



National Schools Poetry Award

2016 Judge's Report by Anne Kennedy

For a week in early July, I immersed myself in reading a large group of young people who had chosen to put their energy and ideas not just into writing, but into *poetry*. The distinction is important. Poetry is meant to be elitist, isn't it? I remembered Terry Eagleton's warning that poems 'these days' are often read as bits of writing that happen to not go all the way to the end of the line: 'Maybe the computer got stuck,' he quips in his plea for a more considered critical discourse. I suspected these poems would not be read so arbitrarily. Poetry, it seems, is current in a way that it hasn't been for a long time, perhaps ever. And it occurred to me that these young writers – young poets – know that, and that they write for a poetry audience who understand the conventions and freedoms of poetry.

Reading the 175 entries to the 2016 National Schools Poetry Award was to have my reading muscles flexed in all the available ways - in form, content, and language. The enormous range of poems was variously moving, funny, sad, political, personal, rhythmic, structured, free, and sometimes all these things. I got a sense of just how daring young writers are, and most excitingly, that poetry is changing.

Perhaps the most important departure I noticed is the mixing of a performance-oriented poetics with page-poetry. It used to be that the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. The cross-fertilization and the influence of that on form, technique, concept and innovation left me excited and impressed.

Before I go any further, I have two notes of thanks. The first is to funders Creative New Zealand, Ogilvy and Mather, and to the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University for organising the competition and creating a venue for something this vital. As we all know, the reading

and writing experiences that we have as teenagers are incomparable. All the writers involved in this competition, up and down the country, are part of the future of our literature.

I want to thank and congratulate all the contributors. To share your writing is a courageous act, but you already know that. Most likely you agree with Audre Lorde: ‘Your silence will not protect you’.

If you’re reading this and you submitted a poem to the competition that was not shortlisted, don’t miss a beat. Keep writing and keep sending out your work. (And keep reading, of course.) Your poem may have been among the twenty poems I agonized over to make a short-list of ten. Even if not, part of the derring-do of writing is being thick-skinned. I know this from personal experience, both as a writer and a teacher. So don’t give up, whatever you do.

What persuaded me that these ten poems must be on my list?

Luckily we all have different requirements from a poem, otherwise the world of poetry would be narrow, and it isn’t. I want a poem to do something very basic – to reach out to me. I’m one of the corners of Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle. I am the Reader who is appealed to by the Writer by way of the Text. The first and strongest appeal is to my sense of engagement; that is, the poem gives me enough humanity to want to enter its world, even if it’s just one element – it might even just be the hum factor, that it sounds good. This might sound obvious, but you just have to read a poem that takes no heed of its reader’s sense of humanity or logic to see what I’m talking about.

The second appeal comes from the opposite direction – that a poem takes me somewhere I’ve never been before, or makes me think or feel in a way I never have before, and that usually involves a certain daring, even to the point of risking failure. It might be just be a small thing, in language or form or concept, but it’s new. (I’m channeling Ezra Pound’s ‘make it new’ here.)

My other approach to this list was something I always do as a journal editor, and that is to push out from the inclinations of my own little world and to be open to the conventions of a wide range of writing. (I find I do this with music genres too.)

One phenomenon I noticed coming up very frequently in the 175 poems, and used with some skill, is the idea of the poet as persona – an ‘I’ who the reader might be tempted to suspect *is* the poet or

at least is close to the poet's self. Reading a poem in this way can be reductionist. As a reader, we're better off not assuming that the poet and the 'I' in the poem are the same. But how to make sure of that? The best jugglers of the 'I' or the persona in the poems I read engaged an interesting slipperiness around what's real and what is made-up, what is personal and what represents more universal ideas.

In the end, I found that the poems on this list continue to skate a line between clarity and being unknowable; no matter how many times I read them, I discover something to wonder about, and that's precisely why I read them again.

Here's a note on each of the ten poems (in title order):

'The Girl Sitting Next to Me' by Jamie McKenzie sets up a realistic two-handed portrait of the 'poet-persona' and her mysterious desk-mate. The title alone achieves a sense of duality – this girl is so near yet so far; she has no name and we know her only by her internet habits. The 'poet' encourages us to 'despise' this girl – and we are willing to be led by the description, the plain language, the confessional tone. But only to have the tables turned. This girl can teach us something, 'other than Algebra, the Second World War, and Market Equilibrium'. 'The 'girl sitting next to me' could be the poet, or you, or me.

In 'How Much is Too Much for Remembering', Huyen Thu writes of a devastating flood and its aftermath.

The afternoon smoke flew away as they burned the rice stubble afterwards
 There, the neighbour boy caught the fishes
 shut them in a jar so his childhood couldn't go too far

This poem does something tried and true but very important in how art can help us process trauma: it asks us to compare tragedy with beauty, the beauty of the lyric and the images.

A deceptively simple image of beauty in Caleb Morgan's 'Indian Wedding' is juxtaposed with the not-so-pretty – 'an array of horns and engines', 'a wine bottle shatters' - reminding us in a simple, imagist manner that life is complicated.

'inside out' by Nina Richardson describes in exquisite and aching detail the accidental cutting of a finger - 'this steaming red-hot rush'. We're vulnerable, us humans, 'peach-soft and dripping', but we're not alone in this, it's delicate, 'the touch of my finger to yours', and how in both in an accident and in love we '...turn ourselves inside / out.'

A rainbow march is the setting for Zhouai Wang's 'It's 2016'. A dialogue between a younger and an older person show generational differences in the experiences of LGBT pride. 'Being seen got some of us attacked, left to die.' This hard-hitting poem reminds us that the battle is not over when incidents like Orlando can still happen.

'King Country' by Eva Poland creates a sense of a continuously moving forest alive to the elements and to mythology, to the contemporary ('Pollock on steroids in summer') and to the traditional ('Tane's warriors'). At the heart of the poem is a listener who provides gravity and perhaps a reason for the telling: 'As I pull my strength up through you.'

In 'The Last Real Home is You' Lily Van Buskirk daringly begins with abject images of a foot virus, acid, a tree virus. She quickly moves into the philosophical, off-set with matter-of-fact language: 'I do remember going away on holidays. / I would take a lot of pictures... Then came back home and didn't take any.' This is a very thoughtful and political poem that suggests ecological destruction and our own insignificance.

The funniest poem on this list, 'The PWF', by Cassandra Wang is also one of the darkest. That's often the way with humour. 'When I told them about the Pretty White Friend, they were delighted / and

frightened...’ In the world that the PWF upturns (‘our rice cooker is firmly / lodged under bed’), nothing is quite where it should be, including the smile of the poet-persona, which might turn into a scream.

On the surface, ‘The Universe’, by Mari Karunanidhi, seems a simple lyric poem. It’s plain-spoken and has a clear analogy – the end of the universe, the end of love. But the very simplicity of the language allows so much to lurk just behind or beneath the words. The questions that form in the reader’s mind create spaces for deeper thought. Who is the poet-persona speaking to? What is the exact nature of the end of love? In the end, the scientific analogy is not just vast and universal, it’s particular.

Finally, the winning poem, ‘History’, by Ioana Yule Manoa. The most striking thing about this poem, and it’s what made it leap out at me the first time I read it and on each subsequent read, is that it code-switches; it juggles description, sensory image, references (games, songs, memories, food), but manages to keep all these balls in the air towards one purpose. It’s quite a big purpose – a slice of this teenage girl’s life. (A ‘Slice of Heaven’). The essence of the code-switching is ‘high’ next to ‘low’ across language and culture – I Spy and flax flowers, Dave Dobbyn and the laundry chute, tango and merchandise, Nutella and history. While this poem nods towards ‘spoken-wordness’ with its notion of testimony, it never wavers from owning the page and making its life on the page.

‘History’ is the most ambitious poem in the group. It would have been so easy for this poem to fall apart because all that’s keeping it together is a fine common thread of sensibility, of world view. The very fineness of that thread makes the poem a high-wire act, a riveting journey towards the last line, ‘this is my history’. As the poem flickers time and place, the kaleidoscopic repositioning creates a whole that is more tightly wrought than it might at first seem.

While ‘History’ feels fresh and new, it also places itself among other poetry with its reference to Tomaš Šalamun’s poem of the same name. It’s audacious but also humble. It’s saying, ‘I don’t know everything about poetry, I’ve learned from a master, and this is my version; but my version really is mine.’

After many readings, Ioana Yule Manoa's poem still excites and surprises me, it hums in my ear, and in the end, it moves me.