

National Schools Poetry Award 2013 Judge's Report by Anna Jackson

“Something gets left open when Timothy waltzes away with an idea...”

This is a line from one of the short-listed poems, and it does what it describes. I don't know who Timothy is but his surprising presence in this poem serves to open it up and make it more than just a poem about one person's “incredible cupboard of consciousness.” Reading and assessing the 250 poems submitted for the award made me very aware of how difficult it is to write a successful poem: on the one hand, you have to leave something open for the reader. A poem has to be more than a statement, or an illustration of a statement. It has to have some kind of resonance or mystery, a detail or a juxtaposition of images or ideas that somehow add up to something more than you can explain. On the other hand, I don't (usually) like reading a poem and not knowing what it is about or what is going on. It helps me as a reader if there is some concrete situation described, or a particular person or relationship addressed, and precise details and images are what I find myself remembering and looking forward to re-encountering on a second, or third, or fourth read-through.

These are the demands a reader makes not just of successful creative writing, but of *poetry*. I read a tremendous range of work for this award, all of it showing some promise, some energy or some element of successful resolution. Many of these pieces of writing – I hope – would have been awarded excellent grades according to the relevant NCEA criteria. But only about a tenth of the entries were real contenders for a poetry award. Those entries are doing much more than succeeding at a creative writing exercise, they are genuine works of literature. As James Fenton wrote in a terrific essay about what it is to be a writer (“A Lesson from Michelangelo”), the aspiring poet is “in the position of someone who takes up a violin for the first time and has a go at giving a concert.” There is no real training for a writer, no scales to practise, no fingering positions to learn. To learn to write a poem, you have to try to write a *poem*. This means being ambitious enough to write the sort of poetry you most like to read in anthologies, magazines and collections. (Eventually, to be a poet will mean having to try and write something *better* than anything you can read in anthologies, magazines or collections.)

These are some introductory comments. The rest of this report will comment on each of the winning poems in turn, beginning with the overall winner but then discussing the other nine in no particular order.

It was difficult to pick one winner from the shortlisted poems, but Emma Shi's "inadequately blue" caught my attention from the start and continued to quietly please me every time I read it again. This is a very assured poem, from its arresting opening image, through its three poised and shapely stanzas. My own preference for conventionally punctuated poetry was easily discounted in the face of this poet's resolute use of the lower-case. This is a poem about an origami feeling, with the image of the origami cranes at once suggesting the care, the attention, the patience it takes to "fold and fold and fold" and at the same time the lack of pretension, the artlessness, the simplicity of writing all in the lower-case about nothing more than a feeling.

"Hurt" by Ruby Solly is another very poised and crafted poem, again in three nicely-shaped stanzas of uneven lengths. Yet this is also an ambitious poem, a poem not afraid to introduce big ideas: the "sins I commit without thinking," the church-goers failing to sound "a single harmonic / upon their heart-strings," the distance between imagination and reality, physical space and mental space, the present moment and the remembered past. The second and third stanzas offer very vivid and particular images, a need to stop and kiss on the church steps, a plan to string clothes up between "the two tallest trees in town" so they can wave in the air "like the flags that my grandmother hung / at times of celebration." The first stanza sets up the emotional weight that gives the poem as a whole its resonance, with the image of the speaker sounding "the notes of hurt." I imagined an organ player, though perhaps I must have been thinking of a piano and its insides when I wanted to read the hammer that plays its nails through the skin as a musical hammer, but this is the one stanza where I would have liked a little more detail and context to ground the imagery.

A poem doesn't have to be small and shapely, it can ramble. The strength of "Wintersweet" by Didi Hughes comes from its slow unfolding of detail after detail, as almost every plant in the overgrown garden is given its moment of observation: the twining vines, the tangled thorn-branches, the spiked teasels and rioting fennel. The narrator of the poem is present too, right from the first line, pausing at the gate, ducking beneath a rose, wading through the weeds. Even before the kuia, "Nan," is introduced as the remembered presence still ruling over this now neglected domain, it was evident this garden was a place of significance, a garden that evoked strong feelings. The line "Then she died" may have felt like necessary information to include, but it jars with the rest of the poem. Death *is* jarring of course but this is a poem about the lasting power of memory and influence, and by the end of the third stanza (perhaps the true ending of

the poem) the shift into the past tense would already have alerted any perceptive reader to the story that is being told.

“No one ever tells us” is another poem – if it is a poem – that is much less concerned about form than content. This is a passionate, clear-sighted exploration of the confusion and excitement of adolescent sexuality, especially for anyone whose sexual feelings and sense of identity don’t line up neatly into the categories that seem to be available. Like really great fiction or a really great essay, it makes its point through specific examples, particular moments vividly described, closely observed details (“the lovely protruding of the adam’s apple,/ the grate of stubble, the gangled elbows, the blunt fingers, all angles and edges./ or the waterfall of collarbones crested above the swell of her breasts”). Isabelle McNeur makes it evident in “No one ever tells us” that these literary features have an important place in poetry as well as prose.

“La Langue Francaise” by Madeleine Ballard is a witty portrait of the French language as a character “looking out of the window, smoking pensively in long streamers.” To be honest, clever though the conceit is, I think I’d have liked the poem even better if it were just about a person. The portrait of this pretentious character, initially off-putting in his (or her) photograph-like composure, but eventually irresistible, is witty enough in itself and more charming somehow if a real relationship is suggested. (Other readers may disagree.)

Philippa McMenamin’s “A China Robin” is an extraordinarily powerful elegy for someone vividly called into presence by this poem, by the poet’s determination to choose the pain of thinking about them even when “the pain of you is like huffing paint,” causing migraines, knitting a knot in the spine. The emotions evoked in this poem are mostly evoked through metaphor, some startlingly original imagery, some quite conventional, but together suggesting a very real, very particular and very important relationship.

“Oceanic Romeo and Juliet” really stood out from the rest of the poems for the way it revelled in language, opening with the astonishingly lovely line, “Waterfaerie, beautiful, why did it have to be like this?” Although so much of contemporary YA fiction and television is supernatural fantasy, there was hardly any trace of the fantastic in the poems submitted, with this one glorious exception. As the title indicates, this poem tells the story of Romeo and Juliet as the story of a young fisherman in love with a mermaid, with stanzas alternating between unrhyming couplets and rhyming quatrains. It is a risky thing to write in rhyme, and even more to attempt metre: the general comment I’d make is not to use metre unless you are very sure you have mastered correct scansion. The rhythms of “Oceanic Romeo and Juliet” are not rigidly metrical, and some lines are more effective than others, but the poet clearly has an ear for lyrical cadence.

Holly Brendling's "Dust" gives a wonderfully subtle, but vivid, portrayal of a character through her complicated feelings towards a small china elephant ornament. It is a perceptive response to Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel, *The Secret Garden*, a psychologically acute reading of the central character Mary Lennox, but if you didn't know this it wouldn't matter at all. This is a poem that succeeds independently of its starting point as a character study, even while it has an extra resonance for those readers who love *The Secret Garden*. Mary Lennox's strong will and independence of thought comes through very strongly in her disobedience to what she knows her mother would have said – "she packs a toy?" – but we are equally aware of how much she has been shaped by her upbringing and how conscious she is of her parents' views. We can see both how damaged she has been, and how resilient she will prove to be, through Holly's selection of the most quietly perfect details.

In "Just another sketch" Bryony Campbell takes the risky option of writing about writing. It is hard to be very interesting writing about the difficulties of writing, but this poem succeeds through the surprisingly singular details – the form of the letter "traced / on an old newsletter found discarded in the recycling bin" – and the question it raises about who is the recipient of the letter, what is it about this relationship which makes writing this letter so difficult, and yet so urgent? Since for me, this question gave the poem its interest, I regretted the last couple of stanzas which expanded on the satisfactions of writing in a more general way, switching from the first person to a generalised "you." Even the shape of the last stanza loses the lovely irregularities and nicely deliberate line-breaks that characterise the other stanzas, and which combine so nicely with the regularity of having every stanza exactly six lines long.

Finally, we come back round to "Incandescent Essence," by Timothy Fraser. Discovering the name of the poet makes the introduction of a character Timothy less mysterious – though it adds a new strangeness to the shift between the first person and the third person in that line (and I still don't know who Robyn Reid is, several lines earlier). I like the shifts and surprises of this poem, the odd pointlessness of knowing the exact address of a character (Robyn Reid) who makes so brief an appearance, the shift into French for just one line, the unfinished lines that enact the darting, melting quality of the stream of consciousness thinking that the poem is all about. When revising or workshopping poems, you want to hold onto these strangenesses whenever you possibly can.

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