

New Zealand Post National Schools Poetry Award

2007 Judge's report by Andrew Johnston

Way back in the 1970s, Whitcombe and Tombs published an annual series of books, edited by Helen Hogan, full of secondary school poems. That was the thing to get into, back then, and when I made it, I was over the moon. Now the NZ Post National Schools Poetry Award is the thing, and I can imagine the invisible hopes and dreams lurking between the lines of the poems that have been sent in this year. When I agreed to judge this year's contest, I was curious to see what kind of poem today's young people write – and whether it's any different from the contributions to those slim, stapled 1970s selections.

One thing I found immediately striking is that secondary school students seem to be much freer to be themselves these days – but that paradoxically, as far as poetry goes, sometimes that's a good thing and sometimes not! Let me explain. It's a good thing when it liberates young writers to be as idiosyncratic – and, let's face it, just plain weird – as they can be. Poetry thrives on weirdness, when it's not forced or faked – when it means finding words for genuine peculiarities of thought and speech and experience. The 10 poems that I chose for the shortlist often start from the same kind of place, the same frame of mind, as the other entries, but quickly go somewhere much more interesting, often carried along by the leaps and quirks of language itself.

All that freedom can be an unfortunate thing, however, when it just sends young writers diving deep into themselves, without the oxygen of fresh, interesting language. It's not a problem that there was a lot of "free expression" in this year's entries – a lot of soulful exploration of feelings (the theme, after all, was "Liberate your words"). It's a shame, however, that there wasn't much else. Presuming that a good number of the entries were born in the classroom, I'm curious about the approaches that teachers take to the writing of poetry. Perhaps it's time to get back to setting subjects that take students out of themselves and into the world. (A couple of teachers apparently had set subjects, along the lines of pretending to be someone else. These two batches of work seldom escaped, however, from the deep-diving syndrome.) Reading my way through the entries, I thought of the wonderful books that the late American poet Kenneth Koch wrote about teaching poetry, and how some of the poems could have benefited from Koch's ideas and methods. As for the need for concrete detail, I can only point to what previous judges of this competition have said about the importance of real, visible, audible things in poems.

Like most of the entries, the shortlisted poems tend to start in that familiar zone where teenagers feel keenly their aloneness and the otherness of other people, as well as the

tantalising possibilities of breaking down those barriers – of togetherness, understanding and romance. As well as a certain ability to handle language – to listen to its rhythms, to break lines in useful places – I was looking for poems that achieved a bit of distance within that emotional zone, distance in which humour, irony or other kinds of reflection could take place.

The winning poem, ‘mosaic’ (Chloë Nannestad, Year 12, Epsom Girls Grammar, Auckland) reads like five short poems jammed together. But of course it is a single poem, as the five fragments share a distinctive unity of tone. The picture that emerges out of the pieces of the mosaic is slightly melancholy but nevertheless bemused. The poem is self-conscious about literariness (the first part mentions Hemingway) and about consciousness itself (it talks of ‘revenge fantasies’) – but always ironically so. The way it uses different linguistic registers – the comic book words in the second section, the movie-Western cliché (‘you said it ain’t big enough for the both of us’) – displays a sharp awareness of the fact that all language (even, or especially, ‘poetic’ language) is pre-treated timber, so to speak: it comes to us marked by the purposes and contexts it has already met. This doesn’t prevent some touches that are poetic in the best sense of the word – ‘white rain,’ for instance. Which is not what we usually say, but then rain sometimes *is* white, and the poem notices that for us. It’s a very appealing, quirky, witty, sophisticated poem.

‘Something less than nothing (but still I kiss you silver)’ (Zoe Newman, Year 13, Dargaville School) is totally over the top, in many ways. It’s excessively romantic. But what I like about this poem is precisely its excessiveness, its obsessiveness, underlined by all the repetition and the remarkable rhythm, which bounces and extends the meter of the title’s words (that’s a trochaic trimeter, but never mind) throughout the poems’ daringly long lines. Bits of it may not even make conventional sense, but that’s not a problem, because we’re simply swept along by the sounds of the words, by the music of language enjoying itself. Some awkward or clichéd phrases that might have sunk in another context are carried along by the poem’s huge burst of energy.

I like the way ‘Act One’ (Michael Trigg, Year 13, Wellington College) plays with the idea of preparing a face to meet the world. It’s a very sensitive, thoughtful poem evoking what it’s like to have an inner life, what goes on in our minds where no one else can see. The voice intermittently practising scales is a brilliant touch, and technically the rest of the poem is very clever, too. The lines are short, sharp and punchy, and the use of the imperative – the voice giving all those instructions – puts the vocal stress on the first syllable of the line, in most cases, so that the lines seem to lean forward, grabbing our attention. I’m looking forward very much to hearing the poet read this one.

In ‘lifetime(s)’ (Alisha Vara, Year 13, Rangi Ruru Girls School, Christchurch), the description of a fish in newspaper on the garage floor – an unwanted gift to a family of vegetarians – was an unforgettable image of the strangeness of the ordinary, a reminder that one man’s fish is another man’s ‘sea animal’ (as the poem calls it). I loved the way

the poem then drifted into the story of children's hands painted with henna, at a wedding, reimagined as a sea of red for the fish to swim in. To my mind, the poem should have stopped there – the last two lines let it down a bit, I think, by returning to prosaic and slightly hackneyed language.

In 'A Leaving Message (for Eriko)' (Sarah Zydervelt, Year 12, Nayland College, Nelson) language is destabilised and made mysterious right from the start, and I couldn't resist reading on, to find out where these pithy, one-line sentences end up. The poem holds our attention by never quite revealing the whole picture – it could be a teenage romance glimpsed in fragments, or it could be something else – and by jumping from thought to thought, never quite settling down into anything like a regular way of talking to us (the changing line-length mimics these jumping thoughts). Like some of the other shortlisted poems, this poem teeters on the edge of sentimentality, but the things it does with language pull it back, make it more complicated and more intriguing.

'Lazy Boy' (Sam Wells, Year 12, Wellington College) starts out as if it's going to be a plain, straightforward, talky poem (like a lot of the entries), but soon becomes much more complicated and interesting: The second sentence – 'It's funny what you see / when your eyes aren't open' – implies that what we see in the first three lines is only just imagined, so where does that leave the rest of the poem? It's a poem that takes risks, following its own flow of association – a stream-of-consciousness poem that works.

In 'So here we are' (Laura Lincoln, Year 12, Karamu High School, Hastings) the four stanzas read like four attempts to say the same thing, with the fourth stanza working wonderfully as the clearest, most resolved way of saying what the poem feels like it wanted to say all along; it's also a funny, affectionate conclusion, with the extra line in the fourth stanza pushing the thought out further and finding added humour and warmth. I like the way the lines step across the page – it's very evocative of the sense of the words – and the way each stanza starts with a strong, stressed imperative, seizing our attention.

'Father, Ph.D' (Sue Mun Huang, Year 12, Karamu High School, Hastings) is a plain-spoken but very carefully arranged poem, the speaker spelling out the difference and the distance between herself and her father – and sticking up for herself in the process – with precise, punchy examples. The taunting tone of the conclusion stays in the mind: the scene being spoken of isn't perfectly clear (what does it mean to 'replace the mail exactly / as you left it?') but the hollowing out of the story to leave just this stark rejoinder only adds to the dramatic impact of the ending.

'The Pact' (Shannyn Boyd, Year 12, Valley High School, Lower Hutt) is appealingly full of a certain kind of wilfulness – a never-grow-up Peter Pan quality, with its bittersweet win-and-lose prospect, which parodies itself in the barely veiled sarcasm of the wonderfully catchy last line, 'Let's be nothing, I hear it lasts forever.' It's a bold, powerful poem, which takes the big risk of announcing its theme in its first line ('Let's

never fall in love’) but manages very successfully to build itself up from there, using strong repetition – of ‘Let’s’ and ‘easier’ – to pave the way.

The title and the first line of ‘Scarlet Lips’ (Michaela Ball, Year 13, Cashmere High School, Christchurch) gave me that ‘uh-oh’ feeling – here we go again. But straight away the poem sets off somewhere unexpected, with the line ‘like the colour you think a laugh might be.’ The story that begins in the first line dissolves into fragments, held together only by the colour red – and then along comes a loopy, appealing line that pretends to sound like an explanation: ‘The moon stole my vocabulary.’ I don’t understand all the connections in the poem, but I feel like I understand the mood, especially the escapism of the conclusion, because the poem constantly feels like it wants to escape from itself, and finds lots of inventive ways of doing so.

What I like most about the poems that I ended up choosing for the shortlist is the astonishing range of tones and voices across the 10 very different poems. None of the poems is perfect – they all have rough edges, and even some lines that don’t work. But in every case their energy and curiosity leapt out at me, and sometimes their imperfections make them much more interesting than poems that are polished but predictable. Another judge might have chosen 10 quite different poems. But I’m confident that the authors of these 10 poems have what it takes to write even better poems, and it’s exciting to imagine what they might go on to do.

Seven further poems deserve to be acknowledged as highly commended. I’ve chosen them for their vivid use of language, the sense in each case that the writer has worked hard to produce something distinctive and coherent, and the obvious promise that these writers show:

Highly commended:

‘Ink Man’ by Tabitha Bushell, Yr 12, Auckland Girls Grammar School

‘Stranger’ by Nic Harty, Yr 12, Karamu High School

‘Peter Pan’ by Hunter Douglas, Yr 12, Wellington College

‘Make It More Like a Song’ by Ish Doney, Yr 12, St Andrews College, Christchurch

‘Lullaby for an Insomniac Nation’ by Alissa Hackett, Yr 13, Wanganui High School

‘Brief Reality’ by Grace Thomas, Yr 12, Wellington High School

‘bridge, river, hands, and’ by Arron McLaughlin, Yr 13, Hamilton Boys’ High School