

JUDGES REPORT

‘HALFWAY BETWEEN THE EARTH AND THE MOON’

*Not for Paris, by Micah Ferris*

The poetry that has most challenged me, disappointed me, frustrated, worried and delighted me in the last twelve months has been the poetry written by year 12 and 13 high school students in the Bell Gully school poetry competition. There were exactly 200 poems entered in the competition and they were an unexpected insight into what it is that makes good poetry and what it is that teenagers see, feel and write about.

There were a handful of excellent poems. The winner, *I wish I had an intelligent dolphin* by Chilton St James student Poppy Haynes, literally leapt out of the pack. It was a small tunnel of words to escape through and not out of place among the best poems I have read this year. Every time I read it, it stood out for its simplicity, imagination, precision and joy. What I liked most was the clarity of the writing coupled with the imagination of the desire it expressed. This combination gave the poem a tension that made me think that sometimes the impossible might just be obtainable. In a sense it made it obtainable. For poems like this I read poetry, to write poems like this, I write. Thank-you, and damn-you, Poppy Haynes.

*Cards*, by Helen Lyttelton, was a lovely piece of understated writing. It invited the reader on a small hesitating journey. The core of the poem hid behind corners revealing a shy blink of the eyes or a nod of the head. It seduced its readers, compelling us to ‘make sense’ of what was being written about without giving us enough information to be sure. Is it a love poem? Who is it to? A partner? A parent? A friend? There is a sense of longing in the poem, as though someone is just out of reach. It is perfectly balanced and left me with a sense of delight and gentleness and loneliness.

*Reprise* is a similar poem in that it is about a relationship between two people. We do not know the nature of that relationship but the poem works well enough for us to recognise attraction, joy, hurt and retreat. This is enough. The poet, Melissa Chen, is not simply telling us what happened. She is painting that place we come to in relationships between going on and going back. The details are not important. In a sense the poem purposely obscures them behind its inferences and the specialized language of music. These have the added beauty of decorating the poem with language joyful and beautiful in its own right. This makes the poem distinctive and more ‘dense.’ Meaning is hidden in an undergrowth of words. This is not just random undergrowth. It is a finely planted garden that threatens to obscure and protect the poem at its centre. If we find the poem, good for us, if we don’t then it’s a gorgeous garden to look at anyway.

*Monbretia* by Meg Ryburn completes a hat-trick of poems about relationships. Like its partners it says by not saying. Its central relationship is outlined within a single

remembered incident, a girl (I assume) tells a boy (I assume) about monbretia, a boy tells a girl about cricket. The poem celebrates what insignificant packages our most significant moments come in. It recounts the moment of first contact between two people who seem like they have so much to say but begin by talking about something mundane. This is the great joy of the poem, nothing is insignificant. Monbretia and cricket are safe places to talk from when encountering a person outside the zone of comfort. More than that, and because of that, they go on to become a talisman of first love. This poem is about the elevation of the minor to the major. In the last paragraph the orange of the monbretia has become the orange of a sunset, an event as wide and significant as the sky itself, a type of horizon. Or else I'm just a big girl's blouse.

Buried in a pack of poems about teenage angst it was water to a dry man reading *Le ode to teenage angst* by Arielle Tai and *Gardening for the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman* by Shezani Nasoordeen. They came at a time when I desperately needed some relief. Sometimes the right poem finds us at the right time. I liked them because they made me laugh. The writing did not need to be demanding for these poems to work, however it still had to be done well. In *Le ode to teenage angst* the deflation of a well built up idea is the center of the poem. Most of the poem is a set up, a poetic side-step, feinting to the right and then coming back left to sit us in no mans land. It works by trying to create an instant of recognition which it does well. *Gardening for the 21<sup>st</sup> century woman* relies on a good ear for the speaking voice and is as sparse in structure as the instructions it contains. It convinces us in a few words of a personality we recognise. When we reject the distance, or 'pruning', inherent in that personality we reject what they say. That most of us do this says as much about our desire for chaos, lushness and warmth as it does about the teachers we used to have, and still do, it seems.

While there are always objective criteria to judge poems by sometimes the decision to choose one poem over another is very subjective. There were three poems this year that missed recognition by a very small margin. These include: *To Roger Waters* by Laura Vincent, *Henley Road* by Mia Gaudin, last years overall winner and *Hurunui* by Michael Baker, the only poem by a boy to really poke me in the eye.

As usual the best poems all shared the quality of saying something without really saying it. The poems that were not so good said what they had to say, then said it again, then knocked on the door in short sleeved shirts to ask you if you had time to think about what was said. It does not seem surprising that students from Rangī Ruru Girls School in Christchurch, who have a writer-in-residence programme and Epsom Girls Grammar, with an established creative writing group, produced five of the six winning poems. I don't know that you can teach someone to write a good poem but you can teach them how to avoid writing a bad one.

Many of the poems, successful or otherwise, also highlighted the need for good editing. Just about all of them could have been made stronger by a few trips back to the drawing board. There were very few bad ideas but many good ideas weren't fully realized.

It seems significant that there were no male writers among the winning poets this year. In fact there was only one poem by a boy included among the top nine poems. I'm not sure why this is. Do fewer boys write poetry than girls? If this is so, is it because boys are less articulate, or because they value poetry less? Is poetry seen as too confessional? Are boys less confessional? Is poetry just not a very bloke thing to do? Only 40 of the total entries were written by boys. A lot more were written about them.

In many ways for me the story of the competition is not told in the six poems that have been rewarded. It is more accurately told in the 150 or so that didn't make the long list. The preceding comments and observations relate largely to the poems that were successful and that is as it should be. In some ways though the most powerful reward of judging the awards this year was the sense of sadness, confrontation and challenge I felt reading the thoughts of 200 New Zealand teenagers and the way those thoughts and concerns were translated into poetry.

I have to say that I was a bit disappointed in the quality of the poetry entered in the competition overall. I don't mean to be hard but I think it is good to expect more. I can't help thinking that if this was a competition for the best visual arts produced by a similar age group the standard would be higher. Perhaps the visual arts are more easily identified with creativity and therefore garner more attention from high schools. I imagine teachers honing student creativity and the technical skills they need to express it.

So many entries in the poetry competition seemed to lack any process of review. Maybe that is an inherent quality of poetry or writing - that it is private, but I think when you are working on a piece for the public to consume then it is good to get some feedback. Poetry is a craft and as such there are general approaches to it that can be taught. One of the significant steps in learning to write is to realise that you do have to learn to write and that speaking a language fluently doesn't necessarily translate in to writing well for an audience. Maybe we should move poetry out of the English curriculum and into the art room. It is art. It is more about seeing than writing.

I don't mean to be pedantic but of the 200 poems entered 43 of them relied heavily on outdated regular rhythm and rhyming structures. I am not saying that rhyme is bad. It is great. It remains a staple of poetry and used well is terrific. Bad rhyme kills poetry dead. It too easily slips into cliché and cliché is the enemy of poetry. From reading the entries in this competition it seems that too many students still think that a poem is a poem if it rhymes. That's ok if you are entering a rhyming poetry competition but if it is the foremost national poetry competition for senior high school students then maybe it is time to review exactly what a modern poem is and how it works.

I don't want to be a poetry snob but I wouldn't expect a national high schools art competition to throw up a quarter of its entries depicting bowls of fruit or landscapes of the English countryside. We have moved on. Most high schools students I know speak a language I have never heard of. It is exciting. They should be at the cutting edge of language and its uses. I wonder if they have never been made to think about it much. When they go into 'poetry mode' they stop speaking like they really do and start speaking like they think a poet does. But we don't.

The other thing that struck me was the topics that our young people chose to write about. I suppose I have studied just enough science to want to count things whenever I want to know what is going on. Of the 200 poems 36 were about death, sickness, loss or leaving (most of these were about death), 24 were about being alone, isolated or sad, 19 were about disappointment and the decay of good things and 11 were broken-hearted love poems. That is a total of 90 poems about sadness. Another 37 poems were about God, world problems, war, terrorism, racism and poverty. They all contained a searing righteousness for lack of two better words. There were 12 love poems with happy endings (I think) and, thank-god, at least one poem about escaping from school on a dolphin. That is a grand total of 139 poems out of 200 on very big feelings - a double edged sword when it comes to poetry.

On the one hand poetry is the great domain of big feelings. It is designed for big feelings and some of the best poems written are about big feelings. May it always be so. On the other hand most poetry about big feelings works best by understating. To understate a big feeling is a balanced art and is usually learnt by getting it wrong a lot and then being forced to re-read what you have written when you are calm.

Too many times the big feelings in this competition made for poor poetry because the feeling got the upper hand over the poem. Too many poems screamed. This is so easily remedied. It is usually the 10<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> poem about a big feeling that is the best. Some good advice on writing good poems about big feelings would have been to write a dozen poems about the feeling and send in the last one.

Most of the poems entered had great ideas at the core of what they wanted to express but without any feedback they tried to say too much. The horses threw their riders. There were too many poems that lacked a quality of silence. I guess what I am saying again is that some wise mentoring would have turned some wonderful big feelings into much more powerful poems.

I am unsure how I feel about the fact that so many of our young people wrote about such overwhelmingly negative feelings. It makes me feel old fashioned. I don't know if it is an artefact of poetry, bringing out the confessional in people, or if there is sometimes just a lot of sadness in our teenagers that we forget. Perhaps it is endemic to poetry. Perhaps a newly developing understanding of poetry concentrates on poetry's power for communicating great emotion and so it is thought that great emotion must be sought when writing poetry. Perhaps it is because sometimes it is easier to make writing more powerful if it is about sadness than if it is about joy.

Perhaps it is endemic to adolescence. Adolescence is usually the first time powerful emotions such as love, hate, hurt and disappointment are combined with a newly developed sense of consciousness. It is the age we first begin to see that adults don't know everything and seem to occupy a world of compromises. It is the great age where the world turns from black and white into too many shades of grey and maybe someone needs to stick up for the black and white.

Perhaps it is the first time we become familiar with that voice in our heads that talks to us all the time. The one that tells us what other people think of us, who to talk to, how we stack up. That voice can be a bastard for a while until you realize it is as scared as you. It is isolating. Maybe that is where the big emotions come from - galloping along the beach. If so, then perhaps this is a stage of life and poetry that will be passed through and looked back on with joy and embarrassment. The alternative, that perhaps our young people don't have many other places to confess and talk and express big emotion is frightening, for them and for those of us who thought we knew them. For students who fit into this last category I would say that sometimes there are some things more important than flash poetry. You deserve our gentleness and care and tenderness before anything else. Your stories were moving and powerful. They work as poems of confession and personal exploration and that is a different thing all-together. In some ways people who love poetry should read the best fifty entries in this year's Bell Gully competition. Most of these recent comments don't relate to those poems. People who love young people should read the rest.

I want to finish by making a plea for poetry to be taught well to our young people and in our high schools. It is important. It is always important to look at the world in a different light. Poetry is one of the oldest ways of doing that. It is worth preserving and promoting. If it does not reflect or interest the people who are reading it then we have to write more relevant poetry, not give up on it. If the models seem old and crusty then we have to create better ones. If it is intimidating, punch it back. Poetry is with us like it or not, sometimes our ability to write it down is all that eludes us. That can be fixed.

Above all it seems to me that poetry is about seeing. It is a way of looking at things. It needs to be rescued from the teaching of metaphor and simile and alliteration and rhyming structures. That can all come later. It is wrongheaded that poetry should end up in the English curriculum. Words are only the final common pathway of the poem. They are important for that obviously, but poetry is about more than writing. We should teach poetry in the art-room or in a poetry-room if we have one, even in the woodwork-room. It is physical and tactile. It is not about books. Books are the graveyard of poetry. Poems end up stuck inside books like dead people and never see the light of day. It is as relevant to teach poetry in an English classroom as it is to teach art in a hardware shop. Why don't we walk amongst our children's poetry the way we walk amongst their art at schools?

Telling stories is one of the great joys of being a human being. Recognising and being able to communicate our own stories is liberating and exhilarating. Our young people deserve to know that their lives are rich, that their ordinary days are extraordinary, that they are chocker with yarns, that sadness is a narrative. There is always another chapter, episode, sequel. We deserve to be old and arthritic and sit down with pleasure and listen to them.

I want to thank Bell Gully and the Institute of Modern Letters for organizing and sponsoring this poetry competition. It seems a wonderful way of beginning to show young people the joys and rewards of poetry. There may be a long way to go in some ways for poetry to be as distinctive and as competently practised in our schools as some of our other arts. We should set high standards. This competition is a wonderful beginning.

Glenn Colquhoun  
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