



National Schools Poetry Award 2023

Judge's Report, by Morgan Bach

It has been a great privilege to read the poems of so many of Aotearoa's Year 12 and 13 students, and it has also made me worry. I was already worried, of course, because the challenges our teenagers are facing in 2023 are huge. There are the same challenges that had their predecessors lost in deep and intense feelings of being lonely, misunderstood, unseen and isolated – of being outsiders and wondering at the purpose of it all. But now they are also facing challenges we were ignorant of, or perhaps just lucky enough to be able to ignore. Are the kids all right? Were we ever all right? But more importantly *will* they be all right? I can't say. Politically, socially, in terms of personal rights related to aspects of identity and the freedom to be who we all are supposed to be, we seem to be moving forward in great leaps, but there's always backlash. Then there is the climate. To be honest, I was surprised at the relatively small number of poems that centred around the climate crisis and other big picture concerns this year, but those that did so were moving. The overwhelming vibe I took away from this reading task is that our teens feel fraught and isolated in their own troubles. I want to get all of them in a room and say TALK TO EACH OTHER – you're in the same mire here, people!

But many of the poems/poets were deeply engaged and concerned with the hard and outward looking stuff. When I read these young poets, I feel encouraged that they are better people than us, far less afraid to be who they are, and bolder in their expectation that people should treat each other well. They are looking squarely at the big issues, and facing our colonial past head on. They are informed, and sometimes their poems try to contain so much that they resemble essays. To our young people facing up to and writing about the effects of colonisation I want to say please keep writing, keep talking and keep thinking because we need you and we need your words to help us in the work of decolonisation and becoming the country we desperately need to be.

It was a very hard task to choose only one winner and nine finalists. I found so much to love in these poems – surprising imagery and language, inventive and relevant play with form. So many wonderful poems stayed with me, doing the good and slightly magical work of pinning down extraordinary or just plain beautiful aspects of the world around us, and our place in it, or capturing the experience of being human, young, and on the verge of that great and dreadful precipice that is fending for yourself as an adult. I was very grateful to be reading these poems,

and also grateful that I am no longer there. I wandered around in a fog of poems for a couple of weeks and felt changed by them.

I thank each and every one of you who submitted a poem this year – and I ask you to please DO NOT STOP writing. Writing poetry is a brilliant way to connect with and express your emotional and interior life, and so is reading it. To pick up a book of poems or read through an online poetry journal and see yourself in a poem can be an intense catharsis. There's nothing like the buzz of recognition and that spine-twanging sense of feeling seen, of seeing yourself on the page in someone else's words. It's why we read and it's why we write, and it's why many poets get up on stages and (despite usually being pretty shy people) read or perform their work.

The poems I ended up choosing as the final ten are very different, but they all share a quality of inventiveness, and a poetic sensibility – be it in restraint or lushness. They distilled, they swarmed with imagery, they disturbed me, made me smile, or flung me from one state to another. I would read them, then walk away and do other things (see friends, endure the Barbenheimer double feature experience, do my day job, run on a treadmill in the packed winter gym, debate spending \$7 on tomatoes for 5 mins and walk away without them) and they would still be with me and when I picked them up again I thought 'oh yes, you'. They became friends to me, and so they made the cut.

Poetry, like all personal writing (vs. say investigative journalism) is a subjective thing and we like, in the end, what we like. So my chosen ten would be different to any other poet/reader/judge's selection and it's important to remember that I read all poems without any idea who the poets were – no biographical data whatsoever apart from what could be gleaned or assumed from the poems (and I do suspect some of my assumptions were wrong – we bring ourselves as readers to each interaction with a text). I was looking at the poems as worlds unto themselves, which meant they had to impress me with just what was on the page (literally a printed page – totally analogue!). They had to get under my skin as little nuggets of language.

When I read the winning poem, 'X - MANGOES - X - SNAKES - X - RED PAPER BOATS - X' by Liberty Beck, I was immediately struck by the imagery as well as the inventive form, and how those two aspects interact to form a 'quilt' of sensory and narrative experience which is, I think, what most of life is like. I liked that it was not linear, it was cumulative: the meaning built and interwove and then called back to earlier lines in the poem with new meanings, or as a part of the same pattern reappeared. There is something urgent in the way the imagery builds with ampersands/ands, memory flooding in like the water, and at the end of the poem it unravels, the stitches failing. Some of the images stayed with me as I wandered around – 'crashing a motorbike into a river of snakes' will never leave me. This poem felt very different from all the others, and showed both restraint and precision in its layering of imagery – the language is beautiful but doesn't overreach. I felt like there was a mature eye here with a refined sense of what a poem can be, that considers the concrete elements of a poem – the way it interacts with the white space, the way it can embody its psychological movement. There's space for the reader to bring their own understanding, while the poem itself is rich with images, and moves us as we read it so that by the end we're downstream from where we were, but we can still see the

place we started. I'm terrible at explaining why I feel a poem works, but this one surely does, and I'd be thrilled to have written it myself – so brava and full respect Liberty!

The finalists were very hard to choose – I could have easily included about 20 poems in the shortlist! Narrowing down from there was an agonising task. In no particular order, here are my thoughts on the nine other finalist poems.

'The New Year' by Charles Ross is a deceptively simple poem. I loved the way it slowed me down, laying out the scene in careful and precise language. This poem is in no way overwritten – and it draws you in quietly (like a fish on a line!) and focuses on small actions and details that conveyed the delight of this outing. It's subtle and contained, a lesson in how to take a scene or a memory or experience and let it speak about more than what it gives us on the page. Also 'a body heavy as rain' – I just love this so much.

'I see her in corners' by Andrew Castles is a creepy poem in which we're not really sure WHO is haunting the speaker – what connects them? Or perhaps this is entirely in their head, expressing some kind of suppressed self? I loved the gothic tone of this poem, and how the imagery was both lush and specific and quite cinematic at times – the 'her' haunting the speaker by playing captain on the mantelpiece, and particularly this stanza stayed with me: 'in swimming pools, / a twisted pale creature curling in the current / aiming rude, water-blurred gestures at the lifeguard... / She trails pruney fingers along the calves of overhead swimmers'. I enjoyed the way this poem made use of variation within a repeated pattern. The poem creates a sense of unease, but has lovely bits of language in it, and gives the reader room to come to their own conclusions.

'Sunny side' by Molly Laurence is a great example of a poem that expresses heartache and sadness through a sleight-of-hand focus on positivity. The poem uses a kind of aspirational list (and so is inherently double toned, because aspiration exposes a present lack or want) to build its happy, sunny world/context, then starts to break it down. We see the cracks appearing when we get to a transitional stanza that shows the speaker within the action of the poem:

next time i get out of bed
it will be in one / smooth / motion

And when another person is introduced to the poem we feel the bittersweetness keenly, and realise this poem is really about something that has been lost:

and maybe / in the sunny side / we'll be
amicably friends and I intentionally
single / and we will meet / every so often
for brunch at that / new place down the road

The language holds its tone and keeps its cool as the poem progresses, but things like 'city-smog' and 'dog-pissed / scrub-shrubs' sneak in as the cracks widen. I love the way this poem

hints at feelings through specific imagery, rather than spelling out the emotions felt. In this way it's different from many of the other poems submitted, which often reached for familiar expressions of sadness, anger or loneliness. This poem does its work so well by looking outward and naming concrete things in the world (or imagined world) to reflect the speaker's state of mind. It's a great poem.

'When I heard my father had died' by Jonah Cropp captures the surreality and shock of a very sad moment. It's a topic that we could expect to yield a highly emotional and dramatic poem, but I think the poet has done something more interesting (and more haunting – it stayed with me) by using fairly sparse language and concentrating on one specific memory. We start with the speaker's physical reaction to receiving news their father has died, then move into memory. The layout of the poem adds to its meaning – spaces in each line seem to express the gap between knowing and understanding (as felt when in shock). They could also reflect present and past/memory, and even the physical space between the speaker and father throwing the ball. This is a great example of a poem using the space of the page for a reason (not just 'cos it looks cool or poetic), adding an extra layer to the poem and how it works on the reader. I love the way the last line sits centrally between the two 'sides' of the poem and seems to bring the speaker and father together in this wish for strength.

'My Tears Stream Down the Uretara' by Layla Hoskin was one of the poems that took nature as its setting and subject matter, but also expressed a troubled state of mind in a complex way. The speaker wishes to metaphorically (and maybe literally) rejoin with the land, but the landscape itself becomes the focus and is so much more engaging than simple sadness. We are very definitely in Aotearoa, a landscape rich with endemic and introduced trees, bird life and running water. There are some images that are both beautiful and disturbing at once. I enjoyed that discomfort while reading and found the imagery stayed with me.

'Gloom/Bloom' by Sunny Radzyner focuses on a small scene of brightness amongst the daily gloom, and by keeping its focus tight it manages to speak about many things – about attention, and being present, about social media and posturing, about the climate and daily battles of wildlife and ecosystems to survive amongst the human-built elements that threaten them. It does this by describing a simple scene, elaborating out from it, and returning our attention back to the image of the blooming median strip. This is a poem that doesn't try to do too much and so does a lot! It drops us into the action, and makes us look closer.

'Onions' by Lavenitani Mischah Taufa is a great prose poem that expresses anger and defiance and pride in a cultural identity that is constantly made to squash itself or to fit in with the dominant culture. It uses a surprising opening sentence as a frame for the poem and a gate into each stanza. This repetition and variation reminds us where we are/where the speaker is coming from as we enter a new aspect of their experience. The poem then takes us to a point where the speaker wants to 'flip the script' and reclaim their true name and their pride in where they come from, and is defiant in the face of a system that could (sometimes unthinkingly and ignorantly, at other times quite actively) try to use and discard them. A powerful poem.

'Perspiring and Frantic Home' by Isabelle Lloyd was, I thought, the most compelling response to the climate crisis and humanity's abuse of the natural world that was submitted this year. It's a dense and lush poem. There were a lot of phrases and images that surprised me – the language is fresh, and the political is enacted by the physical: for example: 'promises as rotted as this slow wrecking ground of crops'. These heartbreaking lines spoke to me of the fear the younger generations face in not knowing how the climate crisis will impact their lives:

And my days they do not ripen, for though they
warm rapidly
they blow and they cry.

'How to Dream' by Oshadha Perera is a poem that seems (to me) to explore memories of a home or a time that is tinged with traumatic experience. As we move through the three sections of the poem, the distance between the second person 'you' of the poem and this time/place grows. In the second stanza, there seems to be a freedom found – driving rather than walking, but the difficult memories are still there. In the third stanza there's more distance, and a future (sweetness in a new language and a new day) but the 'thawed memories ... run down your cheeks' – we never entirely leave our past behind. This poem speaks to me of hope and of pain, and of the complexity of moving on and away from difficult experiences, while holding them as something that formed who you are. This poem does a lot with a refined and focused use of language.

A huge thank you again to all of you who submitted poems this year. Thank you for letting me read your words, and giving me a glimpse into your interior worlds. I know how vulnerable and daunting it can feel to share your work – it is both humbling and exciting. I would encourage you all to find other writers in your schools and communities to exchange work with and seek feedback from. I think poets thrive in communities – I know I am exceptionally grateful to the incredible network of poets in Te Whanganui-a-Tara and in Aotearoa more generally who support each other and make spaces for new work. There are so many journals to read, poetry events to go to, and ways to find and share new work within our communities and I encourage you to get involved where you can, and *read read read*. Always read, both poetry and everything else that draws your interest: it's all compost for the brain and comes out in interesting and unexpected ways in your work.

My congratulations and admiration to our finalists and winner – you've all made something unique in your poems and I look forward to meeting you at the workshop.

Morgan Bach
Wellington
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Liberty Beck is from Takapuna Grammar School, Auckland
Charles Ross is from Logan Park High School, Dunedin

Andrew Castles is from St Andrew's College, Christchurch
Molly Laurence is from Lincoln High School, Christchurch
Jonah Cropp is from St Andrew's College, Christchurch
Layla Hoskin is from Tauranga Girls' College
Sunny Radzyner is from Avonside Girls' High School, Christchurch
Lavenitani Mischah Taufu is from Aorere College, Auckland
Isabelle Lloyd is from St Mary's College, Auckland
Oshadha Perera is from Southland Boys' High School, Invercargill