

Preface

“What a strange thing! / to be alive / beneath cherry blossoms.”

So wrote the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, nearly three hundred years ago. He knew all about life. He lost his mother when he was three; he was sent to the city; he was robbed of his inheritance; his house burnt down; and in the space of a few years he lost three children and his wife. He wrote in another poem that everything he had loved ‘pricked like a bramble.’

The world does this. It confronts. It challenges. It hurts. It is sometimes blesses us, too. But how to respond? Issa came to the same conclusion as many other great artists over the centuries: through art.

Art is what defines us as humans. There is no other species that indulges in self-expression in the same way we do. We paint, we act, we write, we sing. Of all these art forms there is none as clean and precise and exacting as poetry. It is distilled language and feeling. It is a painting in words, a snapshot of a moment, or a chronicle covering years.

When I write there are two moments when the process is

at its most joyful: the beginning and the end. The beginning tingles with possibility; the ending is a kind of triumph. So it is with the Budding Poets' Award. In the beginning we run workshops. Our tutors ran a variety of stimulating exercises – provoking (or perhaps a better work would be evoking) poems from the students. There is a beauty in the moment where a child who has never written before sits, writes, and then finds that they have written a poem. There is a shock and a joy – often because we suffer under the delusion that our life is normal, boring, not worth sharing for another. There is a wonder. There is sometimes and hopefully an urge to do that again. The excitement of possibility charged the autumn air.

Of the thousands of poems that are written and submitted I get to meet all the shortlisted poets and hear them read their poems in their own voices. I get to hear how they came up with their ideas, what it meant to them to be shortlisted, how they framed their language to express what they wanted to say. And this is a thrilling moment as well.

Those shortlisted poems are included in this anthology, but in a sense this is just the tip of the iceberg. Really all

the poets and teachers who took part in this process are winners. The teachers because they took time out of their high pressured schedules to devote to exciting and inspiring their students. And the students too, because to write and share a poem is to open one's self up, to express a feeling or a moment is to take a risk.

There are funny poems here, sad poems, ones that are quirky and bitter sweet. The poets here are all risk takers and their work has been recognized in this collection. But beyond this, all the poets who took part have triumphed. They have affirmed what makes us uniquely human: to feel, to laugh, to love, to express and to share it with others.

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