

Bell Gully National Schools Poetry Award 2005

Judge's Report

by **Bernadette Hall**

I wasn't writing poetry when I was the age of the young people who have submitted their work in this year's competition. But I did write poetry, heaps of it, when I was younger than they are now, at about 10 or 11 years old. And I wrote for money!

I had a friend, Annette, who used to set me topics, things like snow or Dogs or Spring or The Circus. Then I'd produce a little rhyming text which I'd give to her and she'd give me, I guess it was a penny, and I'd buy an ice-cream. It was a very satisfactory arrangement.

In my teenage years I turned to writing in times of trauma, grief or hidden rage. I did this when my Dad died of a heart attack, dropping suddenly and unexpectedly in front of me, when I was sixteen. I still have the outpourings, sheet after sheet of them, that I scrawled at that time. I treasure them but I wouldn't call them poetry. Rather, the guts of poetry, the essential, elemental energy which I am still wired to respond to in a poem.

These days I try to shape that energy, allowing the ear and the eye, the intellect and the literate memory to do their stuff, even unconsciously. I try to disengage from the fear that something will be lost if I tamper with the first splatter of words that hit the page. It's a tricky business. Sometimes I have to tell myself off - 'Hey, who are you trying to impress! Too clever, too clever, you're losing the plot, and fast!' Then I have to dream back to the original rush, the initial impulse. I have to look for the word or the image that might be the key. The task after all is to shake up an intriguing cocktail – transparency, simplicity, familiarity plus magic and mystery.

What surprised and delighted me in reading through the 129 competition entries is that there are young writers out there who already understand the game. They can pull it off, this matching of the impetuous heart with the subtlety of craft. I would guess that they are all in love with language. They have fallen for the tricks that quirky words can get up to in conversation, in song and in written texts, from Shakespeare's sonnets to car manuals.

The six poems short-listed, while varied in their form and content, all have plenty of energy. The language in them is alive, sparky with dialogue and imagery, wit and surprise. There is depth of feeling and depth of thought in them. Like Waterford crystal, they ring true.

The first time I read 'Chain of Fools' by **Kirsti Whalen** (Yr 12, Epsom Girls Grammar School), it was as if I was body surfing, hurtling in on a big curling wave towards our stony beach. The rush was pure adrenalin. Having been a high school teacher for many years, and having not entirely forgotten the dramas of my own teenage years and those of my friends, I felt the heat of the emotions and the episodes described. Out with reruns of tired daffodils, ever hopeful rainbows and bleeding hearts. This is something fresh, a streetwise challenge, strident with vitality. This is an ecstatic rampage on the bad side, fascinating as all crime scenes are to the onlooker. The text is up-to-date, packed with specifics. This is highly moral poem. We are directed, perhaps over-directed by the title, 'Chain of Fools,' even as we struggle not to be swept up in gales of wicked laughter and self-

mockery. 'We are the Mothers, lecturing ourselves / about liver failure and smoke clouding our lungs.' The emotional complexity of the poem, the control of velocity shown in the gear changes between stanzas, the vivid filmic quality of the crowd scenes, the way every word pulls its weight, all these things impress. I wish I was the one who had written this poem, but then it would have been about bodgies and widgees and winkle-picker shoes.

'Ball Game' by **Selina Powell** (Yr 13, Wellington High School) is a very fine example of a double character study. The tone is playful and affectionate, the storyline is strongly established with a minimum of fuss - the cool girl, the dancing footballer 'dodging pillows in the hallway / dribbling to school, and racing / buses at the traffic lights' who aims to impress her next-door neighbour, Liverpoolian Pete, with her footwork. I really enjoyed the relaxed flow of this poem, some of the lines replicating the flow of the ball 'around the cushions / seamlessly, through the chair legs / SCORE.' The dialogue is sharp, sprightly with good-humour. Words, like the ball, are kicked around between the two friends. The writer's eye picks up details that intrigue – in the sun's glare 'the fireball football caught in my eye'; after a header, 'up, up / down to rest yin and yang on my foot.' By the end of the poem, I believe in these people and feel genuinely fond of them.

I laugh out loud every time I read the little powerhouse poem 'My Poetry Teacher' by **Jessie Hendy** (Yr 12, Taradale High School). It's not exactly easy to explain why. It's something to do with the hesitations, the polite bewilderment presented by the narrator. Something about the intellectual struggle between the pupil and the poetry teacher 'who perhaps has been drinking.' The lines buzz, then flare up into a highly sophisticated literary argument. The teacher 'abstracts' – the pupil presents poetry that contains 'bite marks / of expression.' This is blissful! The teacher, for my money, having lost the plot; the pupil being absolutely on the right track. The conclusion is a stalemate. The teacher with 'that long-faced Socrates syndrome / expression on her face' is trapped by her own questionable understanding of technique. The pupil will no doubt go on to write more superbly individualistic poems, like this one which should be read aloud at the start of every single Creative Writing lesson up and down the country.

What a gorgeous poem 'Travel Log' is, with its graceful sweeping through a landscape as much emotional as through 'the beautiful / undiscovered land' revealed by love. From the opening imperative 'drive' to the finding of 'home' in a room in the cheapest hotel, energy pushes on through the elegant text, rich with images. As for technique, the poet, **Melissa Chen** (Yr 13, Epsom Girls Grammar School), obviously has a very good ear. The music of the lines is compelling, like the purr of a classic car, maybe an old Mercedes. Just listen to the rising cadences in the final stanza, the turn at 'motel,' then the delicious falling away in the last two lines, the rhythm matching the voices 'falling through the dark of / mezzanine floored pathways.'

'Under the Trees' by **Guanting Liu** (Yr 13, St Cuthbert's College) is another delightful love poem, this time focussing on the subtle dance steps that mark the beginning of a relationship, a bit further down the track than 'a first crush.' I really enjoyed the smart, witty shuffle of conversation which is not really light at all. The words shared are part of the fun, the playful construction of a private world between the pair, who share a quick intelligence and a fine sense of irony. The words edited out or passed over with laughter posit big themes like gender politics and international power plays. And yes, how dead and shrivelled these seem, like decaying leaves, in comparison with the movement of the human heart.

I relish the romance of this poem, the way it is undercut by 'reality' but survives in laughter. The way the whole is shot by the last line way out into history. The way every word works.

In 'History' by **Russell Kale** (Yr 13, Karamu High School), there is not the same marking of the text by an individualistic voice or tone. The poem is in a recognisable format, it is controlled by a structure made up, pretty much, of tight one-liners. Eventually these push through to a lyrical conclusion. What makes this technical piece successful in my opinion is the element of surprise, the unexpected images and vocabulary that burst through the format of litany or chant. There is much humour in the word-play, the explosions of hyperbole work well- 'Russ Kale knows where to get the best seat in the stratosphere.' I enjoyed the urban smartness of the poem which produces a distancing effect on a reader. We watch Russ Kale, we are not asked to feel anything for or about him. It is as if he is a specimen in a literary laboratory. Yet finally our own certainties dissolve in the hesitations and uncertainties of the last lines – 'Russ Kale becomes distorted at the edges.' We end up not being exactly sure where we are, where any of us are. Our complacency is shattered and that has to be a good thing.

To all of you who turn by instinct to words, just as others turn to music or painting or dance, I'd say read and read and read, poems, novels, plays, financial reports, scientific journals, whatever, in your quest for new language, the language of the 21st century. Read outside your comfort zone, check out translations of work from other cultures, from other times. Homer's 'Odyssey' is rich with poetic invention. Read the words of poets themselves as they try to understand this mysterious work they are engaged in. I recommend the essays of Seamus Heaney and those of Adrienne Rich presented in her invaluable collection 'What is found there.'

Above all don't limit yourself. Use all your languages. Your own life experiences will invest your writing with integrity and freshness. Give yourself time. Poetry is not about competitions, prizes, high profiles, money (it is certainly never about money!) It is about being bewildered, shaping our questions, not our answers, into little powerpacks that will sustain our interior wanderings. With poems we mark our tracks like the red flags that mark the safe routes through The Ice in Antarctica. It is good work.