

## **National Schools Poetry Award**

### **2011 Judge's Report by Cilla McQueen**

I've greatly enjoyed this opportunity to read the work of these young New Zealand poets in 190-odd poems. Their words give me insights into their generation – their feelings, relationships with people and with language, the ways they see the world – as only poetry can.

The subject matter ranges from the personal to the keenly philosophical. Aware of the poem as a valid and vivid means of expression, these poets ask hard questions about society, spirituality and relationships. The poems contain acute, sometimes painful insights, some fresh and surprising imagery, lyrical felicities and daring feats of imagination. The mood overall is realistic, if a trifle bleak. Though many poems deal with love and identity, a considerable number deal with some sort of loss.

I like poems that make subtle use of imagery and sound, have a freshness of approach, invite me in while leaving some things unsaid, trust the freedom of the page and the possibilities of language, have a sense of fun and mystery, spring from concentrated thought, make a mark in my mind and perhaps leave a trace. I looked for imagination, a glimpse of a world beyond the poem, some engagement with contemporary life, and especially for that original spark at the heart of the finished work.

Here's my shortlist:

‘Only falling’

This day-dream hooked me with the first three lines. I recognised this impulse to write; here it is so strong that the poet feels a need to 'carve a hole in/ my skull to let the words out'. I liked the images of flight, the transformation of the poet into a cat and the way the poem twists, like a cat falling out of a tree. I was drawn into its imaginative journey towards creating 'something beautiful' - itself.

### ‘Brother’

Joy in the fond relationship between poet and younger brother is evoked with energy in a poem of slightly dislocated syntax and bright images, underpinned by life's heartbeat and bracketed at either end by a happy grin. 'Small wonders' such as a red-cheeked child's 'blows of the dandelion clock' are fresh and surprising.

### ‘The window’

Perceptive, original imagery portrays the imagination's impulse towards flight, its sense that a special freedom waits beyond the barrier of the pane and that escape from the mundane is possible. The sleepy dog as 'sentry/ to the world beyond', the beetle wishing for magical dissolution, the people dimly seeing mysteries – the window-gazers and the poet know it's worth escaping to the world of imagination, where anything is possible.

### ‘The greenstone’

I chose this poem because it is about a mystery. It made me stop and think about single words, like 'mystery' and 'find' and 'wait'. Time and distance are covered in the poet's search for this beautiful stone – which certainly exists, yet is very hard to find. In its simplicity the poem affirms the connection between poetry, mystery and meaning.

### ‘Being Pakeha’

I chose this poem because although not 'poetic' it is concerned with language and understanding. To the young Pakeha poet the Maori language is tantalisingly close but out of reach, for fear of ridicule or incomprehension from school, friends or family. It's a poem of indecision; the poet talks her/himself out of attempting to make the connection and invites the reader into the discussion with a flat statement of impossibility.

### ‘Turning a blind eye’

I liked the surprises and incongruities in this fast-paced poem, which works rather like a comic strip. Direct, streamlined language speeds the enigmatic plot fragment through twenty lines, told by a narrator to whom the language is appropriate. It has a humorous B-grade movie atmosphere and a suitably ironic whiff of corruption at the end.

‘Grace’

An affectionate poem about friendship, difference and togetherness, where contrasting personalities meet happily in a puddle. Different ways of thinking and feeling are compared in the easy sensuality of 'one fat curl unwinds itself/ on to your cheek' and the 'ten point turns' of the poet's worried thinking. It is happiness that reconciles these opposite, but complementary, personalities.

‘Note for my singing teacher’

I chose this poem because it has an upbeat attitude, some mystery, controlled emotion and a rhythmic jazz feel which makes the language dance. There's unfinished business in 'the Swedish haircut' and the 'incident with the door'. The poem deals with strong emotion by allowing the the music to take over and the image of Zita dancing 'without thought, without weight' precedes the last, low-key tribute, 'you could say she danced for all of us'.

‘What matters is the hiss of powder’

Four vivid scenes like acts in a play are written in terse descriptive language. What begins as a hesitant description gains shape and control through the poem. The conclusion in the fourth stanza is moving; the poet feels guilty that 'the taste seems stolen/ the hands stained'. Clear imagery evokes place, emotion and action in 'slate sky,' 'split down duvets', 'bruised petals' and tears, perhaps, that 'carve your cheeks.' The poem shares the exhilaration and emotion of a memorable experience.

‘Nan’

A young person's encounter with death in the family. There's a contrast between the church's high-beamed ceilings, 'light filtered/ through a stained glass Jesus' and the inarticulate poet looking down at the reality of death. The admission that 'I could not bring myself to/ touch you' grieves for the intimacy of touch, twice lost. Memories of a comforting childhood relationship's small details, like 'fish bones and sick days/ of hot cocoa rice' compound the sense of loss. It's a difficult, honest admission of grief, written in restrained, effective language.

The lyric and the elegaic are probably equally important in poetry but, since life today is not easy, I chose as the winner 'Nan', with its haunting image of grief whispering 'to a bent microphone'.

*Cina McQueen*

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