

## **Moon Festival Poetry Competition Results**

**By Victor Billot**

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The entries showed a wide range of interpretations of the theme. Some surprised with their originality. In terms of style and technique, there was a broad field too. Some poets chose to approach the topic through the lens of the Chinese diaspora in New Zealand. Others considered the place of the tangata whenua, or the origins of Pakeha settlers, as a way to approach distance, whether physical, temporal or psychological. Some poems had a down to earth vibe – what the heck are we doing in these crazy little islands down the bottom of the Pacific? Others went big with cosmic contemplations and exotic visions. It left me feeling good that there are people out there who are thinking and feeling these things: thoughtful, imaginative people, who had an idea who they were.

COVID-19 cast its long shadow over many poems. Our involuntary confinement in the South Seas is a strange and for some a negative phenomenon: as a consequence, it seems it is also a great jumping off point for creative writing. The instant fix of jet travel – even a budget hop over the ditch to Oz – has been snatched away. Stranded in paradise! Poets mourned the loss of connection to a wider globe, to friends and family held at distance, to a dislocating sense of a breach in what we took for granted. Despite our end of the line remoteness, most New Zealanders are today urban people (even if in a provincial sense), and even rural New Zealanders are often not far from a convoy of milk tankers thundering down a state highway. But isolation is as much an internal state as an external one: at least this is what these poems said to me.

Some poems contained a deep drive towards 'freedom', that nebulous term, or perhaps a restlessness, an openness to possibility – the distant landscape was something they were moving towards. They weren't always technically brilliant but I thought to myself they had been written by poets who really love being in this world, who are making the most of their time on the planet.

Most poems stuck to standard formats. There were a couple that experimented with form. Confidence to try something different was reflected in the way these poems had an higher level of technical skill. I didn't have a preference between radical form or traditional metre. While I approve of rhyme and rhythm in a poem, it has to add value. Sometimes rhyme schemes felt as if they were holding up a shaky poem like piles under an old villa. Sometimes they were great and hit the mark.

Several of the more ambitious poems came unstuck when they got carried away, when enthusiasm took over, when description went from colourful to purple to radioactive within a few lines. This is always frustrating. Sometimes I could see a poem struggling to emerge from its cocoon but not quite getting there, other times the poem emerged in a gold suit like Elvis but then slipped on a banana peel. I am terrible at following my own advice, but sometimes less really is more. Image and metaphor needs to be compressed, crystallised, not spiralling out of control like sparkling dragon feathers cascading from a heavenly pillow in bouffants of decadent fluffiness (if you get my drift.)

There are certain words that I think need to be handled carefully – words that shout "poetic." Words like zephyr. Unless it is a Ford Zephyr, my view is call it a draught, or a wind. Or even a typhoon. Also daffodils. Daffodils are a beautiful flower but in poetry land they have sadly taken on the role of a weed. Mists – yes, but why not pea soup fogs? Or relentless Dunedin drizzle? Or someone saying, "jeez, it's really pissing down out

there”? Still, one of the winners had some mist in there. A good test is when you look up a word in the dictionary whether it has a little box next to it saying “Literary.” You can pluck the “literary” raspberry whirl out of the chocolate box and it is often delicious – but be careful not to eat too many; they make you sick.

This goes for other things too – when other authors or artists turn up in a poem we have to be careful about what they are doing there. Mozart – a great composer and a reliable sign of good taste – but when he walks into a poem, you have to ask yourself what is he doing here? Make sure when you invite someone else in to your poem, they are there for the right reasons.

My other recommendation to poets (now that I have a platform to inflict my views) is not to feel that a poem *has* to be about a ‘special’ experience, or a highly elevated, quasi-spiritual vision. It could be a special experience: but expressed in everyday language, or even advertising slogans or teenage slang. Or it could be a mundane experience like a bus trip into town that is turned through language into an Homeric odyssey. If you feel like turning up the volume to 10 on the poem, consider turning it up to just seven or eight. Leave a little room to breathe. Or perhaps do the exact opposite and turn it up to twenty – just avoid the expected. Avoid going for that pre-determined effect you want the poem to have. Avoid, in fact, poetry as she is often misunderstood and mischaracterised as a remote, fruity hippy drifting in the mist, with a daffodil.

Spelling – it’s not a spelling test but all care needs to be taken. I’m not going to throw a poem in the bin because of a typo but it is a craft and little errors can knock the shine off a good piece of work. Likewise dodgy grammar or clumsy construction can mortally wound a poem that then limps off to a sad end. Take care! Show your poem you love it.

I admired the sincerity of most of these poems. Poets had something to say, even if was a personal, small thing. There were few smart alecs (that may be a weakness of the judge). In the end it came down to the level of skill, and the originality of the idea(s) in the poem. This isn't a precise science and I encourage all who entered to continue their journey – it was a privilege to be able to wander through the thoughts and emotions of creative people. In fact, just by writing a poem and sending it out into the world, you have already “won” in an important way.

A final note: please follow the instructions and requested format for submissions. One entry was disqualified as it had the entrants name as well as illustrations on it. This is a shame! Please check the rules before sending in your piece.

My pick for winner is *Instead He Sees*. The reason this poem won was because of its clean form, and how it dealt in a sensitive way with the competition theme. Despite its surface simplicity, the concise narrative and resonant imagery of a Chinese gold miner in Central Otago had a stillness and a clarity that set this poem apart. It's not a stunning, dramatic poem – it is quiet and evocative; sad, but not depressing. Also – and this is important – it felt like it had been worked on, and there were no bum notes or typos or over-reaching.

Second place goes to *When Swampy is Blue*. At first scan it seemed a slight poem but when I went back it rang true: what put it ahead to me was it captured complex emotions in an unpretentious way, and wove this into a common experience that many of us have: a walk around the Dunedin hills. Good one!

I have not chosen to commend any other poems – there were a number of decent poems here but they needed some extra work (in several cases the removal of a forced

rhyme or a spelling error would make the difference.) I think putting them aside and coming back in a day or a month is well worth while.

Thank you for sharing your work with me.