

National Schools Poetry Award

2015 Judge's Report by Cliff Fell

In the July of 1870, when he was not yet 16, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud ran away from his home in the small town of Charleville, where he found life stifling and intolerable, a feeling not uncommon among teenagers in many parts of the world. For Rimbaud this escape heralded three years of wandering and a brief, tempestuous poetic career in which he wrote three books of poetry that remained largely unknown in his own lifetime, but have, since their publication, exerted an influence on poetry that persists to this day. Here's a poem he wrote a little later in that first year of vagabondage, in my own translation:

The Bohemian Life

I went on my way, hands stuffed into ripped pockets;
 My overcoat, too, was becoming ideal;
 Beneath the sky, I travelled, Muse! And I was your vassal;
 Oh! là là! What splendid loves I dreamed of!

My only pair of trousers had a big hole in them.
 – Like a pixy Tom Thumb, I scattered my rhymes anywhere.
 My hotel was at the sign of the Great Bear.
 – My stars in the sky made the sweetest of heavens.

And as I listened to them, sitting in the hedgerows
 On those pleasant September evenings, a few dew drops
 On my forehead could get me drunk as strong wine;

Or, making a rhyme of those fantastic shadows,
 I'd pluck at the elastics of my wounded boot,
 As though on a lyre, a foot so close to my heart!

If Rimbaud's poem was born out of frustration with home-life, tempered by a desire to submit himself to the world, it's of little surprise that many of the poems entered in the 2015 Schools Poetry Awards traverse a similar territory. Almost all of them seem, in one way or another, to be seeking a way out of the difficult terrain of the country that is Youth, where coming into adulthood is mapped by paths that take you on, at times, an aimless circling and where momentary exhilarations of joy, delight or even

success can quickly double back into a maze of anxiety, isolation or uncertainty. And that's not to speak of love and the loss of love . . . or the problem of dealing with authority figures.

So, as I read through the almost 200 poems submitted for this competition, I was strongly reminded, as you can no doubt tell, of just how glorious and difficult our teenage years can be. Indeed, as it's now a few years since my own children were in High School (and an even more scary number since I was there) one of the things I was looking forward to in agreeing to judge the 2015 National Schools Poetry Awards was the notion that it might give me a new insight into what was happening in youth culture. What I wasn't anticipating, though now it seems obvious to me, was how much the poems, would bring to mind my own mid-teens, my sense of self back then and my interests, hopes and fears, let alone my early poetic attempts, the rare successes – in my own terms, for nothing was ever published – and far more frequent failures. And also bring back to my mind the work of Rimbaud, whom I discovered around that time.

Reading these poems over the last few weeks, I often stopped to think about the craft of making poems and a few crucial aspects of technique that seemed to elude many of these young poets. It would be true to say that poetry has become synonymous with self-expression, especially since the influence of American 'confessional' poetry opened the poem up to the rendering of almost any emotion. While that is a marvel in itself, it's important to remember, and I say this as much for the benefit of future entrants into the Schools Poetry Awards as to those who attempted it this year, that a poem should be more than simply a rant or a testament of personal angst or anguish. It needs to go beyond itself, beyond the poem's original concerns into something deeper, an image or idea that will evoke for the reader some memory or understanding of the great mystery of what it is to be alive on this planet, an insight into, or meditation on, what we call the human condition; or a benediction, perhaps. That's what Rimbaud's line about sleeping under the stars, at the sign of the Great Bear, effortlessly achieves; but, whatever this extraordinary extra thing is, it will communicate to the reader, the person whose job it is to complete the poem, an energy that moves her or him in some way.

Another factor that seemed to work against a number of poems was their length. Not that there's anything wrong with long poems. As the author of a number, far too many probably, I could hardly say that. But a long poem does need to be able to sustain the reader, through its narrative pull and shifts in pace, imagery and ideas. All too often, I found myself caught up in parts of a poem, only to find that its energies were lost in a slow, unnecessary petering out, long after its point had been made, or more importantly, its highlight realised. It may well be that future schools awards will set a line limit on the

length of poems. I hope so. I think that such a requirement will discipline these young poets into finding and embellishing the true 'hotspots' in their work. The creative mantra 'less is more' was never as significant as in the making of poems.

Before I go on to considering and commenting on the nine runners-up and the winner, there were some that got so close they deserve a mention. **Danielle Hookway's 'The Piper'** offered an interesting new take on the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, in which the piper re-emerges as a rat-figure. In the end, though, I felt its Gothic darkness and moralising were just a little too didactic. **Tim Kern's 'Schubert'**, about the emotional intensity of playing a piece of music, was a poem that seemed twice as long as it needed or wanted to be. Given some judicious revision, focusing on the imagery at its heart, it could have been a contender. **'on the infidelity of maps'** by **Nicholas Yan** has a marvellous title and was formally fresh. It lost me, though (those unfaithful maps!), in its attempt to make a point and offer a message. Poets should trust the reader to get the idea without anyone needing to tell them. **Luke Nie's 'Sonnet 0 – A poem inspired by Shakespearean style'**, a Shakespearean sonnet in tightly wrought iambics and Elizabethan diction was technically impressive and sweetly anguished. Clearly a worthy contender, and with a poetic sensibility at work, but too mannered to make it into the top ten. I kept returning to **Ally Orr's 'Uncle Adolf'**. It's a poem that attempts to humanise Adolf Hitler by seeing him through the eyes of a niece, and is bold and original in that conceit. Well-written, with an economy of line and diction, it was ultimately too ambiguous (unintentionally, no doubt) in its portrait to make it through.

It's terrific to note that there were three young men in that group that got so close to the top ten. There were only two, though, among the finalists, but that there were any these days would seem encouraging. **Jake Kelly-Hulse's 'White'** was well made, moving from its meditation on darkness to an ironic meta-poetics that questions the nature of poetry itself, even as the poet brings the poem into the light. I always had a feeling the haunting, somewhat muscular hunting trope of **Josh Richards' 'Death and the Maiden'** was authored by a bloke. What impressed me most was the way he pursued the idea of the speaker of the poem dressed as bird, beating on window panes. For all its obviously Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe influences, the vigour of the writing was enough to keep it from slipping into the many pitfalls such a poem might get caught in.

One of the things that these top ten poems clearly have in common is that none of them seem to be pushing an agenda or a message too hard. In **Sarah Liu's** poem, **'Drifting'**, the speaker focuses on an old man, her grandfather, who is quietly dying in a Western apartment. She imagines him in his silence

recalling moments of his childhood faraway, ‘the clink of his mother’s/silver anklets as she walked/in bare feet along the dirt roads.’ This poem came close to winning. It exemplifies, though, the way a single word can be unbalancing. In this case it was the word ‘Perhaps.’ I wanted the poem to be less tentative, more certain in its sense of what was finally going on in the old man’s mind. **Amy Huang’s ‘Groundless’** played cleverly on the idea embodied in the common meaning of the title phrase, ‘without proof or evidence’. Written in the voice of a bird and suggesting the flight of the soul into the heavens, Huang’s poem just slightly loses direction in its penultimate stanzas, though the final image, ‘A piece of prodigal sky/returning to earth’ is excellent.

Alyxandra Devlin’s ‘Colours of the Wind’ is beautifully realised in terms of its imagery and simplicity of voice. I felt it lacked the X factor of some special other idea or shift (or ‘volta’ to use the technical term) to make it the winner. **‘Movement of Life’** by **Katie Hooper** is cleverly conceived, almost symphonic in its five movements, describing four masks the poet adopts in her search for bliss and perfection. But again it didn’t quite have that something special or extra in its ending. **‘The Golden Rule’** by **Anastazia Docherty** was easily the finest of the many love (and lost love) poems I read. A clever extended metaphor that likens a relationship to a mathematical equation, this poem provided my biggest (and possibly only) laugh-out-loud moment. For some days this was at the top of my pile. I felt **Leah Dodds’s ‘Soft Cotton Mornings’** achieved a tightness to her writing and imagery. You can really see the things of the morning she describes, but again this is a poem that doesn’t extend its original idea.

The same is true of **Holly Morton’s** enigmatic and richly detailed poem of return, **‘Tahanan’**. The anaphora of ‘They told me to expect’ is quietly hypnotic and cleverly subverted in the penultimate stanza. This was another strong contender for the top prize, but I wanted the final stanzas to do a little more, to pull back – to use film terminology – and show a slightly bigger picture. Who is ‘The child in my arms’ the poet refers to? I wanted to know more.

And so to the winner, **Grace Lee’s ‘Eileithya’**. My only reservation about this poem was its beautiful but slightly obscure title. It didn’t really bother me, though. These days Professor Google is only a swipe or two away and once I’d learned that Eileithya was a Greek birth goddess, it seemed perfect. In fact it made total sense of lines that had already persuaded me with the sheer gusto of their music: ‘Dewy green fields run on for miles in her womb’ is probably the most shapely and cadenced line I read in all of the 200 poems. The other thing that made Lee’s poem a winner, lifting it above these other

nine, was that it doesn't put a foot wrong at any point. Its ending is sublime, adding a new note, of the sorrows of life to come: 'Spring draws near, and the first cries with it.'

So, please go and read these ten poems. They will undoubtedly entertain and amaze you and give you hope for the future too, I'm sure. That's certainly the impression they've left in me. I'd like to offer my congratulations to all ten of the finalists, but really to everyone who entered. Writing a poem and so submitting yourself to the world takes a particular form of courage along with 'the grace and fear that go with it' as, I believe, the philosopher Simone Weil said. Some of you may never write a poem again; others may go on to pursue this most foolish but marvellous of careers. Either way, you will have tasted something of the Bohemian life.