

*The Bell Gully National Schools*  
**poetryaward 06**  
*celebrating the work of young New Zealand poets*

**Judge's Report**  
by James Brown

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I did the usual thing I do when making judgements and comparisons between a large number of poems, I set up three piles: one called No, one called Yes? and one called Read Again (for those that had both good and bad bits or else confused me). Naturally, No and Read Again grew much faster than Yes?, but every ten poems or so, just as I would feel myself loosing the will to live, a gathering of words that wasn't clichéd, overwritten or pointing out that God, love and nature are all splendid things, if only we had the wisdom to realise it, would spring forth.

The triumphs and failures of the entries panned out pretty much as they have when I've judged similar competitions in the past (the one exception being the winning poem, the standard of which I felt was exceptionally high). Unhappiness still seemed to offer the most creative sparks. It's hard to know whether young people today are more aware of global suffering, or whether when they pick up their pens to write poetry they somehow assume that big themes have to be tackled. Many of the poems that took on big themes – the injustice of the world, for example – failed because they did so in large, abstract terms. Poems that were able to convey their concerns using specific, 'concrete' details – as opposed to generalised clichés of destruction and misery lifted from TV – tended to be more successful. Poems focusing on the everyday life of a New Zealand teenager were also generally more successful – small, specific details again proving the stronger vehicle for larger themes.

Whatever their subject matter, it's essential that poems engage their readers, which is where imagination and an ability to hear the nuances of language come in. I felt that many entries were the work of people who may be competent writers in other genres, but who weren't poets. (Yet. One should never give up.) Clichés and tired, well-worn phrases are the flip side to the equally poem-killing overwriting and sentimentality. Arranging and rearranging words until they click is (usually) tough work. And finding the right balance between overly dull and overly poetic language is like getting a coin to stand on its edge – only harder.

It also helps to be able to tilt the page so that the coin starts going somewhere. Narrative is often under-utilised in poetry. Many poems were fine descriptions – all well and good – but I preferred poems that moved through a number of scenes or incidents, told a little story, or took me somewhere.

A brief word about the use of regular rhyme-schemes in conjunction with regular rhythms – avoid. It is *very difficult* to write in regular rhyme and rhythm without the poem starting to sound like it was penned

with a quill over a hundred years ago. Internal rhymes and half rhymes usually provide plenty of lyrical scope without the poem starting to sound like it was written by Rupert Bear.

The prevalence of regular rhyme and rhythm suggests to me that many of the entrants wanted/needed a form on which to build their poem, and a rhyme-scheme seemed the most obvious – and regular rhythm quickly chimed in. I can understand the desire for a formal structure; being confronted with a blank page and only a topic as a restriction – write a poem about autumn, for example – can be terrifying. My call goes out to teachers to introduce their pupils to simple poetic forms that don't use regular rhyme and rhythm. Simple forms – like syllabics or pantoums – help reduce the panic caused by too many options, and the constraints imposed, providing the form isn't too difficult, are actually opportunities for the imagination.

The winning poem – 'strawberries strung on lines' by Alisha Vara, Year 12, Rangi Ruru Girls' School, Christchurch – went immediately to the top of the Yes? pile, though in its case there was never a need for a question mark. At the time I thought, this is going to take some beating, and although the other finalists also impressed me, it withstood all challengers.

'[S]trawberries strung on lines' takes poetry's most common subject – love – yet still serves up something fresh and vital. Its sureness of tone and gentle precision are breath-taking. The details and images emerge as quiet surprises, slowly enveloping the reader in the world of the speaker as they embark on a new relationship. The subtle movements between the physical details and the speaker's humming mind combine wonderfully to convey the speaker's restrained but intense emotions. The urge to share these is countered by an equally natural desire for privacy. The start of a relationship is often as anxious as it is exciting, and it is this mixture that gives the speaker's world its heightened 'bizarre' quality, where commonplace things take on 'a certain kind of grace'.

The poem is so accomplished that it wouldn't look out of place in the pages of *Landfall* or *Sport*. It is clearly the product of someone who is not just a writer of poetry, but also a reader. Our sense that the speaker's feelings are startling and new is countered by an admission that some lines may be 'stolen', acknowledging that the poem, and particularly love poetry, is part of an ongoing tradition of reading and re-writing, experience and imagination. Stolen lines or not, the poem shimmers with the freshness of

falling in love, and shows us that those floating moments at the start of a relationship, like ‘cycling down a hill with the rain, / soft and endless’, are indeed splendid things.

‘Madeline’ (by Andrew Aitken-Fincham, Year 13, St Andrew’s College, Christchurch) is a wonderfully well-rendered character-study. Many of the lines are extremely powerful. The poem’s language is simple and conversational, yet its information and the way the lines deliver it are constantly surprising. The line-breaks cunningly manipulate each sentence, frequently re-writing the sense of previous lines. This ambiguity is brilliantly controlled, allowing the different readings to emerge and co-exist without conflict. As the poem progresses, Madeline becomes an extraordinarily complex, fascinating and convincing character. We feel we know her at the same time as she remains elusive and thereby alive to our imagination.

‘Ray’ (by Lisa Cochrane, Year 13, Epsom Girls Grammar School, Auckland) is extremely moving and demonstrates how keeping a lid on a poem’s emotion when the subject matter is emotional or traumatic is often far more powerful than letting everything hang out. The poem’s poignancy is partly generated by the speaker’s calm, almost distant voice, beneath which we clearly sense the emotion surrounding Ray’s death. In the final stanza, the speaker locates themselves as looking back on the event from three years after, and perhaps that time gap contributes to the detached tone. The well-chosen details of the nine daffodils carried by the nine daughters, of the speaker being ‘secretly glad’ (a traumatic admission in itself), and of her mother placing ‘Salt Shakers’ into the coffin for “‘later on”” are heightened by the poem’s restraint.

‘Like Tea and Crumpets’ (by Sophia Graham, Year 13, Epsom Girls Grammar School, Auckland) combines stanzas comprised of short lists of similes with stanzas driven by narrative. The combination is crucial because impressive as many of the similes are, they could easily start to sound samey without the variation offered by the narrative. The similes show how something abstract – in this instance, the speaker’s possible names – can become more tangible when likened to something real. Thus: ‘Victoria Jane’ is fleshed out by genteel details of Victorian England, and ‘Grace’ by details associated with a religious great grandmother. The exotic sounding ‘Lila’ finds her strongest embodiment in ‘soft jazz’, and ‘Sophia Claire’ in her suggestion of things Greek and Italian. Despite the lists, the poem in totality is in fact a narrative, a marvellously entertaining journey through possibilities to selfhood.

‘Thumb – luv’ (by Chaturika Jayasinghe, Year 12, St Cuthberts College, Auckland) is a poem in another language, the language of youth – txt. Like ‘A Universe in my Head’ the joy is in the way it translates a traditional text – in this case, marriage vows – into a contemporary form. It’s daring and outrageous, pushing the boundaries of what poetry might be and succeeding with style. Humour is an aspect of poetry too often dismissed as trivial, but by taking the traditional marriage vows as its primary text (what could be more serious and solemn?), ‘Thumb – luv’ suggests that although the language by which we communicate may change, the important things of which we speak, like love and commitment, remain the same and will continue ‘4 eva & eva & eva & eva’.

‘A Universe in my Head’ (by Graeme Ninness, Year 12, Awatapu College, Palmerston North) is structurally adventurous and delivers two versions of the same poem, side by side. The first adopts the tone of Romantic poetry – as characterised by an ABAB CDCD rhyme-scheme, old-fashioned syntax and operatic descriptive language – in its description of a Tolkienesque world. The second re-writes or translates the first into a more contemporary tone – free verse, straightforward syntax and plainer descriptive language. The effect is both humorous and instructive, and clearly the work of someone who knows how to manipulate words to create and control different tones. It’s worth noting that the charm of the poem exists in the comparison between the two versions: the first being a finely-judged piece of overwriting and the second being coolly underwritten. Graeme plays the two extremes off against each other with great deftness.

‘Life Cycles’ (by Jennifer Niven, Year 13, Samuel Marsden Collegiate, Wellington) deals with the delicate subject of – how can I put it? – female puberty. It’s a fine example of how everyday details can stand for more than just themselves – in this instance the occasion of discovering a partly-formed chick when cracking an egg. But the poem also skilfully mixes showing with telling – ‘Period pain I said’ – so that we’re left in no doubt as to how to read the opening stanza. I particularly like the way the poem also mixes registers and techniques that are more poetic with everyday language, speech and detail – for example, ‘the six o’clock news / Drifting / from the silhouette of / old Mrs Reiher’s open window’.

‘Imogen’ (by Dora Sharpe-Davidson, Year 13, St Andrew’s College, Christchurch) is a highly accomplished portrait of a teenager ready for new horizons. As with ‘Life Cycles’, the superb details and imagery quietly stand for much more than themselves – for example, the curtains held by ‘two tight

pigtails’ and the light bulbs seen as ‘tiny skulls / their faces flat and defeated’. The pigtails are also ‘too tight’, further emphasising Imogen’s desire to break free from the restraints of home. The final image plays a strange trick with reality in that one would ordinarily expect a thrown stick to be swallowed by the sky. Perhaps the image is a declaration of independence, an evocation of the power of Imogen’s mind (her head filled ‘with words’) and voice (the stick ‘a pointed tongue’) to assert themselves in the world (‘swallow the sky’).

‘Little Sister’ (by Sarah Wilks, Year 13, Samuel Marsden Collegiate, Wellington)

is an extremely concise, sensuous and evocative poem. All the senses – sound, sight, touch, taste (albeit indirectly, through the icing sugar and toothpaste) and, perhaps the most powerful, smell – are brought into play in a description of the speaker’s little sister. The poem is an expertly shot ten-second video. Its angles are perfectly pitched. Nowhere does it overwrite. For ten lines, it is simply a ‘smooth and absolute’ rendering of a happy moment – and, as mentioned earlier, for some reason happiness seems harder to write about successfully than unhappiness. The last line, like the snake in the Garden of Eden, introduces an unexpected twist in the seamless idyllic moment, but I think I would have picked this poem even without that added complication.

‘Cellar Door’ (by Lilian Yong, Year 12, Epsom Girls Grammar School, Auckland) is one of a number of entries that tackled the subject of teenage drinking. But unlike many of them, it does so without endless Whey-hey-I’ve-drunk-too-much clichés or excessive moralising. The first stanza is a fine example of showing: the reader’s imagination must interpret the information to understand what’s going on. Do the ‘elbows’, for instance, refer to a drinking game? Similarly, the third stanza paints a wonderfully tactile picture of vomiting. Yes, there is a moral in the negative ‘facial contortions’ of the speaker’s friend and the speaker’s own lack of excitement or participation, but their stance remains largely observational and understated, proving the potency of silence and subtlety.

One judging dilemma that confronted me was how to compare those poems that were trying to push the boundaries of poetry in some way, but that hadn’t quite come off, with poems of more modest ambitions more successfully realised. The hard truth about poetry is that it is very unforgiving of poor lines. There’s really nowhere for, say, a ridiculously flowery image or wise-old-man-of-the-hills homily to hide. Many poems had dazzling bits, but also bits that wobbled. Often this was a case of a poem proceeding to *tell* the

reader what it had just nicely *shown*. If writing is working well, it doesn't need to *tell* readers how they should be thinking and feeling.

Happily, I was able to include Highly Commended and Commended categories, where poems that hadn't made the final ten but still deserved to be acknowledged could be. I hope the people in these categories return to their poem and try to work out which bits are maybe letting the rest of the poem down.

### Highly Commended

'I Used to Wonder' by Miranda Cossar, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'10 to None' by Rex Cullen, Lawrence Area School, Otago

'Inamorato' by Pramudie Giunaratne, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'Friday and the Problems Flowers Present' by Lexie Hughes, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'Summer Lunch' by Jenna Kerley, Wairoa College, Wairoa

'Albert Park' by Allison Tang, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'Remembering Ana' by Lizzi Tollemache, Marlborough Girls College

### Commended

'Not a shortcut' by Rhonda Bridges, Awatapu College, Palmerston North

'Night in the playground' by Jasmine Kim, Otago Girls High School

'The Exam' by Renee Lyons, Tawa College, Wellington

'Cuba St' by Kate Mead, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'Logan Terrace' by Hannah Ellen Rogers, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland

'Lunch' by Meg Wearing, Wellington East Girls Grammar

The really great thing about this competition is that it isn't just a case of entering a poem and then finding out whether you've won anything or not. Part of the prize flies the top ten poets to Wellington for a day of masterclasses run through the International Institute of Modern Letters. These will give me (and others) a chance to workshop the poems with the poets and suggest ways of improving them. Other classes will help the poets develop their craft in other ways. It's such a great thing to do. I only wish those people in

the Highly Commended and Commended categories could also have had the opportunity, but, as many entries made clear in their subject matter, the world is not an equal-opportunity employer.

If there's a lesson here it's don't let not winning stop you writing. Also, don't let not winning stop you re-writing. Also, don't let winning stop you re-writing. All the poems in the top ten can be improved. Few poems arrive on the page fully formed. Most go through many drafts, and some you never manage to unlock.

It can take years to learn how to listen to the sounds and rhythms of words so that you know where the bung notes are. Reading poetry, especially contemporary poetry, is a great way to learn. If you can't read a poem and get that special zing you feel when you listen to a favourite song, then how will you ever be able to create your own zing with your own words? *Landfall*, *Sport* and the Best New Zealand Poetry website are good places to start.

James Brown