National Schools Poetry Award

2012 Judge's Report by Ian Wedde

This was an amazing experience – 290 and some poems from the energy cauldron of young poets hell-bent on everything: Who am I, what's happening to the world, have you heard the one about, what was the fool thinking, can't you see how I feel, look what these words can do, get this ...

There were elegantly crafted poems, poems that caught the droll twang of kidding-you speech, rapper rhymes and rhythms; poems that dived into language and splashed about there, poems that dipped carefully into language; poems that were scrupulous with the sense they wanted to make, and poems that pulled the rug out from under sense; emotional poems, intellectual poems, piss-take poems. One very short poem I liked had the title 'Ew poems': *When poems don't make sense/ Yet they're supposable good?/ That just grinds my gears.*

The most obviously striking thing about these poems was that someone wanted to write each and every one of them, thought that writing a poem was a significant act, and knew something about how poetry has been written in the past and is being written today. This may seem like a banal and obvious thing to say; but it's a fact – the larger collective impact of all the poems was what bowled me over at first. Then I began to look for what was specific and individual in the poems; and I looked for craft skill and writing ability. Like anyone else, I have my preferences when it comes to reading poetry, but what I found myself wanting to do most when it came to choosing the ten poems that would make the final cut, was to sample diversity. This is because it was the diversity of the 290 poems that made their collective impact so powerful.

The default mode of poetry often can be for it to express something vividly personal in a lyric, anecdotal form, and most of the 290 poems do this in one way or another: they reach out to me, the reader, they ask for my sympathy and attention. These appeals have some shared themes: questions of personal identity, grief at the loss of a loved one, the experience (good or bad) of being in love, anxiety about the state of the planet, among others. But what makes the diversity of the poems interesting is the ways in which these personal expressions of shared or familiar themes are turned and repositioned, uttered by or on behalf of selves whose positions and viewpoints are made surprising or even disturbing in some way. These are not all predictable encounters. What also makes their differences interesting is the variety of techniques, language, and poetics used.

In 'Waiting to Fall Off', written in succinct, focused, three-line verses, there's an 'I' narrating an encounter with a man whose 'hedge is a different shape/each time'; he seems to be tattooed with a 'seal', a 'mermaid', 'boobs', and 'The Sailor Man' – he may even be the Sailor Man. There are 'nurses/ on their day off'. Are we in the day-room of a care-giving institution? Sometimes events seem to be remembered, then they're in the present; but is that present the strange time-fold of memory that brings the past back as some form of now? Then the 'I' switches to a 'we': 'We're all doing fine.' 'Fine' despite the fact that the Sailor Man's legs are like 'red kumara/ ... waiting to fall off.' And is this 'we' statement in fact a transcription of something the Sailor Man said, overheard and reported by 'I'? The pronouns in the poem and the viewpoints they articulate are unstable, as is its location and time, and as, sometimes, is its grammar; and yet the poem's focus is intensely

observant and crisply organised. The poem closes with a wickedly terse articulation of the askew attentions and consciousnesses it contains:

> Some lady got up and
> said a tribute to you
> about somebody else.

Is the 'you' the Sailor Man? Why 'somebody else' – because the tribute is aimed at the wrong person by 'some lady' who's confused, or because the narrator in the poem doesn't recognise the Sailor Man as the person described in the tribute? Is this narrator a child whose experience of the Sailor Man living behind his always-changing hedge is being remembered by the adult writing the poem? Is the always-changingness of the hedge a measure of time passing? Is the compelling ambiguity in the poem the result of that observing consciousness, that self, stretched between a child's and an adult's perceptions? These small puzzles and fractures in the anecdotal surface of the poem don't make it a 'ew poem' that might grind our gears; rather, they are what make its sense vivid and strange; even scary.

The tense strangeness of 'Waiting to Fall Off' is very different from the long-lined love story of 'The Beekeeper' – which, however, also has a disturbing undertone. The Beekeeper is at once 'my sweet, sweet man', the one who provides 'honey sandwiches', who cries when bees' lives are 'snuffed out' flying into window-panes while trying to reach him; and the one who smokes the bees out and 'put[s] them all to sleep'. The Beekeeper and the poet have twins – 'two bastard sons' (whose 'yellow booties' are like the pollen-pads on bees' legs).

> But don't worry my man,
> my sweet, sweet man.
> I know it's all lies.
>
> For our confession of love had one million witnesses.
> *Each guest humming me down the aisle ...*

... where the lovely, unobtrusive half-rhyme of 'lies' and 'aisle' closes the poem after the sound-pun of 'humming me' (humming bee?).

'If I Ever Write a Poem' joins a tradition of poems disliking (or pretending to dislike) poetry, of which the best known is probably Marianne Moore's 'Poetry', which begins, famously, 'I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.' Moore, of course, trumps her own proposition by writing a poem that redeems poetry from her 'dislike'. Something similar happens in 'If I Ever Write a Poem', first of all, obviously, because what we immediately read *is* a poem – so much for 'If'. The poet then announces that he or she won't 'let the main point parade around/ dressed to the nines in simile and metaphor/ bejewelled in allegory and rhyme.' Okay – but already 'the poem' has been presented as if it *could* be dressed up – it's already been metaphorised; and next the poet strips it: 'I will let it wander around in the nude.' We are now deeply inside a metaphor which might be characterised as the naked truth. What follows are three marvellous lines of naked truth:

> When food is scarce lady bugs will resort to cannibalism and eat the elderly.
> The common garden worm has five pairs of hearts.
> Scorpions have venomous stingers but some have twelve eyes
>
> I'll write. And I will put down the pen

At the end of this face-off between naked truth and 'dressed to the nines' poetry, with the points decision awarded to that brief catalogue of marvellous facts, the poet observes that what's been avoided is a 'contest' –

> where one of us will inevitably be broken
> and remade as something less than whole.

In fact, it's been the 'contest' within this poem that has made the poem; which isn't something 'less than whole' but rather something greater and more interesting than the sum of its (contesting) parts.

'You'll remember' launches without ado or reflexive doubt into a plain-speech, 'naked truth' account of a summer in which 'couple of things/ ... stand out:'

> when we egged alicia
> suarez's house
> she pushed fabe in the
> fountain
> the bitch

... is one of the remembered stand-outs; the other is when 'we jumped/into the/ river/out the back of your house'. And then, as the memory starts to break up around the belief ('and I'll only say this now')

> that you had a
> crush
> on me
> would explain some things

... the strutty, confident tone of the poem peters out. It ends, laconic as it began, but with the swagger all gone:

> there was something
> that happened
> there was you
> there was me
> I forget
> I know you'll remember

Sometimes, it's that kind of compression and simplicity that gives poetry a particular kind of power. In 'Ever to Forget the Elephant', that concision creates big spaces in the poem – spaces between images but also around a kind of hidden narrative. This elephant is vividly present in some wonderful images:

> A thud of large, grey footsteps
> A huff of earth
>
> His shadow casts a warm darkness
>
> His memory is the world's tallest library

But, without filling in its spaces with exposition, the poem also conveys the idea of an elephant in the room, so to speak – of 'what is important' gathered somehow in the unstated significance of

'revenge can be sought,/ love lost.' What might be referred to here is never explained: the elephant both takes up and makes all the space in the poem.

The horse in 'Queen's Horse' is in a painting by the artist Joanna Braithwaite. What's fun about this poem is the way it takes on the gentle satire of the painting (a horse in Queen-at-Badminton-type head-scarf) and expands on it, in witty language that cunningly embeds the rhyming repetitions of rap:

> Inbreeding; something that might be followed by some kind of legal proceeding,
> then maybe an alternative pleading, disbelieving and a debriefing this evening –
> Quite some insult if that's where this painting's leading.

A plea: 'Queen's Horse' should never be published without Braithwaite's deadpan equine portrait.

'Spaces Between' involves a single, sombre metaphor: of a person as a locked room into which others can only peer

> through frosted glass
> at outlines that seem
> to shift and settle
> like overgrown moths.

The poem is constructed as a simple list extension of that metaphor, driven along by the repeated phrase 'you are'. Such lists can work by ending-without-concluding – by just stopping; or they can go for a punch-line. This one manages to combine both. Its concluding list-item, '[You are] the dust that is never let out' is at one level just the final variation of the metaphor, after which the poem comes to an end. But at another level it's an uncanny image, a metaphysical conceit, in which the room becomes a tomb.

The puzzle of how to end a poem without overstating the point of it – having the last word as we say; not letting the reader go – is unobtrusively but subtly solved in 'Spaces Between'. In 'I Forget', the poem goes for, and delivers, a great punch-line. The poem lists a bunch of things that bring on an endorphin rush, including exertion and defecation, but concludes:

> I forget about all this
> with two tongues in my mouth

This zappy punch-line makes the poem end on a high (endorphin) note. Sometimes, though, the best endings are deliberately flattened. 'Passive Aggressive' is the narrative of one sibling saying goodbye to another who is leaving 'in one month two weeks five days' for Pennsylvania, the destination to which their mother (drowning her sorrow in wine) is sending him or her, to university (the destination has a 'roommate' and 'professors' in it). The sibling going off to far-away college is an opinionated 'devil's advocate', delivering 'one-sided vendettas on Marxism/ or was it Wall Street'; in the background of the poem we can hear this annoying but loved loudmouth in the car yelling 'to turn the Oldies off'. But then the hectic tone and rhythm of the poem subside into a laconic final four lines:

> when our time zones intervene
> put on Etta James and
> write me cheap postcards
> on Saturday evenings

The sadness and understated poignancy of that dying fall in the final line is just one of the marvellous, individual effects in these poems.

Picking a winner from these ten poems has been hard because I wanted my selection to sample the diversity of the 290 submitted – having gone for diversity, how can I single one out? In a real sense, all ten constitute a single 'winner', since collectively they demonstrate the range of approaches, voices, and intentions I've encountered while reading these poems.

But choose I must, and the winner of the 2012 New Zealand Secondary Schools poetry competition is poem number 1279, 'Passive Aggressive'. This poem seems to do something quite conventional. It's a narrative about emotion and reasons for emotion. It's written from a straightforward first person point of view. Its language and voice are uncomplicated but full of character. Noticeable, though, is the way its simple arrangement of lines scores the rhythms of speech with occasional well-judged breaks or emphases:

> tell your roommate, your
> professors, that man
> standing behind you in the checkout queue

Those little catches of breath or attention between 'your' and 'professors', and between 'man' and 'standing behind you' convey ... jealousy? anxiety? the effort of visualising? They are, at any rate, signs of the poet's unobtrusive but effective attention to what poems can do. Then there's a minor breakdown in syntax, a lurch without punctuation from 'tear-stained pillowcase' to 'can you trace us from this place,/ trace me?' – with, for emphasis, a little chain of rhyme linking 'pillowcase', 'trace', and 'place'. And then that flattened, laconic sign-off: 'put on Etta James and/ write me cheap postcards/ on saturday evenings.'

Straightforward and even conventional at first sight, this poem rewards closer attention with many deft subtleties – with internal diversities of its own.