

Judge's Report

The American poet Charles Olson once said that, concerning the writing of a good poem, there are four legs to stand on: Be romantic, be passionate, be imaginative, and never be rushed. It's one of the best pieces of advice for young writers that I know.

The best poems in the competition struck me as realising the four legs of Olson's imaginary chair. They were romantic, in the sense that they manifested a love of both the sounds and the meanings of language.

They were written with a passionate attachment to 'the world', to the objects, people and events around which the poems shaped themselves.

The verse was 'imaginative' in that it offered me, the reader, an 'imaginative' ride. I stepped for a short time into another world—a familiar one, but one that was surprising and fresh.

And there was something writerly about the best poems: a cultivated detachment, you could almost say. The writer, rather than dashing the poem off, seemed to have placed the words carefully, aware of their textures and the interrelationships between them.

While a good number of poems submitted in the competition used traditional poetic devices such as rhyme and metre, the best poems were those written in free verse—but with a real sense of music in the words, phrases and lines. All of the best poems relied on understatement—ie. they didn't tell the reader what to think. Rather, they offered the reader an experience of words and things and people. Needless to say there was also some great, subtle word-music in the winning poems: David Seaman's rhyming of 'test pot size' and 'A5' being my favourite example. Poems don't have to have a strict rhyme scheme to offer exhilarating sound effects.

The winning poem, Mia Gaudin's 'Harriet' is a plainly rendered piece, but is made more marvellous and resonant by the simplicity of language and the directness of the narrative. There are no tricks here; no artifice. It reminds me of some of William Carlos Williams' poetry. The poem ends with a resonant 'act': watching pips from stolen cherries rolling 'quietly / down iron grooves / on your neighbour's roof'. From the plain details of the poem, nuances of a friendship emerge. It's a compressed narrative—almost a short story—but one where small things (a t-shirt, eggs, marshmallows, the cherries etc) carry the weight of people's lives, their dreams and loves.

The five short-listed poems had some of the same qualities as 'Harriet'. Sienna Smale-Jackson's 'Eugene' is a wonderfully physical poem. The first stanza has an unsettling feeling to it: 'he puts the plunger / onto his chest / and pushes down'. The

writing is economical and the sounds of the words certainly enhance the drama of the piece: ‘releasing the clog / of clotted emotions’. It’s evocative, original and attention-grabbing. It was a real toss-up between ‘Harriet’ and ‘Eugene’ when it came to deciding the overall winner.

I enjoyed the deadpan tone of Joanna Wang’s ‘Family bonding at 4am’. This is a narrative poem full of sharply registered details. There is an almost filmic quality to the writing: ‘The bathroom. The toilet. / The laundry / The kitchen. Cupboards. / Scrutinising every single tiny grain of space...’ The title plays an important role in orientating the reader: While the poem focuses, for the most part, on an unfortunate elderly relation, the title alerts us to the fact that the poem is really about the bonds that exist around her and, in a sense, because of her.

Meg Waghorn’s ‘The Little Heart’ is a strong, alluring poem about both the emotional life and the life of a pen-wielding writer. The detailed imagery is sensitively placed, the line-endings and breaks between stanzas showing a real attention to cadence, to the sound and rhythm of the words. David Seaman’s ‘Wrapped in logic’ is a curious, elusive short poem. Small poems are very, very hard to write: every word has to count for so much. ‘Wrapped in logic’ is a witty, rueful, successful instance of this kind of writing. I like the ambiguity of the poem: ‘I wonder what it would be like / if you came in test pot size / or A5’. The poem could be addressed to a friend, a child, a parent, to God—or is the poem addressed to a colour, a material object?

A more ornate piece, Catherine Palmer’s ‘The Hearts on the Vines’ has a denser, slower music to it. The language of the poem is more self-consciously ‘poetic’. It contains some great-sounding words, such as ‘proteinaceous’ and ‘masticated’ and, best of all, ‘spiracles’. The music of the poem is what wins me over, rather than any sense of what is happening here. (This is the kind of effect the writing of Mallarmé and the French Symbolists has on me.) Alongside the pared down poetry of ‘Harriet’ and ‘The little heart’, it’s great to see this kind of orchestrated, richly textured work as well.

It’s good to see young poets trying a variety of forms and approaches. The two problems for young writers to be aware of, it occurred to me after reading the entries, were (1) overwriting, striving too hard for effect and (2) writing about subject matter that is too personal, too emotional. Good writing has to generate emotion through its imagery and language; you can’t generate emotion just by describing emotion, at least not on the page. As the old adage goes: poetry should show and not tell. It should also use the fewest words, the best words, in the best possible order.

Anthony Burgess once complained that the education system ‘has conditioned us to look on words as mere counters which, given a particular context, mean one thing and one thing only. This tradition, needless to say, is geared to the legalistic and commercial rather than to the aesthetic [or the artistic]...’

That statement is definitely worth thinking about. Obviously, words are an integral part of the everyday, ordinary life we all live, but they also have magical, marvellous capabilities. They can be a *mystery*—and the human mind thrives on mystery, whether we experience it in the form of television thrillers, strange sounding words or

inexplicable poetic images. In the best writing, words can soar, they can duck and dive, they can baffle us and move us and entertain us.

An awareness of words is what it is all about. And the way any writer nurtures this awareness is through reading the poetry of others. The winning poem, 'Harriet', was definitely the work of someone who had an eye and an ear for 'the poem'—a reader as well as a writer. I hope all the young poets who entered the competition will keep working—reading as well as writing—developing their craft and staying passionate about poetry. They will be, after all, the future of this country's poetry.

Gregory O'Brien, August 2003

Winner

Mia Gaudin (Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland) for her poem "Harriet"

Prize

\$500

\$500 book grant for the winner's school library

A six-month subscription to *The Listener*

A year's membership of the New Zealand Book Council

Accommodation and transport to Wellington for the prize giving

Runners Up

Catherine Palmer (Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland) for her poem "The Hearts on the Vines"

David Seaman (Taradale High School, Napier) for his poem "Wrapped in Logic"

Sienna Smale-Jackson (Otago Girls' High School, Dunedin) for her poem "Eugene"

Meg Waghorn (Rangi Ruru Girls' School, Christchurch) for her poem "The Little Heart"

Joanna Wang (Pakuranga College, Auckland) for her poem "Family Bonding at 4am"

Prize

\$50 Booksellers Token

A six-month subscription to *The Listener*

A year's membership of the New Zealand Book Council

The winning poem will be published in AMP, September 6 issue of *The Listener*. The five runners-up will be published in subsequent issues. All poems will be published on the IIML website, www.vuw.ac.nz/modernletters.

Winner: Mia Gaudin, Epsom Girls' Grammar School

harriet

I

It was twelve

you crossed the road
in your dad's
"lawyers never lose their appeal" t-shirt
and sat down laughing

I offered you eggs

but instead
you gave me the marshmallows
from your flat white
and we talked

about uni courses
the ball
and the colours of the sky

II

We were ten

you went to America for two terms
and when you called me
with a half rehearsed accent

I cried
and told you to come home

you did (with candy)
so your dad had a party
with his lawyer friends

we stole cherries
from downstairs
and spent the night
at your bedroom window
spitting pips
and watching them roll quietly
down iron grooves
on your neighbours' roof