

Word Play Wonders

Local high schoolers find fun and fulfillment in the world of poetry.

by C. Kevin Smith

A favorite story told about poetry recounts how French poet Paul Valéry once began writing a poem by listening to the echoing sounds of his footsteps as he walked along an uneven sidewalk. Eventually he found words to fit the rhythm of his feet, and he wrote his poem. Yet the poem's origin—that scuffing, beating sound of shoes on pavement, barely noticeable in the final version—could still be heard by those who listened.

Poetry is about noticing.

Read aloud and listen to the heartbeat of these lines:

is that too much to ask from you?
Is it too hard to try and care
for someone other than yourself?

The rhythmic, elegant ease of the poet's words communicates a simple message of questioning sorrow, a sentiment experienced by anyone who has ever loved another. The poem's subtle beat is almost invisible, yet it surrounds the words and gives them shape, like air.

The lines quoted above are from the poem "One Touch" by 15-year old Nuvia Mendoza, a sophomore at King City High School. Nuvia is one of over 200 local high school students who entered the 2001 Monterey County High School Poetry Awards contest, which is sponsored by the Monterey Public Library and Carmel's Carl Cherry Center for the Arts. This year, 35 outstanding young poets from 12 different high schools will receive either a cash award or a volume of poetry at a public ceremony Saturday at the library on Pacific.

Local activist and acclaimed poet Elliot Roberts, who selected the winning poems, has nothing but admiration for "the passion, enthusiasm and energy" of these students' poems. "Judging the contest," he says, "is one of the most exciting things I do." It's also one of the most difficult, he adds, given the overall quality of so many entries.

Having read several of the winning poems myself, I can attest to their beauty and power. It is striking, and deeply reassuring, that in this millennial context of technological impatience there is still a hunger for the insightful gaze of poetry. Whether raw or polished, the poems by these talented young people affirm that the skillful, honest use of language remains our greatest tool for survival.

In my conversations with some of the contest participants on the art of poetry, I was reminded that while each generation invents its own stories and moves toward its own goals, certain universal values, like emotional truth, can link one generation to the next and create fresh hope for greater understanding.

What makes a poem a poem? Compared to a short story or an essay, “a poem is less obvious in its intentions,” argues one winner, Khalid Hussein, a freshman at Pacific Grove High School. His method for writing poems reflects that kind of complexity.

“It’s a strange process,” Khalid says. “First I write a line, or first I think of a tone. Then I think on it, sleep on it, slowly develop on that. A poem goes through many stages before the finished product. It’s generally more subtle, more lyrical, more emotional than other kinds of writing.”

A prize-winning poem entitled “The Whispering Deep” by 11th-grader Omar Hussein, Khalid’s older brother, offers a good example of poetic concentration. In the poem, the poet turns his attention to the heroic efforts of ancient warriors, to their “voices too loud to forget, too stern to ignore.” The poem begins:

Upon the plane of my soul,
A deep dark skein of discordant voices
Etched in silent harmony. A dribble of unnoticed rain
Slips off the cold face of the stone before dropping
Down again into the tense mirror face of silver velvet.

For Carmel High School student Amy Rossini, a successful poem is one that communicates a certain authenticity. “I like to feel that what the poet says really meant something to them,” she says, “that it’s not just pretty words.”

Elise Franklin, another student at Carmel High, appreciates poets like Robert Frost because his works are almost limitless in meaning. “There’s a vagueness, an ambiguity, that I really like,” she says. “It can relate to anyone.”

As Nuvia Mendoza puts it, “I like poetry about life.”

The question of structure is one that concerns many young poets. More than once I heard the refrain “no rules!” when a student explained to me why he or she liked free verse best. The prize-winning war poem of Tyler Johnson, a student at North Monterey County High School, features a first-person perspective of trench warfare. Tyler explains that writing in free verse offers a creative outlet, the occasion to express openly certain ideas, in this case the pointlessness of war.

A different perspective is offered by Greer Murphy, a junior at the Santa Catalina School in Monterey. “I like things to have a pattern, an order,” she says. For Greer, the crafting of structured poems—the way it involves carefully choosing words, deciding how to combine them into something that has a cohesive design—allows one to get closer to a specific truth. “It’s a form of meditation,” she adds.

Another student at Catalina, 17-year-old Olivia Nilsson, admits that she used to think that “rules about rhyme and meter and whatnot were the tools of the incompetent, what to fall back on if you couldn’t think of things on your own.” She now feels, however, that traditional poetic techniques don’t “limit my creativity, but quite the contrary, they expand my horizons.”

For some poets, the question of poetic form is secondary to the urgent desire to get one's ideas down on paper. When asked why she writes poetry, 16-year-old Holly Hisamoto of Pacific Grove replies, "I can't help it! It just comes out of me!" Holly, who is home schooled, says that writing poetry "has been a natural passion" for her since she was 5, and her prize-winning poem "Once Upon A Time" displays the pleasing flow of a successful poem. The title refers to a place

where make believe is not pretend,
but possible instead,
and love exists within the heart,
instead of in the head.

Holly has been sharing the writing of poems with her mother, Eliel Fionn, for years now, and they continue to inspire each other. Who is Eliel's favorite poet? "Well, e. e. cummings. Or Holly!" she exclaims. "Neither of them follows rules, and their poems are very expressive."

Several other young poets enjoy poetic family connections, like the Hussein brothers. Tara Tully, a 17-year-old from Greenfield who attends King City High School, says that her favorite poet is sister Tasia. Poetry for Tara is a social activity. She posts her poems online and shares them with her friends at school during lunch.

While Tara claims that her poems are "silly and insane"—one poem she wrote is about paint that suddenly falls off the wall and gets into people's hair—her prize-winning entry, "The Teacher Ran Away," displays the keen eye that is the mark of any poet worth her salt. The poem begins:

Did the teacher run away?
Can a teacher run away?
I think the teacher ran away.
The books are gone.
Papers strewn about. The teacher said he would.
Said he'd run away.

Poems like "The Teacher Ran Away" are like messages sent as reinforcements across the battlefield known as adolescence, which for many is a time of confused identities and frequent personal anguish. One student considers her journal "to be basically one big poem."

Several students prefer to keep most of their poems to themselves, or to write some "public poems" for friends or family and other, more private ones, as Holly put it, "to get my angst out, to process."

Nuvia and her cousin and friends like to share poems with each other, to communicate in a positive way the turbulence of adolescence. Indeed, it was a friend of Nuvia who submitted her poems to the contest, seeing in them, as the judge did, something special.

Another prize-winning poet inspired by friends is Kris Massey, a sophomore at King City High. Kris has loved reading since he was young, and he was fortunate to be surrounded by friends

who were always writing poems and short stories. “I really liked their poems and stories,” he says, “so I decided I would take a shot!” During a time of recent conflict with one friend, he sent a poem to express how he felt. Would an e-mail have had the same effect?

Five years ago—amidst declining sales and worried articles with titles like “Can Poetry Matter?”—the Academy of American Poets designated the month of April as National Poetry Month “for the purpose of increasing access to, and appreciation of, the art of poetry.” Many students remark that their first poems were English class assignments.

Clearly, exposure to good poetry and expert guidance in the shaping of a successful poem will help to ensure continued poetic literacy. When asked to name a poet whose work inspired them, many winning student poets cited the same inspirational sources: Pablo Neruda, e. e. cummings, Mary Oliver—accessible poets who explore the complexities of nature and the human heart in a way that makes us cry out, “Yes! I've felt that way, too!”

The world of commercials and politics and info-tainment bombards us daily with language that is flat, dull and often numbingly imprecise. Poetry can sharpen our senses against this onslaught of noise and make us hear our own voices again.

Poetry is also about imagination. Nearly a century and a half ago, a 17-year-old poet pictured his life as a trip across time and space in a drunken boat. Full of youthful desire, anger and despair, his poetic imaginings allowed him to inhabit another place, one where he might show other young people how life could be beautiful:

I wanted to show children the sunfish
Of the blue wave, those singing fish, fish of gold.
Bouquets of foam lullabied my drifting,
And winds beyond words winged me, for a moment.

The excerpt above is from “The Drunken Boat” by Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote his best poetry—in fact, his only poetry—as a teenager. After turning 20 he never wrote another poem.

And what will happen to Monterey County’s wonderful young poets? Will they continue to express their thoughts and feelings in words that are witty and wise, heartfelt and healing?

For the short term, they have some celebrating to do. At this Saturday’s award ceremony, they will read their poems and receive certificates of congratulations from the County Board of Supervisors and from Sam Farr’s congressional office. And they will be given the opportunity to visit (with a companion) Robinson Jeffers’ Tor House, which is a wonderful place to see how a poet might truly inhabit the world of imagination, word by word, stone by stone.

And then? Olivia Nilsson, for one, hopes that she will continue to write poetry. But if not, she says, “I will always be a lover of great poetry, which is in itself a very satisfying occupation.”

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