

## **New Zealand Post National Schools Poetry Awards 2008**

### **Judges' Reports**

#### **Judge's report for 'Best Poem' category by Paula Green**

Our world is awash with products demanding our attention: songs, films, television programmes, novels, rugby matches, supermarket shelves, websites. Somewhere in this global flood we find the humble poem. What is it about a poem that can still capture and then hold our attention? For centuries, writers have come up with the keys to a poem that stands out. When I sat down to read the hundreds of poems, all competing with each other in this competition, I brought along two words: freshness and charisma.

In my view, secondary schools and creative writing programmes provide a great chance to test out what poems can do in terms of poetry techniques. They can also set students on a path of discovery as they explore the relationships poems may have with emotion, ideas, world issues or personal issues. What becomes trickier, but is the seductive hook of a poem, are these two notions: freshness and charisma. How does a poem rise above the sum of its parts? I do not like the idea of creating a formula for poetry, but I do like the idea of proposing poetic ingredients that are worth testing and exploring how a poem can move.

Most of the poems that I read explored similar issues: relationships, world issues, family matters, love, and grief. What marked out my top fifty poems was not *what* they were about, but *how* they handled the subject matter. Firstly I recognised that these poems were written out of an experience of how poems can work, an awareness of the possibilities of sound, language features or images. Secondly they were written out of an awareness of other poems. I am always keen to read the poetry of others, not just for the pleasure of reading a fine poem, but for the kick it gives my own writing. Finally, and most importantly, these poems had found ways to refresh the common subject matter.

When I write a poem, it is a bit like going on a bike ride. I know how the bike works and I have a map of the world. What makes the journey memorable for me is when I stumble upon the unexpected and when I see the world anew. While I can offer no recipe for freshness or charisma I can offer potential ingredients, features that I spotted in the winning poems. Poetry, for example, benefits from the unspoken, from a bit of mystery, as the very best poems demonstrate. What you *don't* write is as important as what you *do* write. On his recent visit to Auckland, Scottish poet, John Burnside mentioned the word "pause." He was fascinated with the role of silence in a poem. However you decide to name this space, it is one place where a poem comes alive. Some poems used concrete detail to send me off to discover layers of feelings or ideas. Some poems paid striking attention to features such as sound or line breaks or similes, and I was stalled in my reading tracks in admiration. Finally some poems emphasised that poetry about love or loneliness doesn't need to be clichéd and sentimental but can be quirky, audacious, funny or thoughtful.

When I finished selecting my final six poems, and I must confess whittling down the last ten was a struggle, I realised I had unwittingly dragged another word through my reading: sincere. Poetry may be based on what is truly and perhaps deeply felt, but

when it also carries some kind of freshness and some kind of charisma, poetry has a chance of standing out in that global flood. I salute all the teachers and students of poetry that are finding ways to do this.

### **Winner**

*'Flotsam and Jetsam'* by Manon Revuelta of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland

The winning poem, 'Flotsam and Jetsam', represents a portrait of an old woman that has its origins in the swarming memory bank of the poet. The result is a fresh, intelligent and moving example of how we might translate people we know, and aspects of the world we inhabit, into poetry. I loved delving into the exquisite layers of this poem as much as I loved finding my way around its mysterious spaces. One of the poem's strengths is the way that it shifts us from an everyday outer world to the veiled inner world of the mind. We leapfrog, surprisingly, wonderfully, from the attention-holding first line ('She keeps her butter in the freezer') to a startling metaphor that likens the woman to a tadpole in the poet's unconscious. Metaphors and similes create surprising images from which to leapfrog but also provide fuel for the poem's emotional range. I loved the way I moved from the living woman, 'as blank and remote as the moon' to her brother at his death when his heart 'was fast and anxious/ like a blind moth'. This poem gathers its energy and freshness from its many and varied movements. There is the intrusion of the italicised lines, like a spoken voice whispering a personal detail that will pull us in closer: '*she taught him to walk, you know*'. There is a sublime texture of sound that appears effortless, but that in my mind carries the deft touch of a musician. The emphatic rhythm and sound choices of the lines 'Thumping through the/ fat coiled roots' underline the vulnerability of the old woman. It is as though we are asked how one can remember and then write what is so deeply buried. Then there is the striking sound shift that makes the brother doubly pale: 'his face as firm as a rope/ tiny ghost'. When I sat down to write a few lines about this terrific poem, I found myself wanting to write pages. In my mind, this poem celebrates the idea that poetry can achieve levels of simplicity in order to be complex, and levels of complexity in order to be simple. I loved it!

### **Runners- up**

*'fooling around'* by Claire Sorrenson of Takapuna Grammar School, Auckland

A number of poems submitted in this year's competition seem to drown under the weight of emotion, but 'fooling around' succeeds in presenting an intense emotional moment without such disaster. The poem works so beautifully because the emotion is hard at work behind the scenes, and from there, can deliver a more powerful impact. I like the various repetitions and the way they draw out the heat of the moment. Each of the three sections focuses on lips and tongues, but each time we get a different perspective. By the end of the poem it feels like you could cut the air with a knife. Like all the poems in the shortlist, what *is not* said is as powerful as what *is* said, and in this poem, what is not said forms the poem's heart. I loved the way the words that nobody could utter hang over the poem in a rather gut-wrenching fashion. Yet this poem never gets too much as it drifts in and out of spoken and poetic languages: 'a lumpy plan' and 'lip/ like a fat grape' in one section, 'dont you get it mum?' in the next. The emotional tension is heightened by a shrewd use of line breaks. Again this is a poem to be reread.

*'If, Only' by Finn Teppett of Wellington College, Wellington*

Political poetry that draws our attention to significant issues of the day can be strident, in-your-face, and depend upon slogans or catch phrases. In contrast, 'If, Only' uses a series of quirky revolutions to present a fresh political perspective. I was immediately drawn into the delicious humour. The audacity of the first line, 'I wish that global warming would hurry up', is heightened by the poet's reasoning that early spring warmth would mean the journey to school 'wouldn't be so freezing/ or humiliating'. I like the way the word 'humiliating' stands out on a line of its own before it rebounds back on 'global warming' and gives the poem one of its many political edges. Each hypothetical revolution grows out of the one that precedes it and comes up with a daring profit to a dreadful situation. I love the image of the burnt wasteland of the Amazon overturned to become a solution for the world's ills. These solutions stand out spare on the line like quiet slogans: 'or to start wind farms'. I also love the way the poem journeys from the universal to the personal reminding us of the power of the individual: 'I could be in a revolution!' the poet cheekily writes. This marvellous poem reminded me that poetry can do many things in many ways; in this case, with a skilful mix of comic timing, simple language, and an effective layout, I am reminded that poems can be the gathering place for a political voice and a poetic voice.

*'The Parameters of Refugeeism and Flight' by Nalin Samounry of Tamatea High School, Hawkes' Bay*

Five poetic vignettes take a risk that pays off beautifully in the aptly titled, 'The Parameters of Refugeeism and Flight'. Each vignette uses a different linguistic register to stake its claim on the poem's title. By moving from anecdote to history to the personal to proverb the poem opens out the subject matter. I love the way a poem that shifts its registers like this can force me to linger over each fragment and change the way I view the poem. The central section lays out the historical detail from which, on either side, the personal details take flight. For me, this created a powerful and haunting reading moment. To hit the conversational voice, the desperate plea, is to hit the vulnerable gut of the poem: 'Run, run, run Dad!' The agony of this line is underlined by a word choice on the next, reminding me of how a single, striking word can influence the whole poem: 'I call out here, insufficient'. When I fell upon that word, I knew there was much to be thought and said about this stunning poem. The daring ending, standing as part legend and part proverb, is testimony to the notion that poems can take life from many sources.

*'The World Instead' by Ish Doney of St Andrews College, Christchurch*

Poetry can become a way of marking our place in the world through any number of poetic choices. 'The World Instead' is such a poem and the overall effect is gloriously mysterious. While each perfectly placed word creates a poem of sublime unity, there is a gradual and mesmerising swelling in the poem that is an internal counterpoint: a sense of dislocation. This standout poem uses oppositions to mark the world, chiefly the opposition between less and more, between here and there, and between 'I' and 'you'. I loved the way the unknowable world is to be named with post-it-notes and then reappears in the window boxes as 'insect calls/ and empty chip packets'. The placement of the words, coupled with the choice of words, indicate that this is a poet that wants to test out what words can do. The end result is a slow, alluring rhythm of phrases that get under your skin as they continue to resonate: 'the slow unbuttoning of spaces / more / or less / of the world.' This poem quietly demanded my attention; I loved the unexplained, the thoughtfulness, the lyricism.

*'Purple' by Carlos Carbonatto-Bowkett of Wellington College, Wellington*

'Purple' interweaves two crusades as it explores the mystery of human relationships. One of the joys of reading and writing poetry can be found in the chemistry of juxtaposition. I am immediately drawn to the magical fizz that comes out of an unexpected placement of words and images in a poem. I love the way this superb poem gives life to feelings not through clichés and abstract words that float off without anchors but through bubbling interconnections. The first crusade leads us to the nonsensical stanza where 'twirple, gurple and flurple', crazily attempt to make purple rhymes like lovesick cats. The second crusade represents sexual attraction firstly in terms of physics and secondly in terms of the low-key description of an envelope. The shift between each crusade is moved by a language that is, in the face of intense emotion, captivatingly spare. I loved the mysterious links between these two crusades and I appreciated the space in the poem for me to explore. In my view the poem was let down by a weak final line, the kind of line that does well to hover behind the scenes for the reader to stumble upon. Rhetorical questions should be used with caution in poetry. Aside from that, this poem is a great example of the way poetry demands more than one reading.

### ***Highly Recommended***

I have selected ten further poems that were strong contenders for the winning places. These poems are certainly further examples of how poetry can be fresh and charismatic in diverse ways. One small niggle: I was disappointed by an inconsistent use of punctuation in a number of these poems. However, my overall response was a keenness to see more poetry from these fine poets.

'A Pair of Feet' by Lauren Brazier of Paraparaumu College, Kapiti Coast  
'A pinker shade of blue' by Jennifer Yeh of St Cuthbert's College, Auckland  
'All you can eat' by Jimmy Garden of Wellington College, Wellington  
'Insomnia' by Genevieve Fowler of Christchurch Girls' High School, Christchurch  
'Instruments of Clique-dom' by Amber Watson of Aparima College, Riverton  
'Mrs. Potts' by Sonya Clark of Karamu High School, Hawkes' Bay  
'Passage Over Water' by Cara Chimirri of Rangi Ruru Girls' School, Christchurch  
'Stolen' by Toni Duder of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland  
'Traces' by Alisha Lewis of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, Auckland  
'Unframed' by Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle of Western Springs College, Auckland

Paula Green July 2008

## **Judge's report 'Best Lyric' category by Samuel Flynn Scott**

It became very apparent to me reading through these poems that many secondary school children have a more 'modern' attitude to rhyme than myself when it comes to lyrics. This was actually a refreshing challenge for me, as I had to read the poems for their visceral nature and internal rhythm as opposed to great swathes of rhyme, which is how I normally write myself.

The winning poem in the lyric category is a piece entitled 'Mrs. Potts' by Sonya Clarke of Karamu High School, Hawkes' Bay. A few brave metaphors (breasts as apples spewing forth from a strudel) mixed with an intimate but non-explicit sense of locality had me instantly engaged. Unlike some other poems, 'Mrs Potts' doesn't try too hard to spread a message and is all the more poignant for it. It has very little rhyme, which makes it a difficult choice for lyric, but the poem has a sense of rhythm and slight alliteration that means it could easily be adapted to song form. It is an inherently New Zealand poem but not self consciously so. Its New Zealand character has nothing to do with it winning – that is all down to the clever understanding of the English language this young poet has shown.

Of the shortlist I was very fond of 'A pinker shade of blue' by Jennifer Yeh of St Cuthbert's College, Auckland, which traversed such subjects as Homer's suspected colour blindness and was superb. I thought it was let down by over reaching a little in referencing global warming in a verse that seemed out of step with the rest of the poem. 'Molly' by Taylor Hughson of Wellington College, Wellington, was the one quality love poem out of many attempts in the entries. Truly the most difficult subject to write about but also it seems the most common.

The overwhelming negative from most of these poems for me was a sense of forced passion. I feel a lot of these students would convey a more honest and enjoyable style if they didn't feel that poetry has to be inherently about emotions, love and impending doom. The poems that leapt of the page for me were more about little observations and moments captured in a way that has a sense of how good the combination of words can feel regardless of their meaning.

I was certainly very pleased with the best poems entered in the lyric section of these awards but would hope that a few entries in the future might pay more attention to the conventions of modern song. I also think that much of what was entered could have greatly benefited from a little self editing and re-writing. Clichés such as 'suicide', 'abandonment' and 'unrequited love' should be banished from the curriculum! They interest me not.

### **Winner**

'Mrs. Potts' by Sonya Clark of Karamu High School, Hawkes' Bay

### **Runners-up**

'Downtown Bazaar' by Saxon Adams of St Andrews College, Christchurch  
'Passage Over Water' by Cara Chimirri of Rangi Ruru Girls' School, Christchurch  
'All you can eat' by Jimmy Garden of Wellington College, Wellington  
'Molly' by Taylor Hughson of Wellington College, Wellington  
'A pinker shade of blue' by Jennifer Yeh of St Cuthbert's College, Auckland

Samuel Flynn Scott July 2008