

## The Caselberg Trust International Poetry Prize 2018

### Judge's Report

In poetry, there are no compulsory prescriptions. What matters is the vitality of the writing. Poetry is the most pragmatic of disciplines: what works, works. Reading the more than 150 entries for the 2018 Caselberg Poetry Prize, I felt like a bloodhound truffling for the scent, the spoor, of the finest poem, unearthing it from a rich tilth of possibilities.

There were poems about identity, political and personal; and a poem about Anzac Day, a poem about MGM movie moguls, a poem about 'having trouble with words'. There were poems about Aleppo, Amsterdam, the Catlins, the Gare du Nord. One poem discussed banning Philip Pullman for swearing; another, the sensation of being embraced by Mother India; two poems debated the feminist gaze versus the male gaze. There was a poem about Peter Olds' jacket by an admirer.

One motif met with over and over in these poems was birdlife: in particular, native birds of all kinds, soaring and swooping and fluttering through light and shade as if emblematic of the pulse of life itself — from fantails above Mount Maunganui, to a falcon 'kiting old Hawkdun grey'. Another motif was a matter of tone: the deployment of a sidelong laconic manner that seemed expressive of a particularly New Zealand way of writing poetically about experiences.

Sincerity was a constant: sincere emotion, sincere assertions, sincere belief in the power of the poem to tell the truth. Well, perhaps. But a poem must also be full of verve, agile in its language, artful in its crafting. The best poetry blindsides you with the unexpected, so that you feel you must immediately revisit it, dwell on it, absorb it: you are the music while the music lasts, wrote T.S. Eliot.

In the end, I selected six poems that are all very impressive pieces of work. Astonish me, the impresario Sergei Diaghilev challenged his dancers in the Ballets Russes; these poems do that. Other poems had their moments, but these finalists have a satisfying sense of completeness in every aspect.

I was taken by the alertness of perception displayed in 'A Country Airing', and the way its compressed descriptions were all neatly dove-tailed into place. It is a poem which, in the words of John Updike, 'gives the mundane its beautiful due'. 'The Castle' is a poem where domestic incidentals — a telescoped autobiography — are combined into a zigzagging metronomic unity, with a heartening homeward turn at the end, using the compass of the 26 letters of the alphabet. Each line is cleverly buckled into place by its alphabetically-ordered beginning letter. The poem 'Memorial', naming and remembering, is a kind of allegory, reminding me of Robert Frost's claim that 'the land was ours before we were the land's'. Here, the old colonial order or repressiveness is still being wrestled with, while the lushness of regenerating native vegetation and wildlife, even in suburbia, asserts the return of the true order of things. The poem 'Oh! Kee-o Kee-o' — a sonically-charged title — has a heartbeat-like pulse animating its nervy language. With its empathy for the natural world framed by the exigencies of the modern world, it is part epiphany, part psychodrama — and will jolt you with its electric flash of tension, like sparks arcing.

There's a certain magisterial resonance conveyed by the poem title 'Full Measure' that is borne out by the poem itself. It is a graveyard poem that asserts, with Shakespeare, that 'ripeness is all'. Ruminative, both sardonic and affectionate, it is a poem in which the poet writes with a eulogising immediacy of unquiet graves and of the entanglements of generations. If the poem has a saturnine cast, it is also lapidary, as if chiselled in communal stone.

The poem 'you can't be here' has a quicksilver radiance; it's like some febrile emanation of human consciousness itself. I applaud the wit and vividness of its dream-like scenario. In its zaniness and absurdity, it's a kind of distillation of our current cultural condition, making it up as we go along in a just-in-time manner. A poem, in order to be true to itself must find its own form and confidently express that form all the way down. This poem does that. It obeys an internal logic that is organic, harmonious and wonderfully expressed. Evanescent, spun out of thin air, it generates its own force-field; it lifts you up — and puts you down in a different place to where you were before.

The winning entry is 'you can't be here' by Derek Schulz and the runner-up is 'Full Measure' by Tony Beyer. The four highly-commended entries are 'Oh! Kee-o Kee-o' and 'Memorial', both by Janet Newman; 'The Castle' by Sarah Scott and 'A Country Airing' by Ruth Arnison. These poems, along with the two prize-winning poems are published on the Caselberg Trust's website.

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