

Poetry
New Zealand
Yearbook

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Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2017

Edited by Jack Ross



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Jack Ross

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Editorial

Hands across the Tasman

An interesting package arrived in my Massey University pigeonhole late last year. It was a large cardboard box packed full of books. They'd all come from the same publisher, Vagabond Press of Sydney (and Tokyo). Among others, there were ten small chapbooks from the *decibel* series (selected and edited by senior Australian poet Pam Brown), as well as six volumes of the *Asia-Pacific Poetry* series, a set of anthologies covering different poetries (in translation), each showcasing the work of three representative poets from a particular region.

There was also a bookmark at the bottom of the box. It read:

Please review our books. Shouting from the rooftops wasn't as effective as we hoped.

I've done my best to respond to this heartfelt plea. I can't promise to have included a review of every single title, but certainly the lion's share are discussed here, along with the usual bumper crop of local books and journals.

More than a third of this issue is, in fact, devoted to reviews and essays, and that's a trend I hope will continue. We can't review everything, but the fact that we've been able to include discussions of poets from places as diverse as Australia, China and Slovenia — as well as New Zealand, of course — gives some indication of the kind of scope to which we aspire.

The box of books was sent, I suspect, as a direct result of the contacts and friendships which have been growing over the past few years between Australian and New Zealand poets. The work (among many others) of Michele Leggott at the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre and Anna Jackson at Victoria University in arranging symposia in Auckland, Wellington, Sydney and Melbourne has certainly helped to

make some of us more familiar with one another's work.

I have to say I was blown away by the range and self-confidence of the poets published by Vagabond Press (including, I should add, our own Stephanie Christie, whose work is discussed in greater detail in this issue in Lisa Samuels' essay). No doubt it was Pam Brown herself who arranged to have them sent to me. It was great to see one of her own books in there as well.

It got me thinking about the nature of the links between the two places. I myself am half-Australian (or so I like to claim). My mother was born and brought up in Chatswood, Sydney, and came over to New Zealand in her mid-twenties to get a job as a hospital house surgeon. She met my father in Hamilton, and the rest is history.

History of a kind, at any rate. While my father's father, a Scot, was serving in minesweepers during World War I, my other grandfather fought as an Australian infantryman on the Western Front. I was lucky enough to meet him a few times on our trips across the Tasman, but not, alas, my Scottish grandfather, who died during World War II.

Australia is so different from New Zealand, in so many ways: so incomparably more ancient, so culturally distinct. True, growing up, Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* became as familiar to us as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (I continue to see it as just as great a work). I do find it interesting, though, that my mother still considers herself a proud Australian, despite having lived in New Zealand for sixty-odd years; more than twice as long as she lived in the country of her birth. Mind you, she cheers for the All Blacks over the Wallabies.

But there remains a deep Australianness in her: little things like the flat 'a's in *branch* and *can't*, but also a stubborn frankness and refusal to mince words — none of the face-saving, mealy-mouthed timidity of so much New Zealand speech.

I was fortunate enough to be able to study in Scotland for four years in the late 1980s. Edinburgh remains (with Prague) one of the most beautiful cities I've ever seen. Perhaps the most important thing I learnt there was, however (as I put it in a poem at the time): 'I am not / A Scot.'

My heritage is Scottish, my father's parents were Scottish, but he was

born in Rawene, in the Far North, and, as a result, I am a New Zealander in every way that counts.

Similarly, my mother's Australian background has gifted me with various relatives and a number of fine memories from over there: the Blue Mountains from a distance, the grandeur of Sydney Harbour. But I'm not Australian.

I've been shocked by many acts of the Australian government over the past few years: the razor-wire fences holding in refugees, the prison camps at Nauru and elsewhere. It's hard not to want to speak out about such things. But I take it for granted that that's precisely what Australian writers and dissidents do all the time. We may not hear much of that on the TV here, but those voices are audible on some of the more adventurous news outlets available to us now in the digital age.

If they need any help with that, they have only to ask. But I don't feel my sentimental Australianness gives me any right to butt in as some kind of self-appointed judge. It's not as if we don't have our own fair share of horrors to apologise for and attempt to atone for on this side of the sea that divides (and/or unifies?) us.

All of which brings me to my choice of a poet to feature in this issue. I first encountered Liz Morton when she sent me some poems out of the blue. This was before I'd started to edit *Poetry New Zealand*, but I think she'd been advised to do so by one of my creative writing students here at Massey.

There's always a certain trepidation in looking at other people's poetry for the first time. What if you don't like it? What if you can't think of anything to say? But I *did* like it. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that it really spoke to me.

That must have been some time in 2013, because shortly after that, and after meeting her in person, I asked her to read at our Open Day here at the Auckland campus. She read almost as beautifully as she wrote, and it came as little surprise when she won the New Voices Emerging Poet Competition later that year.

There's an important balance we try to uphold in *Poetry New Zealand*

between (as we say in our blurb) ‘the work of talented newcomers and developing writers as well as that of established leaders in the field’. This has been the case since the magazine’s inception, and it’s a principle which was observed faithfully by Alistair Paterson, my predecessor as editor.

The poet I encountered in 2013 could certainly have been called a ‘talented newcomer’: her work was powerful and raw and close to the bone, but not (perhaps) as nuanced as it has now become. While I suppose one should still refer to her as a ‘developing writer’, I see the poems she’s writing now as a solid contribution to the New Zealand poetic archipelago.

I guess it’s her blend of the personal and political that I find particularly relevant at present. It’s risky to comment on developing news stories, as she does in such poems as ‘Googling refugees’. ‘Who am I to talk?’ is the question that undercuts such pieces. But waiting until one has a bit of tranquillity to contemplate the experience (to paraphrase Wordsworth’s description of the lyric) unfortunately also often entails leaving it too late:

the children were flotsam.
... they were silty smiles
and ponytailed heads and cleft palates
and birth marks. they were real deal
children and, yes, we saved them

on the hard-drives of our smartphones
and uploaded them to YouTube.

it really was the least we could do.

I think that makes the point perfectly. We need to speak out, but we also need to be very, very careful just *how* we speak out. If that sounds somewhat less than stirring, not altogether resonant, well, hey, that’s poetry for you: always second-guessing itself.

Elizabeth Morton second-guesses herself with elegance and wit on

the lip of an abyss of real, thoroughly lived-through experience. I hope it's obvious by now that I go to her poems to learn, not to judge — and if I'd ever thought there was anything I could teach her, the illusion was a short-lived one: it lasted about as long as it took to open that first file of poems.

Speaking of judging, I think it's now time to move on to the announcement you've all been waiting for (though no doubt most of you have already seen it online): the *Poetry New Zealand* Poetry Prize. It was a very hard job, with so many stellar entries, but I've ended up with the following choices:

First prize (\$500): Emma Shi, for 'it's okay to lie if you mean it' (page 168 in this issue)

Second prize (\$300): Devon Webb, for 'Note to Self' (page 185)

Third prize (\$200): Hayden Pyke, for 'You Say You Got to Leave Someone' (page 154)

There's a delicacy and beauty in Emma Shi's work which leaves me in awe. I think I understand enough of what she's driving at in this poem for it to terrify me, too. Pity and awe — isn't that close to Burke's definition of the sublime?

Devon Webb's poem is more infectious and anthemic, but it conceals a certain subtlety beneath its apparent self-assurance: a very impressive debut in *Poetry New Zealand* for this young writer.

Hayden Pyke's lyric is one of three interesting short poems he sent in. It seems to me to hit a lot of marks simultaneously, a considerable feat of legerdemain.

As part of the changes necessitated by the shift to our new publisher, Massey University Press, we will be selling each annual issue separately in future, and no longer as part of a one- or two-year subscription. Our existing obligations under the old subscriptions policy will, of course,

be fulfilled, but *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook* will henceforth be sold through the MUP website, as well (of course) as in good bookshops everywhere.

Our thanks go out to all of those valiant subscribers who have kept the magazine afloat for so many years. It goes without saying that we're still going to need your support to continue, but it now seems more practical to market each issue as a discrete item, rather than as part of a package.

You can find fuller details of all this on both our *Poetry New Zealand* website and the MUP website: www.masseypress.ac.nz

And so, in conclusion, I'm very glad Pam sent me that box of books. I can't promise to manage quite so many reviews in the future for any similarly enterprising small publishers, but I'll certainly continue to do my best.

Shouting from the rooftops really doesn't work very well long-term. All writers depend on getting sound, well-considered reviews from their peers, and I feel that's at least as important a part of *Poetry New Zealand's* remit as providing a showcase for so many poets, young and old (97 — by my count — in this issue alone).

Dr Jack Ross
December 2016

Featured Poet

Elizabeth Morton

Elizabeth Morton is from Auckland, where she is a student of a number of subjects, including etymology, neuroscience — and poetry.

Her poetry has been published in *Poetry New Zealand*, *takahē*, *JAAM*, *Blackmail Press*, *Debris*, *Meniscus*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *PRISM: International*, *Cordite*, *Ika* and *Atlas*, among others, as well as the 2015 New Zealand Poetry Society anthology *Scattered Feathers*.

Her fiction has appeared in *Flash Frontier*, *Paper Darts*, *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Landfall*; her reviews in the Booksellers NZ blog, Beattie's Book Blog and *Poetry New Zealand*.

PRIZES:

- Winner — New Voices Emerging Poet Competition (2013)
- Runner-up — *takahē* Poetry Competition (2013)
- Nomination for Pushcart Prize (2014)
- Runner-up — *takahē* Poetry Competition (2014)
- Nomination for Best of the Net Awards (2015)
- Highly commended — Kathleen Grattan Award (2015)
- Second place — *Sunday Star-Times* Short Story Competition (2015)
- Second place — *Sunday Star-Times* Short Story Competition (2016)

Two of the poems in the following selection — 'Reincarnation' and 'Losing you' — will also be included in her debut poetry collection, scheduled for publication by Mākaro Press in mid-2017.