THE MAGAZINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND POETRY SOCIETY

IN THIS ISSUE

ARTICLES BY T. HOOD AND J. FLEMING
REVIEWS BY N. EASTHOPE, S. EDWARDS AND P. HARRIS
SUMMER FEATURED POET ART NAHILL
POEMS BY A. CURRAN, C. FLETCHER, M. GIACON, S. HOWARD, G. ROACH, D. TODD, M. WOODFIELD
Contents

Feature Article
Say, Slay, Get Scored: An Insight into the Savage Slam Poetry Scene
Tarns Hood

From the Editor
Ivy Alvarez

About Our Contributors

Feature Article
Joan Fleming

Members’ Books
Nicola Easthope

Featured Poet
Art Nahill

Reviews
Night Horse by Elizabeth Smither
Reviewed by Paula Harris
Kokako 23 and Kokako 25
Reviewed by Sue Edwards
Atonement and ternion
by Vaughan Rapatahana
Reviewed by Nicola Easthope

Members’ Poems

Instagram Poem
a fine line

The Magazine of the New Zealand Poetry Society
Te Hunga Tito Ruri o Aotearoa

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Feature Article

Say, Slay, Get Scored: An Insight into the Savage Slam Poetry Scene

by Tarns Hood

Slam poetry is all about owning and holding captive a critiquing audience for three minutes.

This is your stage. Those faces in that crowd are looking at you, watching you take that first breath, wishing you would start the entertainment, the announcement, the poetic message that should be making them…feel something…

My name is Tarns Hood and I am an active performance poet in Wellington, New Zealand.

From July, New Zealand’s ‘slam season’ is in full swing, with poetic competitors slinging prose to live gatherings of people attending nights, hosting qualifying heats and semi-finals, with those scribes competing in the hope to place and claim a regional or national spot.

Rhythmic beatniks are delivering their stories to strangers, who then score them, their work, and that performance, out of a possible ten.

Here is a platform that showcases notepad-and-pencil raw views. Exposed secrets, trigger warnings, and disclaimers, weird rap that’s not poetry, and clichéd rhyme all versed and bundled up in bumbled words and nerves. These are just ordinary people spilling romantic odes, dropping rhymes alight with voices political.

Here we hear a different stance on things, crafted between alliterated, spoken stanzas. These ‘slammers’ stammer righteous rhapsodies full of sometimes controversial opinion, to sway a paying and ready assemblage of the general public.

Hear haiku outlying underlying identity issues, listen to someone speaking about mental illness, but distracting you with dark content covered with humorous facts. It’s an awkward, audible art; slam is spat secrets through a microphone on a stage, sending prose through distorted speakers.

At any given gig, you’ll see the girl in a vintage dress tremble through rhythmically scribbled sentences, explaining past trauma. You’ll look at the way John from Island Bay’s piece of refill paper visibly shakes under stage

Quotation of the Season

I write because I believe in the unquestionable power of words, that poetry can change a life, perhaps not in that one sweeping moment of profound epiphany, but like the words we chisel into the page, our world, and the experiences we make from it, is changed through time, through that steady erosion and resurfacing of meaning.

— Ocean Vuong
lights as he trips over that ‘really clever bit’, then luckily recovers gracefully, with most of the patrons in the crowd still with him, still captivated.

From seeing first-time readers either ‘rise up’ or become a ‘place lost, line dropped, wants to start again trash fire…’, to being shaken and taken to a place of sonnet satisfaction with words dispersed from a fierce, linguistically lyrical warrior, the whole slam poetry scene is pure entertainment for all involved.

The setting for spoken-word type of events is usually at an alternative, arty kind of venue — a cool café, theatre bar, a shady, dank, back alley jazz club — somewhere that welcomes a bit of beverage, banter, and a space that hopes to hold a warmed-up, soon-to-be-moved crowd.

In both international and local competition, slam poetry contenders are scored by strangers. Often someone who has no idea about poetry, who has never attended an event like this, gets randomly called upon.

A main adjudicator chooses five people from the audience to become official judges, who must be unknown to any of the 12-16 competitors.

Those selected get to personally score each poet out of a possible ten, based on their performance. The crowd can influence and play a part in swaying decision here, with the audience having been asked to click, or snap their fingers in lieu of clapping, when enjoying a particular part of the performers piece. Judges review what resonated, what bombed, what was working well on the night — generally how the artist’s work went down within the room.

The official rules in play are: each poet gets three minutes (plus a ten-second grace period) to read one original poem, and if the poet goes past the grace period, points will be deducted from the total score.

No props, no costumes, no music or singing. Check out more here: www.pim.nz/slam.html

In knock-out rounds, the poets compete against each other (with their highest and lowest scores deducted to show a fair average), until the slammer with the overall highest score for that final round becomes the winner.

Good times!

A quick internet search suggests the key to successful public performance is ‘delivering content in a personable, compelling and effective way’. What makes a slam piece land well is when a piece of poetry is displayed in such a way by that ‘say and slay’ performer who has presence, who is confidently relatable, who can captivate and can elicit an emotional response.

Still want to give it a go? Yeah you do. *clicks*

There are plenty of ways to get started. Go along to everything. Workshops, poetry readings, anything with a mic on board. You’ll have an advantage getting to more poetic happenings if you live in, or can easily access, one of the bigger cities. But word is spreading, and these gigs are regularly occurring, now appealing to people from all walks of life, and becoming a bit more accepted.

Addiction confessions get sworn into ‘open mic’ nights in libraries and locals. School students now send their powerful prose viral. Performance poetry is getting embraced by the stay-at-home mums, who love a cathartic outlet; by ‘Steve the Plumber’, who needs a place to say he’s in love with his mate Andrea… while his boyfriend ‘Andrew the Architect’ happens to be sitting at a corner table, hidden behind a bowl of bar fries.

Poetry has moved away from being known as that ‘not so cool, bit bookish and nerdy’ thing, into redefining its place in society. This form can be used as a tool to create change, to give victims a voice, to empower, to evoke emotion, to educate, to inform, to shock, to entertain, to sometimes being the only way in which someone can say something. To someone. To no one in particular. To everyone. Either way, that’s so needed and important.

Here are a few helpful tips for when you eventually get the courage to reveal and share your work:

• Firstly, awesome that you’re giving it a whirl. You’ll get better each time.
• You will muck up, eventually. Everyone does. Poetry audiences are massively forgiving when it comes to bearing witness to a complete performance disaster. Knowing this helps.
• Look after yourself. When you start speaking to strangers, remember to keep safe in this full exposure. Any experienced performer will tell you not to share your work until it’s gone through those full, harsh edits, and starts to feel good.
• In his Learn to Write Good course, Dominic Hoey, aka Tourettes, encourages one to ‘find good people you can share early drafts with’, because it’s harder to edit once you’ve performed it or cemented your poem and committed it to memory.
• Practice your piece a billion times. The writing must connect with you first before those in the seats below the stage can enjoy it.
• Some things are better read than said.
• If you are one of those smart folks who can recite without having the text on hand, high five! *snaps* From experience, and only in my opinion, those acts who perform their poem from memory gain crowd trust, appear more confident and become more memorable, funnily enough. Displaying an impressive skill can earn a higher score.
• Start strong, end strong.
• Wear lipstick. Eyes are naturally drawn to the mouth, so give them something to look at.
• Lastly, don’t be afraid to share your beautifully sad sonnet. Your limerick about laundry powder. Your rhymes about a dying relative. Your list poem that states everything you love about your crush.

This is your stage, your three minutes.

From the Editor

Ivy Alvarez

‘It’s not often that a poet gets to see their words on a movie theater screen,’ says poet Kaveh Akbar, recently commissioned to write poems for the 2018 movie, The Kindergarten Teacher, in an interview for the New York Times. What exciting bedfellows poetry and film make!

Also exciting is to feel the seasons turn. And new changes mean fresh announcements. Please join me in welcoming a fine line’s new Editorial Assistant, Emma Shi. Emma is the winner of the National Schools Poetry Award 2013, the Poetry NZ Prize 2017, and included in Best New Zealand Poems 2017. She is also the author of a self-published chapbook, Elsewhere. I am greatly anticipating Emma’s contributions to the magazine.

The NZPS Committee are also delighted by the warm reception for our 2018 anthology, The Unnecessary Invention of Punctuation. Don’t forget to order your copy. Poetry always makes a never-fail present for friends and family.

Speaking of the Committee, current Committee members represent Wellington and Auckland but we always need more. Could this be your New Year’s resolution? Contact Administration Manager Katharine Allard should you wish to help steer the Society: info@poetrysociety.org.nz

Congratulations to returning NZPS member Nicola Easthope on her second collection, Working the tang (The Cuba Press, Wellington)! Sure sounds like thought-provoking summer reading. Nicola recently launched her book on the Kāpiti Coast.

In the NZ Society of Authors (NZSA)’s Oral History Podcast (Episode 3), our very own NZPS Patron, Dame Fiona Kidman shares her version of some “colourful, successful, caustic and challenging times” in NZSA’s history: authors.org.nz/podcasts

The next edition’s theme for a fine line is Windows. I would love to receive your poetry-related articles and news, regional reports and, from our members, up to four poems (40 lines max), sent by 10 January 2019 to editor@poetrysociety.org.nz

Writers of pieces selected for publication receive a book token as payment. If you’ve ever wanted to review for us, you get to keep the book, too. Visit poetrysociety.org.nz/poems-reviews/books-available-for-review

For now, take a peek behind the magic curtain of performance poetry, with invaluable advice for those willing to brave the stage from Tarns Hood (2017 NZ National Poetry Slam second place-getter), while Joan Fleming shares her overview of the NZ poetry publishing landscape. If you’ve ever wanted to know who’s publishing what, this one’s not to be missed.

Our Members’ Poems continue to dizzy and delight with kaleidoscopic takes on the theme of Wheels. Be sure to also check out the poem and picture from our Instagram winner for this season, Cerys Fletcher.

I am pleased to present our Featured Poet for the Summer edition, Art Nahill, with four poems that examine love’s simplicities and complications.

Thank you for reading a fine line. On behalf of the NZPS Committee, we send our best wishes for a safe and happy holiday season. See you in the New Year!
About Our Contributors

Anne Curran is a poet who lives and works in Hamilton, Waikato. She is very grateful for any opportunity to read and write verse.

Sue Edwards is a former manager of the unique second-hand book store Endeavour Books, Kaikoura. She’s an ex-librarian in Tauranga, where she writes book reviews. Sue has a Diploma in Editing.

Nicola Easthope first poetry collection is leaving my arms free to fly around you (Aotearoa: Steele Roberts, 2011). She recently featured at the Queensland and Tasmanian Poetry Festivals. Her second collection, Working the tang (The Cuba Press), came out in 2018.

Cerys Fletcher is an 18-year-old sack of asbestos. She puts the things she makes on Instagram. @local_goblin_gallery

Joan Fleming is the author of two poetry collections published by Victoria University Press: Failed Love Poems (2015) and The Same as Yes (2011), and a chapbook, Two Dreams in Which Things are Taken (Duets, 2010). www.joanflemingpoet.com

Michael Giacon is an Auckland poet and songwriter from a large Pākehā-Italian family. In 2016, he won the Kathleen Grattan Prize for a Sequence of Poems.

Paula Harris lives in Palmerston North, where she writes poems and sleeps in a lot, because that's what depression makes you do. She won the 2018 Janet B. McCabe Poetry Prize and was a writing resident at Vermont Studio Center in late 2018. She tweets randomly at @paulaoffkilter

Tarns Hood is a Wellington-based Performance Poet, who placed 2nd in the 2017 NZ National Poetry Slam. Her style of raw, rhythmic truth within rhymed verse is self-reflective & brutally observant.

Susan Howard lives in Matakana. She writes about what affects her and what she feels is important on the world stage. She has been published in New Zealand and overseas.

Art Nahill is a physician, teacher, and poet who lives and works in Auckland. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, and two collections of poetry.

Gillian Roach is an Auckland writer and a founding member of the Central Auckland Poets. Gillian won the NEW VOICES – Emerging Poets Competition 2018.

Belinda Tait: “I am a 42-year-old female living in Palmerston North. I live with my husband and my pets, and currently work in the service industry. I write about all kinds of subjects…”

Danielle Todd is a New Zealand poet based in Paris. Her work ruminates on ideas of identity, family, romance, loss and memory. She’s currently working on her first poetry collection.

Marjory Woodfield appears in diverse publications, including Takahē, Star 82, Flash Frontier, Cargo Literary, and Raven Chronicles. A Bath Ad Hoc Fiction winner, she was long-listed for the Alpine Fellowship (Venice).

Feature Article


by Joan Fleming

There is a preconception that small presses, existing as they do outside the mainstream, publish poetry that is wilder, stranger, more political, and more ethnically diverse. Poetry that the university publishers have turned away, or whose genius such presses have failed to recognise. Poetry that bucks the mannered, nostalgic style that monopolises the prizes and the media. Poetry that takes risks. No safety, no submission.

Certain small presses do, indeed, follow this brief. Anahera Press, for example, publishes Māori and Pasifika writers. Their books ‘give voice to … the intersections and spaces between cultures’ or champion writers who are ‘walking between worlds’. A press that publishes culturally self-aware poetry, by Tangata Whenua and ethnically diverse poets, is much-needed in an environment that is still overwhelmingly white. In 2015, 91% of poetry books published in New Zealand were authored by Pākehā / Europeans; a dispiriting figure, when you consider that Pākehā make up only 74% of the population. Have a look at Janis Freegard’s ‘sad little pie chart’: janisfreegard.com/2017/01

Of course, Māori and Pasifika writers still publish within the mainstream, and are even fed into the dreaded mouths of university presses via the creative writing industrial complex. Tusiata Avia, for example, came up under...
the ‘straightening’ tuteledge of Bill Manhire’s International Institute of Modern Letters, so-named by the Vegas cowboy billionaire who funded its establishment. In 2016, she published her awards-shortlisted, startling third collection, Fale Aitu | Spirit House, with Victoria University Press.

While poetry is regarded as a strange and archaic art-form for most New Zealanders (‘Oh, you’re a poet? I’ve never met a poet before! I didn’t know they still existed!’), and poetry is near-invisible in the shelves of Dymocks and Take Note, the stakes of poetry publishing are enormously high for poets themselves. Being unable to find a home for one’s book can be a crushing feeling, spurring the sorts of frustrated energy by which new presses are born.

Sometimes, though, the aesthetic ‘wars’ between the large and small presses play out in the form of lightly boozy, cheery jesting, in the convivial climes of book launches — at least in Wellington, where everyone knows everyone. I think of Fergus Barrowman, the publisher at Victoria University Press, squinting at the pages of a freshly launched issue of Hue & Cry (the journal) and decrying the size eight font, wine in hand.

So are small poetry presses publishing boundary-pushing, risk-taking, experimental work? Well, the answer is: sometimes. Sometimes small NZ presses are putting out work of zine-like freedom and stunning weirdness. Sometimes the production values are far lusher than the university presses, whose financial constraints and high output make print-on-demand a necessity, resulting in thinnish pages and visible pixels. Sometimes the poetry championed by small presses is deeply exciting. And sometimes it isn’t. The work can be accessible and predictable, in need of a harder editorial steer, and seemingly rushed to the page when it would have benefitted from a year or more of fermentation. The publishing sensibilities that shape these various outputs are themselves various and produce variously interesting work.

The Hoopla series, by Máakaro Press, pitches itself as a boisterous, extravagant, and playful publishing project, while asserting accessibility and clarity as its key values. Is this a contradiction? The very attractively packaged and tidily designed books — lovely to hold — include Helen Rickerby’s Cinema, an absolute classic, Jen Compton’s wonderfully funny Mr Clean and The Junkie, a cinematic book-length underbelly love story, and Brian Walpert’s Native Bird, an accomplished, seeking collection. Walpert’s poems are generous in their concessions of clarity to the reader, and are saved from the over-easy epiphanic mode by their meta playfulness and genuinely meditative engagement with the nuanced pain of parenting and domestic co-habitation.

Hoopla also supports new voices, as one in every series of three is a debut collection. Some new voices are cracklingly promising. My heart quickened at Elizabeth Morton’s Wolf poems: fierce, nasty, taut, hot-blooded. These would have made a stunning chapbook, as the rest of the collection sagged somewhat after the accomplishment of the first ten pages. Morton’s self-consciously gritty image-accretion needs a character to centre it and give it purpose. Other new Hoopla voices exhibit the quiet, safe, tea-drinking nostalgia that frustrates seriously intertextual, experimental, or research-disciplined poets who feel they can’t get a foot in the door.

Helen Rickerby, the editor at Seraph Press, operates free of any commercial constraints — by inclination and by choice, but also because she once applied for Creative New Zealand funding, and was turned down, and can no longer abide the disappointment and the extensive faffery of all those forms. She and her husband fund the press, and book sales usually bring in enough revenue to cover printing costs at least.

Beauty is one of Seraph Press’ core values, and their books are indeed beautiful. The hand-sewn chapbooks and the books in the translation series are especially exquisite. The textured pages, the highly colour-saturated cardboard inner cover, and the rough string binding appeal enormously. Anaheera Gildea’s Poroporoaki to the Lord My God: Weaving the Via Dolorosa is enclosed by a gorgeous fly-leaf inset of hand-made harakeke. These are books that feel like treasured objects, made by friends, to be shared between friends. On the binding process, Helen says, ‘I always have a bunch of people come around and we sit and talk while sewing. It’s a surprising amount of fun’.

Indeed, friendship is a key part of how the press operates. Because it’s self-funded, and Rickerby doesn’t pay herself, she says she only takes on books that she is smitten with, and acknowledges the uncomfortable gate-keeping element of the role: ‘There is a place for gate keepers I think — at their best they keep up quality standards, they curate things they love, etc. — but I do think we need lots of different kinds of gate keepers so we can also have diversity and experiment and boundary-pushing. For example, I think we need more publishers in New Zealand who aren’t white middle-class folks (like me)’.

Seraph Press has sometimes taken on projects that other publishers wouldn’t touch. Their first-ever book was Locating the Madonna in 2004, an epistolary collaboration between Anna Jackson and Jenny Powell that didn’t interest their usual publishers. Fourteen years later, the catalogue is populated by a top-notch range of established and newer poets. Poet Laureate and recipient of the Prime Minister’s Award for Literary Achievement, Paula Green, released a thoughtful, playful collection called New York Pocket Book in 2016. In 2015, Seraph published Johanna Aitchison’s second collection, Miss Dust, a mature, sure-footed work, painting cracking, cubist little vignettes of autobiographical dream-scenes. Last year, Nina Powles’ Luminescent was well-received. This collection is unusually
bound. A folder cover contains five chapbooks, each about a different historical or historico-fictional woman: a dancer who burned to death on the stage of the Grand Opera House in 1923; a ghost from Powles’ high school who is said to have tripped down the stairs when she heard her husband return from a voyage at sea. The romantic prettification of the deaths of these various women felt, to me, less thoughtfully and thoroughly explored than the wonderful, deep, and mysterious poems in her earlier Seraph chapbook *Girls of the Drift*.

Besides *Cold Hub*, which has been publishing poetry in translation for some time, Seraph is the only small NZ press with a regular translation practice.

Seraph has published translations of Greek, Italian, and French poetry, and *Tātai Whetū: Seven Māori Women Poets in Translation* is forthcoming — a book that has (finally) garnered some Creative New Zealand funding, thanks to co-editor Vana Manasiadis’ patience with filling out forms.

Absolute newcomer *hard press* is the most experimental, and the most self-consciously anti-mainstream, of the bunch surveyed here. Their catalogue consists of a total of three titles. Evangeline Riddford Graham’s *Ginisethoi* is a tough-talking, conceptual collection of wry history jokes and direct addresses — to archival papyrus fragments, to text, to meaning, and to Cleopatra herself. Dan Nash’s *To the Roaring Thing Blended* maintains a zine-like rawness. Typos and typographical quirks are left intact, and the book is illustrated with Nash’s lucid dream drawings, which radiate the same dark frantic energy as the poems. My personal favourite is Manon Revuelta’s *girl teeth*, a slight yet deeply striking debut by an author who exhibits an intense self-awareness and a lightness of language that is her result of deep thinking, worked and worked:

> Learning to be near you
> seems to be to learn to be near the world
> by sewing down a flapping pleat
> in a conversation that we are carrying around
> together like a sack of leaves.
> (“For My Father”)

*hard press* is something like the younger poetry sister of art presses *Clouds* and *split / fountain*, which has expanded into a studio and project space. Editors Owen Connors and Anna Rankin are both poets and artists themselves, and Anna speaks of art, writing, and publishing as interlinked practices that all facilitate the testing of the ‘elasticity of established conventions’. Connors says hard press arose from frustration and enthusiasm both: frustration with ‘the monopoly university publishing houses seem to gain over emerging writers’, and with the lauding of poets who, as Rankin says, are writing work that is ‘dull, insipid and nostalgic for a past that never even existed’. The surplus energy for reading and championing urgent, vivid work beyond the norm, is nourished by their community of writers and artists. While ‘of course we don’t want to work only with our friends’, says Rankin, ‘that’s difficult because we know so many good writers’. Connors characterises the first triad of books as having a ‘deep concern with the off stage, be it history or somatics … the writing seems to focus on the ripples and not the stone’. The forthcoming triad — books by Allie Eagle, Gregory Kan, and Samuel Te Kani — has a pulse that both editors describe as spiritual or incantatory in nature. It will be thrilling to see what emerges next.

While funding for small publishing projects remains highly competitive and distressingly difficult to access, Creative New Zealand *have* changed their funding rules in recent years so that independently published projects can (at least in theory) access some resources. More likely, though, small presses in New Zealand will continue to run on joy, enthusiasm, and rage.

*First published in Cordite Poetry Review (1 Feb 2018).*

**Members’ Books**

From the Orkney Islands to Coastlands shopping mall, *Working the tang*, is liberally seasoned with salt and spit, kelp and wrack, and the creatures who live within coo-ee of the sea. Nicola Easthope writes of the ghosts of her ancestors, and the ocean between them and the life she lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, where people tweet and spat, go camping and kitesurfing, and freewheel the shore on Trade Me roller skates. And David Bowie is here!

Copies are available from the author: nicolaeasthopeful@gmail.com
Poem From A Shopping List Written By Mistake In My Journal

Did you intend me
to pick these up, dear, or compose
a poem about that place

we rented years ago, so close
to the water we woke each morning
to the taste of salt?

Late August, after supper
on the front porch steps,
bowls of pistachio ice cream

the tomatoes we grew in pots
were sweeter than we’d hoped,
drizzled with oil and torn basil.

And since you’ve said
that poetry should never depend
on the truth, you will not mind

my making up this part
about the coffee that kept us up at night
and all the love we made.

That summer, the doctors
told you your eggs
were too old,

asked you to formulate a future
without motherhood—
which brings me back again, love,

to water, the Atlantic,
and you, wide-eyed in our bed,
imagining hard.

Multitudes

I carry many deaths
inside me though
not as a cat is said to
or a saint bristling
with arrows.
Not as an oak

in winter flies
its few brown flags
of surrender.

Not the way the womb
sheds its lush red lining.
Not the way a virus storms

the cockpit of a cell
but the way a man
feeding pigeons in the park

watches each evening
as they wander off
when his hands are empty.

**Love Poem Without Modifiers**

To prove that I could
love you as nothing

more than noun: brow, cheekbone,
body without shore, coastline

of neck and shoulder,
hinterland of breast.

That I would love you as verb:
gather and exhale,

plunge into sleep
stretch—

the way a camera sometimes loves
a horse, legs captured

mid-stride,
mane billowing

in winds
of its own making.
Benedictions

When the telephone startles
you awake at four in the morning

may it be just a friend
from another time zone.

When the truck swerves over
the yellow line

may you be running late
having dawdled over eggs

over-easy. When you meet an old love
at the market may you be tanned

from a month by the sea.
May you rise even once

from your foreseeable life
in some foreign country

the sun blinding
off the brackish waters

of a river whose name
you cannot pronounce.

And if you settle finally
along a deep fault

line may it be with someone
who holds you each night

as though you were bone
china and the whole house were trembling.

Poems from Murmurations and A Long Commute Home, both from Two Hemispheres Poetry.
Reviews

Night Horse

Elizabeth Smither (Auckland University Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Paula Harris

Poetry doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Books in general don’t. Words definitely don’t. I occasionally see people write that they just want to live in poetry 24/7, forever and ever and ever and ever. Erm, no thanks. Poetry is cool, but there are other things.

Which is how it is that I found myself in heavy flirtation mode with a guy via Tinder while reading Elizabeth Smither’s Night Horse (by the time I got to the end of the book, there was another contender in the mix, but his lack of decent grammar saw him quickly side-lined).

What a book!! What. A. Book. Really what I want to say is ‘just go out and buy/read it’ and leave it at that. But that’s not much of a review.

This is a gentle book. Gentle as in this-isn’t-Hera-and-you-won’t-get-punched-repeatedly-in-the-face-with-that-big-brain-slamming-imagery. No. This is gentle as in look-over-there-at-that-beautiful-sunset-and-whomp!-here’s-a-left-hook-while-you-weren’t-looking. These are poems about life, and life is rarely gentle.

One of my favourites in this collection is “A gift of spotted tights”, which is a beautifully drawn portrait of a fantasy world while choosing a gift for a friend. It’s funny. It’s a bit sexy (while also using the word ‘putrescent’).

but you, who have no one to dress you, will sit demurely on the side of your bed and point

your big toe first, then your heel, calf, knee and thigh...

 (“A gift of spotted tights”)

That’s one of the key things with Elizabeth’s poems. They are beautifully drawn.

For your wedding we hired a 1926 Nash
in deep forest green, straight sides
like corsets pressed in and then some more
 (“Wedding car”)

And the beautiful things come from simple things, such as

sucking the green into their bodies
and leaving flat shadows, grass afraid to rise.

 (“Lying in the long grass between two black Labradors”)
There are funny, recognisable moments that made me nod and think, ‘yes!’ and that I, too, want to write someone’s name on a slip of paper and pop it into my freezer:

...Nothing too serious
would happen. Perhaps he’d lose his job
or his dog would need taking to the vet.

The dog would recover, the bill be huge.
His wife might flirt with someone at a party
and be noticed: notice was a big part of it.
(“The name in the freezer”)  

Often these poems have signs of getting older. Because, shhh, getting older is what we all do. So while Tinder guy was suggesting ways in which he could pleasure me, Elizabeth was telling me about gastroscopies and conferences in Spain, and decrepit knees, and hospitals and dressing gowns and slippers. And in one single line, she made me contemplate buying and planting tulips: ‘Plant them carelessly. The earth straightens them’ (“Spring bulbs”). I even went so far as to start filling out the order form for tulips, before realising I’d missed the ‘must order by’ date.

My favourite of these poems is “Picasso’s tenderness” — and while, yes, I admit this is in part because I adore Picasso, it also does the magical thing of getting me to stop and look back and wonder if Picasso’s contorted painted bodies were actually a sign of tenderness. Were they?

Could we arrange our faces this way
how clear it would be. Misery, misery
and from it, as it dissolves and weeps,

beauty, beauty.

(“Picasso’s tenderness”)  

The Tinder guy never showed up for our date. But that’s okay, I could still curl up on the couch with Elizabeth and Picasso and discuss tenderness and beautifully drawn things, and the tulips I nearly bought.

Kokako 23 and Kokako 25
Edited by Patricia Prime and Margaret Beverland (2015 and 2016).
ISSN: 1177-0902. $NZ30/a year subscription. 80pp.

Reviewed by Sue Edwards

Cover images: Kokako 23 is from the ‘pathway series’ by John Parsons and Kokako 25 by Sandra Simpson.

Kokako is a magazine of haiku, tanka, haibun, and related genres. It appears twice annually in April and September.

I particularly liked the cover image of a bird on Kokako 25. On close study, it could be a negative-type photo of an art piece set on a heavy black plinth. The bird looks like it’s woven from wire... it’s very interesting.

On reading the editor’s note by Margaret Beverland, I discover issue 25 of Kokako is their silver anniversary issue.
Congratulations!

In *Kokako 23*, there are two Memoriam (p.3), one for John O’Connor 1949-2015, and the other for Helen Bascand 1929-2015. This is a lovely touch, and it’s always interesting to read tributes to talented, interesting poets.

As a keen hedge-clipping gardener, I could instantly visualise Penny Pruden’s Haiku (*Kokako 23*) (p.5):

newly-clipped hedge  
perfect launching pad  
for sparrows

Then, Ron C Moss’ (*Kokako 23*) (p.11):

burial place  
soft paws rustle  
the leaves

Sad somehow, and beautiful.

In the same touching vein was Lucinda Savona’s poem (*Kokako 23*) (p.40):

Soft rain  
Moistening our dry land  
Falling tears  
Darkening winter skies  
Another year without you

All my senses were engaged, the smell of rain on parched land, the sky darkening, the joy and feel of soft rain… all participate in her remembering a loss.

You can find a particularly beautiful account of loss (I think) by Chen-ou Liu (*Kokako 23*) (p.62). I won’t write the full poem. This is just a taste: ‘…Like a black widow, loneliness wraps itself around my mind, spins a cocoon, and then squeezes until it stops moving…’ (“Exiled”).

Can you feel the slow insidious pressure? I can.

There are so many beautiful pieces in both books. I have only selected a few, and here are some more that I highly recommend:

Laura Davis (*Kokako 25*) (p.12).  
Elaine Riddell (*Kokako 25*) (p.22).  
Glenys Ferguson (*Kokako 25*) (p.40).  
Marilyn Fleming (*Kokako 25*) (p.40).  

I could see these last two poems working wonderfully together somehow.

You know what? I could go on and on, I suggest you might think about subscribing to this delightful publication. They were truly a pleasure to read.
Atonement and ternion
Both by Vaughan Rapatahana (2015 and 2017, respectively).

Reviewed by Nicola Easthope

In each of these collections, Vaughan Rapatahana’s poems jostle and glide with passion and compassion for the quirks, joys, and injustices of human experience. An utterly distinctive poet and storyteller, who interlinks te reo Māori, Tagalog, Cantonese, and English languages with ease and purpose, Rapatahana traverses the cultural, political, and personal experiences of a life encompassed by Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Aotearoa.

Atonement comes in an attractive palm-sized (A6) format, with cover illustration of an open book on a wooden table, inviting poetic communion. This collection contains a series of biting observed, Hong Kong vignettes, capturing the encroachment of modernisation since ‘… taxis / & / other touts / disgorged / sovereignty / 60 years ago…’ (“kwai shing”). Some of the characters these poems feature include an old man in a soup kitchen, ‘scurfy school kids’, and Māui weaving through the crowds, ‘… rather like / a politician - …’ (“māui in Lan Kwai Fong”). Māui takes pride of place in Rapatahana’s far-reaching, transformative poem, “so māui hooked up hong kong island”. The poet turns secession of Hong Kong back to China on its head, with the eye of the semi-divine mythological hero of Aotearoa on ‘… that LUMBERING HULK… / a far bigger fish to fry’. There is no room for Britain to feature in this one.

Rapatahana has an admirably endless supply of fresh similes and pathetic fallacies to conjure up any time of day, week or season. The opening poem encapsulates the poet’s signature style, playing with white space and melding imagery with the visual-and-aural-pun shape of his words on the page:

the day is an elephant;
warped tusks of sun
strive to c

h
i
n
the corpulent gray conspiracy.
(“a hong kong september”)

Rapatahana often takes the daily arc of the sun as a springboard for emotional reflections and the broader observations of people and places:

The dawn picks itself up
from crumple of night
and shakes its skinny shoulders
like a blind dog...
(“any given SARsday”)
I’m not sure of the stylistic reasons for an entirely lowercase collection of poem titles, first words and most place names, but it suits the size and intimacy of this volume.

Finally, the personal poems often ache with grief and regret or the lack of: past loves, cultural identity, and the harrowing honesty of an estranged father losing his son to suicide. *Atonement* is an aptly-wrought collection of enjoyable, provocative, often moving poems to put in your pocket for an inclement day, a bright dawn, a mass transit railway ride.

Rapatahana’s more recent collection, *ternion*, continues to pay tribute to people he loves and admires (including poets such as Tusiata Avia, Apirana Taylor and Hone Tuwhare, as well as Janis Joplin), a life straddling the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Aotearoa, and the triplicity of languages beaten and boasting, colonised and colonising, celebrating, and mourning.

The first few poems honour a lost love, a father’s death, and visit ancestral memorials and urupā, with confronting and tender frankness. Two subsequent poems tackle the poetic process, including writer’s block, which is kind of reassuring but hard to imagine Rapatahana ever suffering from, so prolific is his pen!

Over the course of this collection, Rapatahana freestyles on a linguistic trapeze, flying from the audacious heights of “aroha mai, apirana” and “railing against”, where he castigates the English language by bastardising all manner of big words to illuminate the spoils of its colonial and global reach:

```
my garotte hands flex
any nearest extempore -
    schwa; tmesis; zeugma; umlaut -
    [???what are these???, I gag]

to asphyxiate its squawky whimpers,
exsiccate its spongy velar
supplicate its fancy frissons
into brute submission.
    (“aroha mai, apirana”)
```

Rapatahana’s poetry demonstrates how you can simultaneously love using the English language and rage against the way it’s been used to dominate and subsume other cultures and languages. Furthermore, poems like “before the whiteman came” and “rua kenana century” challenge the enduring injustices of colonisation, asking what has really changed since the Ngatapa Massacre in 1869 and the raid on Tūhoe at Maungapōhatu in 1916. Poems like these cut to the quick, and could effectively complement the teaching of New Zealand history in our schools.

At other times in *ternion*, Rapatahana sails into more straightforward English, especially when accompanying the primary text in te reo Māori. It is refreshing to see a series of poems privileging the indigenous language of Aotearoa, with the English translation on the following page, rather than the other way around. ‘kua whiti ngā tau tonu’ (“it has been seven years already”) is one such stand out, a simple and evocative love song to his wife.

The poems in *ternion* face loss, alienation, conflict, love, friendship and the existential quest — and questions — of living head-on. As an advocate for the survival and revitalisation of indigenous languages, and a proponent of radical social justice and reform, Rapatahana’s poetic voice, in both collections, is wholly unrestrained. There are poems here for the language-and-music loving ear, and poems for the conscious heart. Though at times challenging in subject and lexis (more than one high school English teacher will be sent scrambling repeatedly for their Oxfords), Vaughan Rapatahana writes life as he knows it, to exhilarating effect.
Members’ Poems

Christmas Stars

stars in my eyes
on Christmas Day
all ordinary moments
extraordinary
in the heart of family
family members
now scattered to the poles
glittering stars
forming constellations
in the galaxy

— Anne Curran

• First published in Cover Creations.

Golden Boy

something’s afoot skater guy
a trick missed

a girl’s laughing
at your slab of stomach

you could be her uncle
on a board
and a fat one

but I dig
your louche
wheeling brio

fully sick
with sunburnt shoulders
inky filigree dripping
down your spine

you couldn’t give
a rat’s

— Gillian Roach
Eurema Lisa

When tonight’s cold descends,
I am roadside in Mexico one heavy evening
in July.
Rented rubber and an aluminium frame put to work
upon the cracked/cracking tarmac
of an uncertain town, and to the red dust
agitating about my feet and up further,
abounding over my head a giant’s
breath of butterflies,
a kaleidoscope of
eurema lisa.

Wind over wing,
wind over wing.

In this dream,
the sun blanketed my body like
I was its favourite creation.
Safe beneath time’s expiry and the
fleeing dust of those yellow exoskeletons,
I tell you I was believing only
nature was real, disaster
merely a film.

Each one of those heavenly
things is dead now, rot through
and through.
Each knew I was wrong – they,
the little darling harbingers of a horizon
in disbelief. And I,
the mortar and pestle both,
caressing the rusted fragrance of noise and light
while the words skimmed their wings
like stones.

—Danielle Todd
Al Masmak

In the heart of old Riyadh there are date palms beside conical watchtowers. A spear tip embedded in a wooden door. Here, once, Abdulaziz Al Saud attacked the Rashids. Today tall men in white thobes and red keffiyehs welcome us, ask if we are the Finnish delegation. No I say, but here, meet my son. He is visiting from New Zealand. We pass displays and photos. 1943, the old Souq al-Haraj and Grand Mosque. 1916, Gertrude Bell with King Abdulaziz and Sir Percy Cox. An old wooden water wheel and well. Qarue, stone basins for storing water in homes and mosques.

As we leave they say the Finnish delegation has not arrived. Would my son, who is not Finnish, but visiting from New Zealand, like to be shown the King’s sitting room. Diwan. We slip off shoes, lean against soft cushions and Eastern carpets. Drink small cups of Arabic coffee poured from a traditional pot. Dallah. The spout a thin crescent moon. We leave with gift packs. For the Finnish delegation written on the front.

— Marjory Woodfield

• First published in Star 82.

Rural Ruminations
(Send in the Cows)

You know you are living in the Real Country
When the paddocks are as large as a ten-acre block

When a caramel coloured train moves along
a well-worn path to new pastures

When a road sign says tanker entrance
and the cone out means milking is in progress

When the cows wait for you along the road
checking your eyes for a chance to cross

When the locals drive daredevil around blind bends
and the school bus hogs the middle of the road

When neighbours lend a hand without being asked
and mow your road frontage as well as their own

When, every time you get out of your car,
you check the back of your black jeans for dust

And when the sun sets over your quiet valley
dusk comes unhindered.

— Susan Howard
Regina Pacis

Plucked from the foreshore of street life with a smile of serendipity into the tide of motorbikes to a place of purloined holiness, the plain face of the Cathedral tarnished with the black stain of time wheeling a wonder of working chaos in countless epiphanies alien where I flew in from. Lady vendors in non la hats balance on bikes under bamboo poles peddling sugared treats to dubious tourists scruffy with choice. Bridal beauties and their slick grooms coerce happiness in communist commerce, colonial and catholic. Gorgeous girls in gloves and facemasks, boys coiffured under helmets, a grandmother moving an orchard of toad fruit, families strapped to fathers and Thuy Anh with me on her bike blazing in for a photo op before the Queen of Peace.

— Michael Giaco

Wheels

That guy's a mechanic doing wheel alignments.
See that car up there, heavy, on that hoist?
Its belly shades so ominous, minds me of a cloud.
Forbid that it should thunder down and flatten that fellow.

It happens, you know.

All's banter and the clanging of tools and raucous classic rock then a new sound up and does 'em right in the awearness.
Shriek of red and very wrong and irreversible.

Hate to be the one who has to go and tell the family.

— Belinda M. Tait
the days after
we're advised to shut windows & mouths,
watch tumbleweed roll through the rusted fairground of
BAD MEN facing consequences. Sometimes

there is NO ONE THING to fit the prompt; no single dewdripped rhyme scheme to gum up the ferris wheel &/or make it all stop. it's
more like this, yeah: whatever hangs in the sky, your body
acts accordingly. do not question it. the
cramping is to be expected. the blood is to
be plentiful. the shame is to be
total. the bleeders elsewhere, by which i mean here,
before my eyes,
are held down & scraped clean for a fear of the
hot & dark & life-breathing.
these are what we call wheels, rolling down some muddy hill at
dawn, the long-dead and oft-quoted dusting their hands with
satisfaction at the top. your story is too old to be of any use
if it saves you & others from being crushed. shut your
windows & mouths, let's have a nice dinner for once. the wheel gobbles up ground. you know this doesn't equate to
babies dying, right, i say to dad on the morning
i wake to Ireland's women DANCING with bodies
that are their own &
his mouth curves like a newspaper in the rain every victory is old news already
warm hands i love are muddy from the wheel
i say goodnight to him in welsh,
Gweld chi yn y bore the feverish five-year me
still hears the mashed words like
we'll see you in the morn wheels, wheels, the long drive home & the being carried inside, through the hot & dark & life-breathing, god, god,
i hope
still my dad's arms, with the weight of
two daughters, must understand somehow they
could not hold us for long out of anything
but choice.

— Cerys Fletcher
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