

New Zealand Post National Schools Poetry Awards

2009 Judges' Reports

Best Poem - judged by Jenny Bornholdt

Reading the poems entered in this year's competition, it struck me how lucky students are to have the chance to write poetry at high school. I have no memory of doing this – maybe what I wrote was so awful that I've blanked it – I remember studying poems, but not ever writing them. There's a vague memory of something rhyming, involving a seagull, from primary school, but that's as far as it goes.

What I do remember from high school, is reading poems. Not only on the page, but reading them aloud – often going around the class, with one student reading a stanza, then passing to the next student. It felt uncomfortable and awkward, but after a while we stopped feeling foolish and fell in with the rhythm of the words – we were drawn in to the life of the poem. This was a wonderful feeling. I still remember it, and I now read my own poems out loud when I'm writing them, trying to find the right words, to get the rhythm right, to get the poem driving itself forward, or holding itself back, or whatever it is it wants to do.

I was lucky enough to have very good English teachers, as I know some of you do – I can tell this from the quality of the poems I've chosen. What I imagine these teachers have done is ask you to move outside yourselves. Not to NOT write about yourselves, but instead to think about your poems as coming from somewhere other than your broken hearts, or your worried minds, or your despair, or anger, or whatever it is you are feeling.

I should say here, after talking around the topic, that I loved judging this competition. As you'll know by now, I'm not in the country – I judged these poems in the weeks before I went away, when all was mayhem. And I expected this 'job' to add to the whirl of what was happening. Instead, I found it strangely calming. I found that reading the very good poems that you're going to hear about tonight, gave me a sense of great cheer and confidence in the world and in the future of writing. I felt really buoyed up and calmed by the experience, so thanks very much to all of you for giving me a kind of oasis to rest within.

Now, to the poems. It wasn't difficult to judge this competition. I had over 300 poems to read and the best of them, the ones I've chosen, jumped up out of the box at me. A lot of poems tried very hard to rhyme. Poetry can rhyme, but it doesn't have to. Good rhyming poetry works when the rhyme comes from inside the poem, not from the poet trying to force language to fit some kind of scheme. There were a lot of poems that were sincere outpourings of heartbreak, loneliness, misery, upset – the kinds of experiences we all have as young people trying to figure out our way in the world. These are not really poems. I don't mean that they're not *real*, just that they're not poems.

A poem is a made thing. A poem is language put together carefully, thoughtfully. Good poems are often cagey about what it is they're 'about' – they come at their

subjects side on, they circle around an issue, or a feeling, or an event. Often you don't really know what a poem *is* about, you just get a sense from it. Some poems aren't actually 'about' anything, they're talking their own language, but that doesn't matter – they communicate something, somehow.

So the best poems jumped out at me because they weren't shouting at me, they used language in fresh and different ways, they were surprising, they created a world within themselves, they were written by people with imagination – people who know about mystery and surprise and restraint. These people think about the world in interesting ways. They *think* in interesting ways.

WINNING POEM

'To a sister', by Charlotte Trevella of Rangī Ruru Girls' School.

This is an extraordinarily good poem. Its poise and assured use of language is quite astonishing – it's a sophisticated and very accomplished poem that doesn't put a foot wrong.

This poem quietly deals with quite ordinary things – a cat, a dead bird, clothes in a wardrobe, but it manages to illuminate the page. It treats its material so carefully and tenderly – I love the way the poet describes the dead owl:

'...a
contorted parcel
of tendon and flight,...

and again:

'...the hollow
scaffolding of wings'

I think these are marvelous images – this is the work of someone who is confident handling language and working with it in a way that appears effortless on the page.

I love the detail in this poem and the way the writer moves so easily from one thing to another and the way the tone shifts so quickly – so we have the owl, then bees 'stealing sweetness', then 'pale, squirming larvae', then dresses hanging in a wardrobe, followed by washing instructions which act as a beautiful meditation on the passing of time. Using the instructions is such a wonderful, understated way of saying a whole lot, without actually uttering the words.

I'm really overwhelmed by the skill shown by Charlotte. She has a great ear, and seems alert to the possibilities of language, its subtleties, the way it can be used to turn one thing into another. I could go on and on, giving you examples of great images, but I'll let Charlotte read the poem so you can hear for yourselves.

RUNNERS-UP

I was really impressed by this group of poems. They're all very accomplished and I'm pleased I didn't have to put them in any order.

'Spanish Heat', by Charlotte Priestley, of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, is a poem with a terrific, unexpected end which changes all that's gone before it. It does a great job of describing urban Spanish scenes in a lovely narrative way. I love the

way the writer conveys a sense of the decay of the city's physical being and the colour and life brought by people and music, and the way this liveliness works against the sense of loss which slowly creeps into the poem.'

The flat tone of the poem helps the slow build of sadness – you're aware something is happening, but unsure of what it is until the terribly poignant final line.

I like the way the voice of the writer interjects in the poem, so you get a description of a scene, then the writer's reflection, which gives a lovely, interesting counter view of what's gone before. The poem has a great, quiet sense of movement towards its knockout ending.

'Home', by Georgia Boyce of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, has used lists of food and drink to evoke a sense of person and place. I love the way these things are used as a kind of mantra for home, as if they *are* the place, summoning the writer home. I was impressed by the way Georgia used detail to evoke a sense of warmth, belonging and memory – it's a really interesting way of dealing with these feelings. I like the way, in each stanza, the naming of different food and drink introduces a description of 'home', and the way this is reversed in the final stanza, before we reach the final lovely, hopeful line:

'I hope you'll remember me like I do you.'

'Eighteen and Counting' by Alisha Lewis of Epsom Girls' Grammar School, does a similar thing as the two poems I've just talked about. There's this great description of place, with occasional interjections from the poet, which add an edge to what's happening in the physical world. I love the careful observation in this poem, the ordinary subway scenes, and the way we're introduced to a 'you' in the first line of the poem, so we're always aware of a someone to whom this is addressed, but we get lost in what's going on, on the train and in the streets, until the last few lines of the second stanza with their casual mention of 'Telling someone you love them/is like counting to a thousand/I only got to one hundred and thirty/before I gave up.'

Then we're back on the streets, shopping for shoes and looking around, and there's a lovely sense of restraint and the lines are beautifully held, until the final line. Another knockout.

By the time I read **'Barcelona's Sun', by Georgia Johnstone, of Epsom Girls' Grammar School**, I was thinking there was a very good teacher lurking in the background of these poems. I don't mean that this person had anything to do with the writing of these poems, but that someone had suggested approaches to writing that brought the best work out of their students. I might be wrong about this, but I was interested that this could be the case. If it is, I'd like to commend the teacher, or maybe teachers, for their wonderful skill in helping young writers find approaches to writing poems that avoid the usual traps and clichés.

'Barcelona's Sun' again has a foreign setting, this time incorporating lines of Spanish, which add to the sense of 'other'. There are lovely descriptions: 'The doors arching up/push past the sky line' and I like the way the physical world reflects the internal world of the writer, as in the third stanza when: 'my lungs bursting thought of you/as I gasped for the air I couldn't have.' Again, the final lines are terrific, bringing the whole poem to a not entirely unexpected but nevertheless really interesting end. Listen to this:

'You would love it here
you really would.
It's a shame you're in Zürich
learning the wrong language.'

'To My Ten-Year-Old-Self' by Birgitta Swanberg, of Northcote College, is a very different poem – it's what I'd call a 'list' poem, where the poem begins each stanza with 'When you turn eleven,' 'When you turn twelve,' and so on, and for each age lists things that might happen. This form gives the poem a really pleasing rhythm and also allows the poem to accommodate all kinds of happenings and feelings which might otherwise be awkward to deal with. I like the way it progresses and I like the things the poet talks about – they're really ordinary, affecting things, like: 'you'll have a boy's number written on your arm in blue highlighter,' and it's these things that give the poem its charm. This is a lovely poem.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

I chose 12 poems to highly commend. These poems all stood out as being written by people who'd thought about language and were attempting to use it in interesting and imaginative ways. Some of them were a bit uneven – they had fantastic bits, but then conked out somewhere along the way – but all were engaging and showed plenty of promise. Congratulations to all of them.

'Tha Tha (Grandpa)' by Pooja Sundar, Epsom Girls' Grammar School
'Hiding Place' by Andrew McIndoe, Wellington College
'Identity' by Kat Hunia, St Cuthbert's College
'Haikus' by Anna Feilding, Columba College
'Sixteen Kilometres' by Iris Millington-Bree of Epsom Girls' Grammar School
'How to be Bored' by Philippa Ebdon, St Cuthbert's College
'Unrequite' by Madeline McIntyre-Wilson, Onslow College
'In Praise of the Girl Next Door' by Charlotte Agnew-Harington, St Cuthbert's College
'Gambling With Matches' by Toni Duder, Epsom Girls' Grammar School
'How Else to Explain' by Olivia Hall, St Cuthbert's College
'redbloodbluedress' by Jessica Storey, St Cuthbert's College
'A Love Letter to Burma' by Phway Aye, Palmerston North Girls' High School.

I hope all the writers whose poems I've chosen continue to explore the many ways in which writing can go. You're all good at writing and, importantly, are obviously interested in poetry and what it can do. In the midst of all this writing, please don't forget to read. It's easy to get carried away with the sound of your own voice, but don't forget the sound of all those who've gone before you and who are writing now – these other writers show you what can be done and their work can open up possibilities for your own writing. It's not just this though, it's that reading good writing is a joy and calls for engagement, thought and imagination – and the world needs more of all these things.

Congratulations to all of you and thank you for letting me read your poems.

Jenny Bornholdt, 2009.

Best Lyric Poem – judged by Jason Kerrison

It has been an immense pleasure to undertake this project. My involvement reinvigorated my appreciation of poetry and reminded me of the immense power that language has to gift perspective and insight. I've had the unique privilege and opportunity to dip into these enormously talented poets' lives and get a sense of their worlds, as well as the methodology they chose to articulate their perspectives as young New Zealanders. Their nascent yet brilliant talent was astonishing. The sophistication of the language and truth it embodied was powerful, insightful, refreshing, and illuminating.

My brief was to single out one poem that would be rendered into a modern song format. From my view this meant looking for a poem that instantly appealed to the heart and ear. The structural scaffolding wouldn't have to be altered considerably, and it would more or less feel like it was being sung as one simply read it.

WINNING LYRIC POEM

'You Just Can't See It' by Sammy Hickson of Middleton Grange School.

The opening lines, 'You think you're standing on your head, because everything's upside down,' immediately appealed to my proclivity for a clever turn of phrase. The tone seemed contemplative and reflective with socially sensitive overtones and an ultimately uplifting and positive ideology. The pivotal phrase for motivic development occurred initially in the second stanza and was implied as a chorus idea through the rest of the work. The structural elements were ideal in terms of working towards the traditional and established song form configuration. Moreover, the composition had a clear sense of prosody, such that everything within the poem seemed to be in relationship with everything else. Certainly one felt a sense of wholeness in the work.

RUNNERS-UP

- 1 'In Praise of the Girl Next Door' by Charlotte Agnew-Harington of St Cuthbert's College**
- 2 'Lost Hope' by Michelle Grafton of Hornby High School**
- 3 'Gambling with Matches' by Toni Duder of Epsom Girls' Grammar School**
- 4 'Home' by Georgia Boyce of Epsom Girls' Grammar School**
- 5 'Distance' by Dylan Wharton of Edgewater College**

All the poems included in the shortlist made a distinctive impact one way or another. One worth particular mention, for no other reason than an indulgence of reminiscing about my own past, was 'Home' by Georgia Boyce of Epsom Girls' Grammar School. It sent me delving into the tastes and smells of my history and I vicariously lived her impressions, hopes and daydreams momentarily too. It invited me to go back to it over and over again to pamper my senses.

In terms of constructive feedback, from even the first few poems that were submitted, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a resistance to rhyme. As if to rhyme was a crime. But rhyme is always a sonic event with varying degrees of sonic relationships. And playing with the scale of resolution strengths from the most resolved perfect rhyme through to the least resolved consonance, rhyme is an important part of the toolbox of any lyricist. Perhaps exploring this concept more could be encouraged. Were there also efforts to steer away from clichés? Clichés can be an extremely useful device. Simply said, just because you're telegraphing a cliché doesn't mean you have to deliver it. In fact setting up the dance between expectation and no expectations is another part of the joy in crafting a lyric. This cannot be understated in my view.

Overall though I was overwhelmed with the excellence in talent that these student authors had, to fashion something bold that spoke truth from nothing but a blank canvas. Whether one was describing an elderly loved one, or making observations about their world, or expressing the long told tales of unrequited love there was, to me at least, an extraordinary understanding and sophisticated ability to share one's self within a structural vernacular. With each and every reading I was left with an impression of the person behind the pen. And I thank each and every one of them for the gift.

Jason Kerrison, 2009.

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