

Poetry
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Yearbook

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Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2019

Edited by Jack Ross



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Contents

EDITORIAL

- 14 What makes a poem good?
Jack Ross

FEATURED POET

- 22 Stephanie Christie — biographical note
26 Microchasm
28 Crossing the Park
29 Unfinished Objects
31 Amethyst
32 -OH
38 Mag[net]ic
40 Flow(n)
42 Clod
44 Krisis.
46 Poverty Mentality
48 Fleshself
50 SQWANDER
52 Nix
55 Madeness
58 Stephen Hawking's Dead
59 Mall Song
61 Parachute
63 Felt calculus
64 Bode
68 An interview with Stephanie Christie

NEW POEMS

- 76 Gary Allen The God complex
77 John Allison *Die Luft hier in Laft . . .*
78 Aimee-Jane Anderson-O'Connor Mice
79 Miguel Ángel Arcas Finales de los sesenta
The end of the sixties,
trans. Charles Olsen
81 Shelley Arlidge Albatross
82 Stu Bagby Who is it who remembers?
83 Tony Beyer The Globe
85 Victor Billot So as not to wake
86 Benjamin Blake Lost Recordings
87 Cindy Botha My Mother's Hands, Mine
89 Mark Broatch Kererū
90 Steve Brock Humble wine
91 Owen Bullock not knowing
92 Chris Cantillon Truckdriver
93 Marisa Cappetta Homeless like bones
94 Mariana Collette DNA
96 Rose Collins the Port Hills hare considers
rock fall risk
97 Jennifer Compton Cat Sitting in Brunswick East
98 E. J. Doyle Inheritance
99 Rachael Elliott Wheel
101 Johanna Emeney RLSV
103 Bonnie Etherington Catcall on Oakton Street
104 Mike Evans Impermanence
105 Rachel J. Fenton Break

107	Jess Fiebig	morning after
108	Sue Fitchett	I, robot
109	Katie Fitzpatrick	Confession
110	Dara Flaws	Dad
112	Alexandra Fraser	Piha night
113	Kim Fulton	This is it, Ruahine Range
115	Ruth Hanover	The Oranges
116	Paula Harris	I will go on tour and read my poetry all over the world
118	Jenna Heller	tanka
119	Sara Hirsch	Nocturnal
121	Joy Holley	Twenty
122	Alice Hooton	Lover
123	Amanda Hunt	Family Skeletons
124	Gail Ingram	Morning flight
125	Ross Jackson	The exit
126	Adrienne Jansen	The children in the dark canoe
127	Lincoln Jaques	The Things He Left Behind
129	Annie Tuarau Jones	For My Sister
130	Robert Kempen	Hey, what is going on
132	Paula King	The Square
133	Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod	The Daughter Goes To Hospital By Car
134	Katrina Larsen	Life is Like a Bag of Cats
135	Jessica Le Bas	Near Blind Channel
137	Wes Lee	By the Lapels
138	Michele Leggott	the wedding party
141	Izzy Lomax-Sawyers	Pre-loved
142	Olivia L. M.	The harrowing . . .
143	Victoria McArthur	Self Portrait

145	Olivia Macassey	Elephants
146	Isabelle McNeur	Moss
		Happy Parents under the Microscope
149	Mary Macpherson	On being unwilling to click 'I forgot my password'
150	D. S. Maolalai	Raspberries
152	Ria Masae	Children's Eyes
154	Layal Moore	Two
155	Margaret Moores	Black and White
156	Martha Morseth	The street
157	Fraser Munro	Paper bags don't have feelings
158	Emma Neale	The Tasti™ Taste Guarantee Affidavit
162	Keith Nunes	In the bookshop uttering
164	Stephen Oliver	Protocols
166	Bob Orr	The Vegas Girl
167	Hayden Pyke	Danger is my Family Name
168	essa may ranapiri	Gallows
169	Vaughan Rapatahana	Rangiaowhia, 1864 ngā rākau
172	Ron Riddell	Remains of the Day
173	Gillian Roach	The Object Disappeared
174	Fiona Robertson	Chinese medicine
175	Jeremy Roberts	A Movie Ticket & a Little Bit of Philosophy
176	Siobhan Rosenthal	Whanau
177	Dadon Rowell	Lily Bennett
178	Sigune Schnabel	Grenzland Borderland, trans. Simon Lèbe

- 180 Sarah Shirley Long lie
 181 Tracey Slaughter mostly a/b/c/d
 archaeological
 184 Barry Smith Arrival
 185 Ian C. Smith Remembering Willie Pep
 186 Lauren J. Smith you never know what's on the other side
 187 Elizabeth Smither Ten conductors
 Strange dream
 189 Stephen Smithyman My Father and the Poplar Tree, 1979
 190 John Tarlton On Sabbatical
 191 Loren Thomas Friends
 192 Tybalt intimacy is a sick puppy
 193 Bryan Walpert from *Micrographia*:
 Of the bookworm
 Of the pores of bodies
 196 Laura Williamson Wrong turn on the Hump Ridge Track
 198 Sue Wootton from *Typewriter songs*:
 Anywhen
 Olivetti
 200 Sigred Yamit Sweater
 201 Grace Yee for the good husband
 203 Mark Young Concerning
 204 Zuo You 我接受了他的歉意
 I Accepted His Apologies, trans. Yi Zhe

COMPETITIONS

Poetry New Zealand Poetry Prize

- 206 Wes Lee The Things She Remembers #1
210 Brett Gartrell After the principal calls
213 Natalie Modrich Retail

Poetry New Zealand Yearbook Student Poetry Competition

- 214 Aigagalefili 275 Love Letters to Southside
Fepulea'i-Tapua'i
217 Kathryn Briggs Earth is a Star to Someone
218 Amberleigh Rose Snake's Tongue

ESSAYS

- 222 Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod Telling without looking
234 Jessica Pawley Dreaming of death: The hangover of
history in Derek Walcott's 'The
Schooner *Flight*'
247 Erena Shingade A Buddhist hermitage on Great Barrier
Island: Richard von Sturmer's *Suchness*

REVIEWS

- 262 Ella Borrie Owen Bullock
265 Mary Cresswell Anna Jackson / Marlène Tissot / *tātai*
whetū / Majella Cullinane
271 Rachael Elliott Rogelio Guedea / Jan Fitzgerald
275 Johanna Emeney Michele Leggott
279 Matthew Harris Mark Pirie
283 Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod Jenny Powell / Damian Ruth / Mercedes
Webb-Pullman
289 Bronwyn Lloyd John Howell / Annabel Wilson
297 Elizabeth Morton Michael Steven / Tony Beyer
303 Jack Ross Dan Davin / Alistair Paterson / Johanna
Emeney
314 Richard Taylor Keith Westwater / Peter Rawsley

321 ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

341 ABOUT POETRY NEW ZEALAND

Editorial

What makes a poem good?

It's a somewhat absurdly ambitious premise for an editorial, you may think. Certainly *I* did, when I was booked to speak on the topic at the 2018 Manawatū Writers' Festival. I won't attempt to reprise everything that I said on that occasion (vanity — not to mention sanity — forbids), but I thought I might mention a few points. First up is a quote from Robert Graves, one of my favourite poetry gurus:

The most popular theory advanced to account for the haunting of houses is that emanations of fear, hate or grief somehow impregnate a locality, and these emotions are released when in contact with a suitable medium. So with a poem or novel, passion impregnates the words and can make them active even divorced from the locality of creation. (*On English Poetry*, 1922)

You see what I mean? What a man! Graves, fresh from the trenches of the Western Front — and even fresher from the psychoanalyst's couch — goes on to argue in favour of the even more sweeping opinion that 'Art of every sort . . . is an attempt to rationalize some emotional conflict in the artist's mind.'

If the work created as a result succeeds somehow in resolving or at least exteriorising the conflict in question, he claims, then it can be said to be successful — for that artist, at any rate. There is, however, no automatic reason to expect this success to translate to others. If, by some stroke of luck, it *does*, then we have what is commonly thought of as a 'work of art'; i.e. something that speaks meaningfully to the emotional conflicts and traumas of others, as well as to yourself.

Certainly, as an editor, I have to acknowledge a certain futility in most of my attempts to make objective judgements about poems. A. E. Housman said that he always knew the real thing because it

made the hairs on his chin stand up while he tried to shave. In other words, even that most austere of Classicists had to resort to a physical reaction rather than any more reasoned definition of poetry.

As my father grew older, and especially after his first stroke, we began to see a more emotional side of him (the exact words the doctors used were ‘emotionally labile’ — apparently a common symptom of cerebral damage). In layman’s terms, he would burst into tears at the drop of a hat. Any mention of war sacrifice, moral courage, or bravery of any kind, would have him sniffing away in a manner that would probably have embarrassed him profoundly as a younger man. It certainly embarrassed *us* as the more-or-less standard products of a repressed Kiwi upbringing.

Even at the time I felt ashamed of this embarrassment, and tried to persuade myself to look on at such displays with joy and affection. It’s hard to overcome the conditioning of a lifetime, though.

Now it’s happening to me! I have always been pretty susceptible to uplifting speeches or noble acts in movies — that moment in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, for instance, when the little girl pulls herself up off the sand to struggle on for just a few yards more with her sister in her arms . . . Pretty much the whole of that movie, in fact. I could make a list. Jimmy Stewart in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (‘Lost causes are the only ones worth fighting for . . .’); Cher in *Mask* (‘Now you can go anywhere you want, baby’); Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (‘Stand up, child, your daddy’s passing’). You know the sort of thing.

It’s starting to affect my poetry reading, too. It’s not that all the poems I like now have to be tragic or elegiac: humour is a pretty strong emotion, too, and everyone needs a good laugh from time to time. It’s just that I’m no longer afraid of being moved by them — by the last lines of Brett Gartrell’s ‘After the principal calls’, for instance:

The dogs broke into the hen house
stringing two birds out in bloody feathered scraps.
My son cornered the panting terriers
washed the blood from their lips
as they licked the tears from his eyes.

Or, for that matter, by the whole of Wes Lee's extraordinary 'The Things She Remembers #1', which is almost the only poem I could imagine knocking Brett's into second place in our annual Poetry New Zealand competition:

Standing looking in the mirror saying:
No, No / The cold orange lipstick of the
Big Nurse / The patient who screamed like
a bird / her mouth wide as the abyss /
The patient who jumped on my back, kicked
in her heels, tried to gee me up like a
donkey / The painful embarrassment of being
thirteen / The laughter of the nurses / At
a terrible time I believed / At terrible times
I still believe / There are still things left to
sell / On the bus a wasp and a homeless man.

My God, there's some pain in that poem! *I hope* that it had some success in working out certain traumas for its author (as prescribed by Robert Graves). Whether it did or not, it certainly works for me.

It's not that I sit here boo-hooing as I read through all the submissions for each issue — but every now and then something in one of them sits up and looks alive, persuades me that something is being worked out there that might be relevant to others simply because it seems so relevant to me.

It must have been very difficult for A. E. Housman to shave without constantly cutting himself. Every time he thought of 'Into my heart an air that kills / From yon far country blows' or 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages', up the little hairs would go.

I wouldn't trust myself to read out loud either Brett or Wes's poems — or quite a few of the other wonderful poems I have included in this edition of the *Yearbook*, either — but I'm very glad the poets wrote them. Glad to have had the privilege to read them and to present them for the rest of you to fall for as hard as I did. (That's if you're not still

stuck at the embarrassment-before-strong-emotion stage of your development. You wait: the time will come when you, too, find your face wet with tears when the townsfolk burst in to give their hard-earned savings to Jimmy Stewart at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*.)

Housman called poetry 'a morbid secretion'. Graves, too, sees it as the necessary working-out of a repressed trauma or complex. Whether or not that helps as a tentative answer to what makes a poem *good*, I don't know. I just know that spotting the real thing has become, for me, as much of a somatic as a psychosomatic matter.

So, to reprise, the winners of the third annual Poetry New Zealand Poetry Prize are as follows:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| First prize (\$500): | Wes Lee, for 'The Things She Remembers #1' |
| Second prize (\$300): | Brett Gartrell, for 'After the principal calls' |
| Third prize (\$200): | Natalie Modrich, for 'Retail' |

I've already given you some idea of what I found so extraordinary in the first two of these poems.

The third is a complete change of pace. Natalie herself refers to it as 'a very therapeutic poem', and while it did make me laugh like a drain — for which I thank her profoundly — it also made me think a little about all the rest of the people doing what she calls 'soul-crushing' retail jobs. I don't know if reading such things helps at all, but I'm prepared to believe it might. After all, Housman said that his poetry was meant for the 'ill-treated . . . / For them to read when they're in trouble / And I am not.'

This time the three poems have been printed separately, in their own section of the journal.

The same is true of the winning entries for the *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook* student poetry competition. All three of these poems seem to show an almost frightening maturity and skill. The difficulty in judging the competition was not so much in finding merit, as in deciding which of so many good poems to put first.

Aigagalefili Fepulea'i-Tapua'i's '275 Love Letters to Southside' is a passionate piece of work — richly imbued with the spirit of her beloved *Heimat*:

When I learnt that no place outside of South Auckland would want to
pronounce my name properly
I scraped it off their tongues
So now all they do is spit on us instead . . .
Haven't my ancestors' screams been muffled between textbook pages?
Didn't a white teacher at my south Auckland sch tell us we're just 'typical
South Auckland crap'?

If that teacher ever reads this poem, I hope he or she feels very small.

Kathryn Briggs's 'Earth is a Star to Someone' is equally passionate, in a very different context. 'Let — This — Matter,' she pleads:

Let us be heard,
Let us take up the space we deserve in the universe.

Let all this youth, all this idealism, count for something. I certainly hope it does. I guess we all do.

Amberleigh Rose's 'Snake's Tongue' comes from a very different side of the poetic universe. Here passion has been turned to self-destruction, but there's an aching residue of hope in there, too, somewhere, I feel:

Last night we slept in our blood stains
and whispered over the sound of our bones
trying to leave our skin and you
were the prettiest girl I had ever seen.
What was that? Not love?

Quite a few of the poems I read while judging this competition frightened me profoundly, I must confess. Where are all the flowers and bunny rabbits we used to write about at school? In fact (as a

reviewer once remarked of one of my own books), ‘the spirit of darkness certainly prevails’.

There are 100 poets in this issue (besides Stephanie Christie, our featured poet). There are also three essayists and 10 reviewers — though some of these have also contributed poems: 110 authors in all.

Among the poets I’ve included are such well-known names as Sue Fitchett, Michele Leggott, Stephen Oliver, Bob Orr, Vaughan Rapatahana, Elizabeth Smither and Emma Neale. In her reply to my acceptance letter for the poems she’d submitted, Emma, now firmly established as the new managing editor of *Landfall*, explains the process of selection better than I could ever imagine doing:

... it’s finally made me realise that rejections aren’t always a comment on literary merit! And it doesn’t even mean an editor dislikes someone’s work, it just means there is chronically limited space.

Quite so. What *she* said. My long list for this issue was full of beautiful poems which have, one after the other, had to bite the dust for one reason or another. Never assume that your poem didn’t make it into that giant file! And don’t think that I didn’t sweat blood over those rejections, either.

Of course my subjective reactions have a great deal to do with the poems you see before you. As long as I’ve been reading her, which is almost 20 years now, I’ve been impressed and (at times) flabbergasted by the sheer virtuosic brinksmanship of Stephanie Christie’s poetry. It’s great to be able to introduce her poems to — I hope — a wider audience than they’ve so far reached in this country. Her fractured word-play — reminiscent at times of late Celan but with a pop culture edge he never achieved — can be daunting at first, but I think you’ll see after a while how relentlessly *quotable* she is:

I hold onto hope because I want something
to do with my hands
(‘-OH’)

Every morning the first word I say is
Yes.
(‘Felt calculus’)

Nothing’s happened. You make me feel
less alone. You’re also real.
That might ruin everything.
(‘Unfinished Objects’)

If you need more evidence, here it is, in the form of a rich selection of 19 recent poems, plus a tell-all interview!

The reviews section is a bit smaller than in previous issues: not because I don’t think they’re important, but because I want to give them more space on their own. We’ve decided to follow *Landfall*’s good example and to cover most of the books we receive on our website, the *Poetry NZ Review* [<https://poetrynzreview.blogspot.com/>].

The reviews that we *do* include in the text will now be more in the nature of review-essays, and there will be no more simple notices of books. This also has the advantage of enabling us to include more poems and stand-alone essays. There are three of the latter in this issue, covering issues such as narrative strategies in poetry, Zen Buddhism, mourning, and death, in poets as diverse as Airini Beautrais, Richard von Sturmer and Derek Walcott.

I’m also happy to be able to include here some dual-text poems in Chinese, German, Spanish and te reo Māori. What more need I say? Enjoy!

— Dr Jack Ross
November 2018

Featured Poet

Stephanie Christie

‘I’ve been publishing and performing poetry for 20 years, while living in a lot of different places in Aotearoa. Ten years ago I changed my active name, Will, back to my birth name, Stephanie. I live in Hamilton in the Waikato with my partner and an elegant hound. I work as a creative coach, and also teach adult literacy skills, run community art classes, and edit instructional materials.

‘The selection in this issue combines new material with (recent) classic hits, to share a sense of my work with you. The pieces show the range of forms I use, along with the voice and vision that run through everything I create.

‘My creative practice has always been a space in which I can challenge myself to go outside of what I know. This has led me into collaborations, poetry in theatre, sound poetry, visual poetry, songs, installations and video poetry. On a good day, I have no idea what I’m doing and am 100 per cent committed to doing it. This is exactly where I need to be.’

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- *The Facts of Light*. deciBel Series 001. ed. Pam Brown. Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2014.
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- *Ravel* (2001)

- *Urbane Mysts* (2001)
- *Orientalisman* (2002)
- *WA.N/S.TED* (2003)
- *Femme fatality* (2005)
- *self [help/harm]* (2005)
- *Re:[play]er* (2006)
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- *crzy* (2009)
- *Art-icu-late* (2009)
- *W.inter* (2010)
- *So light and so fair* (2010)
- *The calling* (2011)
- *Bloom* (2014)
- *Wingettes* (2014)
- *First the wheel then the revolution* (2014)
- *I like the idea I have of you so much* (2014)
- *Freak out!* (2015)
- *Nix* (2015)
- *Runt* (2017)
- *Fakelore* (2018)

Multimedia projects

- ‘Arcadia’, collaboration with choreographer Alexa Wilson at Soliton, Auckland, 2003.
- ‘Husk’, collaboration with composer Alex Taylor, University of Auckland, 2012.
- ‘Home Heart Land’, poetry in devised theatre, Hamilton Fringe Festival, 2012.
- Two video poems with videographer Paul Bradley, featured in HUFF, 2012/2013.
- ‘Aubade’, installation at Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Intraspace Project, 2013.
- ‘Clean as you go’, installation with artist Paul Bradley, Hamilton Arts Festival, 2014.

- ‘Storm Warning’, poetry in collaborative performance, Hamilton Fringe Festival, 2015.
- ‘Why So Normal?’ collaboration in Hamilton City of the Future, 2015.
- ‘True True’ art exhibition, visual poetry installation, Calder and Lawson Gallery, 2017.

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Online resources

Author’s homepage: Stephanie Christie
www.stephaniechristie.xyz/

- NZEPC Six-pack Sound: Stephanie Christie
www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/features/six-pack-sound/02/christie.asp

Some of the poems in this selection have previously appeared in the following publications: 'Felt calculus' in *Atlanta Review* (US); 'Mag[net]ic' in *The Capilano Review* (Canada); 'Unfinished Objects' in *Cordite* (Australia); 'Poverty Mentality' and 'Mall Song' in *Landfall* (New Zealand). Thanks are due to the editors of these journals for permission to reproduce them here.