

National Schools Poetry Award – Judge’s Report

Joan Fleming August 2024

It was a rare sunny Tuesday in July. I stopped into Wellington’s International Institute of Modern Letters, a place with a grand name whose reception is actually a nest of cheerful clutter, where pinned-up posters of nostalgic poems curl modestly at their edges, and where a full generation now of poets, novelists, memoirists, fiction writers, screenwriters, playwrights, and essayists have come and gone and left their smudges. Janet Frame’s desk sits in the entryway, as quiet and watchful as Janet herself.

I was there to collect *The List* for the Schools Poetry Award, which I had the fortune of judging this year. It was handed to me in a big blue ring binder: two hundred and seven poems. All I had to do was choose ten, plus a winner. That’s all.

What I felt as I read through the entries, curled up on the couch night after night with the fat binder in my lap and a pencil in my hand, was the sense that I was only seeing a shard of *The List*’s true potential. What I mean is, there were absolutely *certainly* sparkling and original young minds who were going to go on and blow up open mic nights and writers’ groups and readings in bookstores and creative writing workshops and book launches and future literary festivals, and yet, the poem they had sent in for this year’s comp just wasn’t quite *them* yet. In year 12 and 13, you haven’t yet banked the hundreds of hours it takes to really arrive at *your voice*, and so producing even one single excellent poem is a miracle of happenstance: instinct, mood, timing, weather, and what you’ve been reading for breakfast all have to conspire in order for you to put something on the page that is sparkling and true.

In *The List* entire, there was so much sparkle, and so much that was true. The poets wrote about all the things we recognise as being Irrefutably Poetic: flowers, stars, suns, solar systems, gardens, cities, rain, and heartbreak. The poets were unafraid to express love, and unafraid to express love’s disappointments. Home, in the poems, was a place of safety and refuge, and it was also a place of grief, abandonment, and misunderstanding. The poets wrote poems that pushed against the expectations and assumptions imposed on them, whether by the assimilating forces of colonisation, or the brittle belief structures of their guardians. Many wrote about the tyranny of the mirror, and social media’s toxic image diet. Many wrote about death in the news, and death in the home. There was the sweetness of saying goodnight, and the bittersweetness of saying goodbye.

In the end, the ten poems that rose up as the finalists were absolute miracles of excellence, and there were so many more miracles besides. These, agonizingly, didn’t make the cut. To all the young poets who didn’t make it this year, I say to you: roll with the rejection, relish it, take it in stride. If you keep on writing, as I hope and

trust that you will, this will be the first of many, for rejection characterises a writing life just as much as being lauded and published and read.

The winning poem this year is “But I wish/.” by Chantelle Xiong. Often, poems are objects of language that stop time; “But I wish/.” is a poem that spans time instead. The poem is a series of vignettes where the speaker finds themselves excluded, misunderstood, and othered for being different – for being a Chinese New Zealander. Over time, however, the speaker comes to understand the ironies and absurdities of these microaggressions. They become stronger, and yet, as they say in the poem’s final line, “But I wish / I didn’t have to be.” The bullying and the cruel asides the poem captures are often blunt, though the poem is anything but. It is spare, compressed, and tonally complex, and it is formally inventive in a truly memorable way, making excellent use of the right-hand as well as the left-hand margin to enact a kind of call-and-response between the speaker’s multiple selves. This poem burred in my mind immediately, and the more I returned to it, the more its sophisticated rendering of self-reclamation revealed itself to me. Congratulations, Chantelle. You’ve written something absolutely stand-out.

Other poems on the shortlist this year also grappled with the absurdities of cultural supremacy. Raphael Ferdinand’s “Balancing with a Taiaha” also does unexpected things with form, freely taking up space on the page rather than submitting to the strictures of Pākeha New Zealand’s limiting judgments and prejudices. There is fantastic wordplay in the poem: “she covered her lineage in a suit that was too tight for her to work in / But tight enough that it was suit able”. I found the ending, where the speaker is reunited with their Nana back in the motherland and she finds she can’t recognise her grandchild – “*Who are you?*” she asks – to be heartbreaking. Joseph Lomani’s poem “Palusami” takes the traditional Fijian dish as its central metaphor, and the taro leaf and the coconut milk become secondary metaphors for forgiveness and a stropky refusal to listen to the haters. I was drawn to the poem’s exuberant slam rhymes and the force of its moxie and nerve.

There are other poems in the shortlist that are significantly quieter. Freya Furjan’s “Reflections” is a beautiful realisation of voice: “The water’s cold feels more abraasive now that you’re gone. / It’s getting harder to pretend everything is okay, but my little routine helps. / I wonder if my toothbrush gets lonely now.” The poem is a grief-work, and the speaker’s yearning and subtle growth is rendered with a lovely quietude. “Colour Fades” by Greer Castle is also about somebody leaving the speaker behind. Greer uses rhyme in wonderfully restrained and affecting ways: “i’ve followed you for / miles // down / these supermarket / aisles”. The refrain of “colour fades” builds as the poem progresses towards its eventual, moving, goodbye. “Your street” by Ysabelle Casimiro is a triumphant and intriguing exercise in voice: “A potent swig of the sun, oh, I missed it. / Would I still drink it? No, but the longing, / it still does something dizzying to me. / *I haven’t been here in ages.*” Imagery is knitted together by a gorgeous dream-logic that I wanted to keep spending time with. Another poem driven entirely by image is “11:47am on Thursday” by Meg Simpson. A student attends to all the little life moments they can see going on out the classroom window on a “used-white-shoe Thursday afternoon”. The teacher demands – no, begs – for

the student's focus, but the student knows that all the real poetry is happening outside. As Simone Weil famously said, "Attention....is the same as prayer."

Speaking of prayer, I was impressed by Toby Holden's poem "Blind Prayer", which captures the moment the speaker lost connection with their Christian faith. The voice "that was once God's" is replaced by "cicadas / buzzing in your ears / like faded violins". Something has shifted out of place: "A spare rib / (like Adam's)". This taut, skilful poem conveys a remarkably strong voice and a fine instinct for figurative language and the power of the line break.

The final two poems on the shortlist are both about a disconnect between poet and parent. Charles Ross' "Rarely Soft or Consolatory" manages a series of ambitious, John Donne-like metaphorical shifts: ice rain, golf-ball-sized hail, a ute in a paddock in the middle of a gale, all these become metaphors for a father who looks with mockery and contempt upon a son who is as soft as the herded sheep, a son of "wretched roadkill-rabbit softness". This young poet understands how language must be worked and reworked to capture the psychological complexities of their world. And lastly – but certainly not least – Charlotte McKenzie's "Fickle Arguments" takes its form from the Ilya Kaminsky poem "In a time of Peace". In this sharp, unsettling evocation of conflict between a daughter and a guardian, Charlotte offers a dextrous riposte to the original poem, as she shows how a type of complex verbal violence plays out in the microcosm of the home: "The words of a girl break into silence exactly like the words of a girl."

Part of the pleasure of reading this poem, along with all the others, was getting a glimpse into what the Year 12 and 13 student of Aotearoa are reading. In the weeks to come, these ten winning poets will get the chance to come to the IIML themselves, where so many Olympians of the written word have trodden before. They will get the chance to meet one another, to read and to write together, and to leave their own smudge. I can't wait.