.

'Te Pō' by Elizabeth Nahu also instilled a sense of calm in me after I read it, moved by its thoughtful view of the world and what it means to be connected to it. The poem begins by acknowledging those who have come before ('our tupuna made epic stories/ to the stars') before the speaker proclaims 'i don't need stories/ i don't need waiata/ and i don't even need poetry'. From there, the poem closes in on the speaker, focusing on details like the hum of a milking shed and the cool night air on their skin. The poem prompts the reader to consider what it means to be present and aware of one's surroundings, opening oneself up to wonder, 'because sometimes/ wonder is enough'. I particularly loved the image of 'the night doming over me/ Tāne's kete of stars/ spilling closer and closer' – it conveys a sense of the scale of the world and how small we can sometimes feel in it.

Rachel Lockwood's 'Felicity Wishes' caught my attention with its breezy, conversational tone that belies the conflicting societal pressures that lurk beneath the surface. The performative nature of identity is something we all take part in every day, whether we choose to or not. Rachel's poem makes this clear, from the bedroom set like a stage and the speaker's carefully selected clothes chosen to meet (or defy) other people's expectations. The poem turns its attention to self-examination through that most modern and unreliable of methods, the BuzzFeed quiz: 'How would your friends describe you?' The possible answers are reduced to

one-word options, reinforcing the limiting roles that we are sometimes cast in. The poem wraps up with a list of such potential roles ('the boss, the girlfriend, the author') before leaving us with a delightfully unexpected role: 'the girl who pocketed your mother's lipstick on the way out'.

The power of poetry as an observational medium is used to great effect in 'Our Gardener Ali' by Claudia Snow. Whether the titular Ali is a real person is not clear, but this poetic portrait was written so vividly that I didn't want to question it. The poem is imbued with a riot of colours that explode from the page, bringing it to life: a burnt copper sunset, a blue boilersuit that looks pale violet in the fading light, the blackberried bellies of ants, a salmon pink shirt, and the jaded greens of a park. Centred amongst all of these details is Ali, a gardener who wraps up his work day to return to a tiny mud hut, 'made home by a single bulb'. He's an object of intrigue for the neighbourhood children who know his routine. They watch on with fascination at the sight of this bald man walking to the mosque in his pink shirt. The care with which Claudia has described Ali and his world conveys empathy without resorting to pity, which can be a difficult thing to achieve in poetry.

Another poem that begins with a subject being watched is 'Old Man' by Sebastian Macaulay. The speaker's internal monologue appears cold at first as he observes an old man opening a carton of cigarettes ('yes man, light that cigarette for all you're worth'), but watching this man smoking triggers a memory of him and his father speeding down a country road at breakneck speed. There's regret, and perhaps something lost, as the speaker attempts to unpack why the sight of this old man is affecting him in this way. There are some excellent images in this poem that create a real sense of atmosphere, like the old man 'draw[ing] each drag out long like a bones player shifting keys' or an unknown destination 'where infants are born dead but still live'. Like the smoke-suns that the old man exhales, the poem twists and turns before our eyes, uncertain where the poet is taking us before it drifts off on a more contented note: 'yes man, go on your way, go on your way'.

The poem I selected as this year's winner was the one that, in my mind, carefully balanced accessibility, experimentation and narrative to deliver an emotionally resonant poem. Xiaole Zhan's 'Mammalian' is an evocative poem that triggers a multi-sensory response in the reader, from the feeling of heated cups on the body producing 'red and purple perfect circles' to the tastes and smells of tomato soup, blood and sweat. The individual details are clear

and specific, but there is also something mysterious about them as a whole that provides an underlying sense of danger. It was also one of only a handful of prose poems entered this year, using the form to great effect to create tension and intrigue. The use of repetition throughout the poem is punchy and effective, heightening the description of the strained relationship between the speaker and their mother, shifting between physical and emotional pain until the difference between the two is no longer obvious. From its bold, imagistic opening to the breathless desperation of its final lines, 'Mammalian' reeled me in and refused to let me go until the final word. This is an impressively accomplished poem.

Thank you to each and every single one of the poets who entered this year. Putting your thoughts and life down on paper and sending it to someone to judge against others is a courageous thing to do. It was a privilege to be trusted with reading your work. I hope that you'll all continue to write and refine your poetry, and seek out poetry to read to inspire you. I'll wrap this report up with a list of poems that I'm very pleased to name as my picks for 'highly commended' entries.

Highly commended:

'Stonewall'	Lily Joyce, Christchurch Girls' High School
'17'	Olivia Bradfield, Logan Park High School
'Extinction'	Frederick Clementson, Kings' College
'A Whacked Out Month For Storytelling'	Whaitiri Tua-Warbrick, Whakatane High School
'Streamline Stance'	Jack McConnell, St Peter's College
'Inhabitants of Queen Street'	Robin Kunwar, Burnside High School
'Mitochondrial Eve'	Julia Lockerd, Wellington Girls' College
'Bury The Lamb'	Georgia Wearing, Solway College