

Judge's Report 2023 Writers Walk Poetry Competition

Kia ora koutou,

What a wonderful idea for a competition and what a treat to read all these poems! It's great to see poetry alive and well in Aotearoa.

Everyone wins with poetry. Writing a poem is winning. If you've finished a poem, you've won. If you've sent that poem off to a competition or a magazine, you've won. If you've read your poem out loud to your best friend or your cat or the mirror, you've won.

Can you really judge poetry? Or can you just say which ones you like best on a given day? It's always going to be subjective. I have my personal preferences as anyone else would, and just because a poem hasn't won a prize on this occasion, doesn't mean it's not a great poem. There were many excellent poems and I had to whittle the entries down to just a few and make some difficult choices.

That's not to detract from the winners, who, collectively, have written some high quality poetry that I very much enjoyed reading. And I just want to mention that I judged the poems without knowing who the authors were – I didn't find that out until after I'd made my choices.

It was a pleasure to meander through all the entries. Along the way I met sheep, whales, seagulls, hills, coffee drinkers. There was humour; there was inventiveness; there was sorrow. Many poets wrote about family and ancestors, and their journeys here. Not all poems were set in Wellington, but many were. The Beehive made several appearances, as did our well-loved bucket fountain.

So, congratulations to everyone who wrote a poem, to everyone who entered and a hearty congratulations to those who won or were placed or commended. The winning poems were the ones I kept coming back to.

Edmond Challenge, won by Saige England.

The winning poem was an intriguing one. It drew heavily on sound: "silver babble, keening, sighing" as well as some very physical imagery about fishing and how we might fish up poems.

Kidman Challenge, won by Matthew Chamberlain.

The winning poem was one that asks questions about fitting in, about unseen borders, about being in an unfamiliar place. It also has a very nice line about the lace formed when a place is seen from above.

Grace Challenge, won by Adrienne Matthews.

Adrienne's was a very active poem. It moved from Wellington as the subject – moulded, upthrust – to the personal – a father walking Ngauranga Gorge, an aunty and uncle taping picture windows.

Manhire Challenge, joint winners Emma Neale (Open) and Oshadha Perera (Youth).

Both poems gave us a tantalising glimpse of a whole story. With only three lines these poets provided a window into something that's happened without giving it all away. These were the challenge entries that left me wondering. Emma Neale's poem also managed some nice assonance.

Wellington Writers Walk Challenge, won by Kristen Phillips.

Kristen's poem nicely encapsulated the writers walk as a whole and made good use of rhyme. I particularly liked Kristen's description of the sculptures as the harbour's necklace.

Commended Entries

There were many terrific entries. But in the end, five poems in particular stood out for me. The five writers whose entries were commended were:

- Sherrie Lee
- Jax Clark
- Mia Farlane
- Wes Lee
- Bronwyn Hughes

Sherrie Lee's love for a windy city shone through – I thought, yes, me too. I enjoyed Jax Clark's lovely analogy between hills and a grandmother's coat and how hills "wear stories". And I loved Mia Farlane's description of the writers walk sculptures; Wes Lee's "mouthless hedges"; and Bronwyn Hughes' crayons – which made me happy too.

Youth Category Winners

It's always encouraging to see our next generation of poets coming along. There were some excellent entries from the under 18s. Well done to everyone who entered. I hope you keep writing and don't worry if you didn't win a prize this time, there'll be plenty of opportunities in the future.

Third Place (Youth): Sarah-Kate Simons

I love the opening of this short poem, and how it describes the light.

Second Place (Youth) winner: Bill Kelly,

I particularly enjoyed the rhythm and repetition in Bill Kelly's poem: "always an edge here", "can't fool around here", "people watch and wait here".

First Place Youth winner: Oshadha Perera (joint winner of the Manhira Challenge)

This was a poignant poem, with its talk of gathering dust conveying a sense of loss in just three lines.

Open Category Winners

There was a great range to choose from. And again, don't worry if you haven't won a prize, because you've already won a poem. You've won a feeling of accomplishment. You've won a time of reflection where you thought about the writers walk.

There were many contenders, but these were the poems I settled on.

Third Place Open joint winners: Bryony Rogers and Zac Hing

Bryony's was a very physical poem about a dying sheep, against a backdrop of winter and birds. It's a poem that raises deeper questions and has some good juxtapositions.

Zac's poem had some terrific metaphors: the sky shivering with the bodies of starlings, the skyward rivers made by pine trees.

Second Place Open winner: Heidi North

This was a poem that told a story but also kept us wondering. Who is this person on her charcoal sofa throne? There was some great imagery in the poem too, with the harbour, the hills, the storm, the ferry.

First Place Open winner: Adrienne Matthews (winner of the Grace challenge)

This was the story of a city and the story of a family in that city. My favourite stanza was:

“the harbour a slurping bowl for Cook Strait
relentless in, out, rewriting coastlines with
every southerly”

Terrific!

Well done to everyone who took part and many thanks to the organising committee and the City Gallery for a great competition and a great event. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

Janis Freegard