NOTES FOR ALL CONTRIBUTORS TO THE SOMERSET POETRY COMPETITION

First of all I would like to congratulate all entrants in this competition. It is a mark of regard for your work that judging never felt like a chore. There is no doubt that all writers were sincere in their efforts. There was no poem that I felt was wasted effort or not worth saying. So well done, one and all!

One of my fellow lecturers used to give a lecture to first year university students which argued that in the 21st Century (and the century which preceded it) poetry no longer holds any cultural relevance. It is a dying if not already dead art form, or so he argued. The intriguing collection of poems from young writers who entered the Somerset competition prove this is simply not so. There is a great variety of styles and voices, and a genuine attempt to communicate through the verse.

The writers are sincerely reacting to stimuli around them and trying to work out how they can approach and articulate their response to many things of concern in their community, their country and the world at large. They also endeavor energetically to articulate the complex reactions of a single human mind to these experiences.

It is also clear that you get a kick out of writing, and if you get pleasure from writing something it is almost guaranteed that readers will enjoy reading it. You have also discovered that getting something down on paper brings us closer not necessarily to a solution to problems but to a closer understanding of what those problems might be. You try to give form to vague shadows, deep fears, unalloyed joys that reside somewhere in your mind, heart or soul. This is what poetry does.

In Man Without a Country Kurt Vonnegut talks about creativity and being creative at many different levels:

The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possible can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.

You would already agree with what he is saying for you have already experienced the thrill to be had when you create something that when set loose on the world has a life of its own.

As a judge of the competition I don’t physically know any of you in person. I have no idea what you look like, whether you are male or female, your age or colour of your hair. But after reading your work I know something about all of you - even a little. I know what you passionately care about; I know what makes you smile; I know what you find outrageous; I can feel the frustrations and joys you have inside. In other words now I know things about you that some of your family members and friends do not know if they don't read your poems. There is something delightfully intimate about listening to a piece of music, or looking at a painting, or reading a poem, because the artist is giving something of himself or herself away. But in this instance giving to an audience is also getting for the self. Creativity presents one of the great win-win situations in human existence, and no matter how many high tech gadgets we have, or how advanced we think our civilization is, this will ever be so.

In many ways I would have preferred not to have to judge your work at all, since every piece has something to recommend it. I know that ultimately it was going to come down to a matter of taste, and that another judge would, in all probability, select different poems for the awards. I think it fair to admit to that for this and all writing competitions. It is also fair to give you an idea of what I think a
good poem is. I wrote the paragraph below when responding to one winner’s poem, and it is worth sharing with you all:

There are probably thousands of definitions of a good poem. Writers, teachers and readers are never going to agree 100% on what a poem is, let alone a good one. But for me a good poem will simply let you know it is good—it will grab you in delightful and unexpected ways. Having a list of rules that makes for a good poem is a third class way of trying to find excellence in the art—it will often tell you more about the critic than the artistic product. For me the sign of a good poem is that it will be inescapable for the reader. It will leave an impression, a mark, a dent in the mind. A good poem won’t let you just read it superficially: instead it hands you an experience, sensual, spiritual and suggestive. And ambiguity. Poems don’t have to be authoritative of definitive. They can be open-ended, inconclusive. The quality of the work lies in the sense that somehow the writer is articulating something evasive and contradictory about being human, about the way we think of ourselves and our place in the world.

The poems that were the winners got a hook into my mind and they would not let go. They were surprisingly simple in expression, content and form, but highly complex in implication and connotation. The opposite was true of some other worthy entries. They were highly complex in language use, metaphor, and situation, but somewhat predictable in implication and connotation once I worked through all the words. The winning poems give the impression of being almost perfect within themselves. By that I mean there was nothing in them that was clumsy, pretentious or trying too hard. They exuded a quiet confidence and a mature control of form. The language sat comfortably with the persona’s voice, and was spot on for the kind of experience they were trying to convey. The winning entries simply chose themselves. I was not thinking of Keats or Auden or Dickinson or their awesome talents, or trying to find the work closest to them.

I would like to share a few hints to help you in your future development as poets. You can think about these, agree or disagree at will.

IS A POEM THE BEST WAY TO SAY WHAT I WANT TO SAY? If you can say something simpler in prose about an issue then you probably should not write a poem about it. Any poem which can be reduced in its entirety to a single thematic statement is probably not really a poem at all. A arresting poetry usually leaves questions, puzzles and an aftertaste that is hard to describe. A poem must be the only way what is being said can be said.

SHOWING OR TELLING? As an individual you never like to be told—how to spend your time, who to see, what to do, what to believe, what to wear. So don’t tell your reader what to think or what to believe. If you are passionate about something just expressing that passion is not necessarily powerful and not necessarily poetry. It can become more like propaganda. And you don’t want to reduce an issue that is important to you to that. W.H. Auden said a poem must SHOW not TELL. You have to seduce your reader into your content. This is where the language, situation, and form you choose become crucial, for it is only through careful manipulation of those aspects of verse that you will invite your reader into your world. The more meaningful an issue is to you, the more care you need to take in its expression.

SIMPLE OR COMPLEX LANGUAGE? Don't be afraid of simple language. If something can be said simply without ornate, figurative language then be simple in your language choice. Don't use
complex phraseology and esoteric language unless there is no other way to say what you are trying to say. Simple language is not necessarily less meaningful. It can be very powerful.

CAN I BE HUMOROUS IN POETRY? Don't be afraid to use humour in your work. As a generalization there often seems to be a fear of using humor in young writers’ work. Perhaps they think poetry is a very serious business so they have to be serious all the time. Or the subject matter is important so it is tasteless to treat it lightly. But if you look at great poets like Shakespeare, Robert Browning, Alan Larkin, or Emily Dickinson many different kinds of humor are wound up in their most serious of themes. Remember that humour, sensitively handled, can be the sugar that helps the medicine go down.

HOW TO EDIT? Poetry is written to be read aloud. When you compose and then edit, talk to yourself—out loud and a lot! Read your own drafts over and over again. Great lines, ordinary lines and horribly lumpy awkward lines will jump out at you. This makes editing more efficient, and will help you to grow as a poet. But don’t do it on the bus on the way home!

WHAT ELSE WILL HELP ME BECOME A BETTER POET? Finally, you cannot be a poet if you don’t read poetry, and read it a lot. Writing poetry without being an avid reader of it is like someone trying to compose music who never listens to it. If you have a huge appetite for other people’s work that will broaden your exposure and feed your passion for writing.

In summary it has been my great pleasure to read your work. I look forward to reading more of you in months or years or decades to come. Writing poetry can be habitual. Take care!

George Watt