

**Poetry**  
**New Zealand**  
Yearbook  
**2020**



# Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2020

Edited by Johanna Emeney



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# Editorial

## How the poems choose you

It is wonderful to be chosen by poems, and the very opposite of trying to choose poems. Choosing poems is hard work — it feels like rifling through perfectly serviceable clothes from a stockier, taller cousin. Being chosen by poems, however, is like winning a voucher from your favourite shop and being dressed by one of its very genial and talented personal assistants. The poems that choose you are must-have items.

Poems choose you when they howl without any sort of dissembling — and yet a howl is not necessary. Pain is not even a prerequisite. However, sincerity is integral to a poem's ability to single you out as its guardian. Any sign of fraudulence, and it's all off. When a poem says 'but motherfucker' to you in entreaty or complaint, it better not be playing around — see *essa may ranapiri's 'my dream of a nonbinary prison'* for an example.

A poem chooses you the moment it takes you by surprise. To be clear, this cannot be any old surprise. It must have the qualities of what President Oprah Winfrey calls the 'A-ha moment' — a sudden insight which causes the pulse to quicken and galvanic skin temperature to rise. A poem like this is no riddle; it is a messenger imparting a truth about what it is to be human in the world. In fact, it probably touches on something you have already felt or secretly known, but never quite been able to admit.

Some poems don't need electrodes to test your bodily response. Paula Harris's poem brought me to tears on first reading. And second. Interestingly, it has some very humorous lines as well as some that agitate the lacrimal glands, and I am always in awe of poets who can produce this sort of work — poetry that blends fresh, funny lines with lines that expose the abject difficulty of being alive. It's the sort comedy–pathos amalgam that Jimmy Perry and David Croft achieved in *Dad's Army*, Larry Gelbart achieved in *M\*A\*S\*H*, and Ricky Gervais and

Stephen Merchant achieved in *The Office*. Although they were working with made-up characters, and surely, by now, everybody knows that the poet is the ‘T’ of the poem. Wink emoji.

Because I am editing and not writing the poetry in this journal, I feel free to say: ‘Poems that choose you are like *mille-feuilles* — thoughtfully assembled and subtly layered’, which is a simply dreadful simile, but very true in terms of the type of poems I am describing. Whether those layers come by way of diction, imagery, mood or nuance, it doesn’t matter, but if you can’t get a few readings out of a poem because it’s a one-trick cupcake, then you’re wasting your time. Michael Hall’s ‘Fencing’ is a superb example of a compact poem with deftly constructed layers. It is a poem that will reward you with new insights every time you read it. The last stanza is fabulously dense, with its metaphor of the father and son tacking down the backdrop to a day:

Some days he tightened  
The horizon  
And started hammering  
As I held the staple in place

*Why does the son only appear in this last stanza? The son seems so small here in relation to his father! But, wait, he is steadying the staple — the thing that holds the horizon tightly in place once his father has hammered it in . . . so he is key to this whole enterprise. The son may be just the staple-holder, but he is his father’s right-hand-man here, helping him to hold the whole world in place (as fathers do, for a time).* So many thoughts triggered by four lines, and we have not even addressed the sounds of the lines as Hall works them like fencing wire, lengthening, tightening and tacking.

It has been a privilege, this year, to be chosen by so many moving, well-crafted poems written by people I know well and people I have never met. What a pleasure to be introduced to so many talented poets this way. I am grateful to Jack Ross and the team at Massey University Press for the opportunity, and for their guidance and trust.

# **Featured Poet**

essa may  
ranapiri

HAUNT | HUNT

## **poetry under capitalism**

i'm hitting wooden blocks together  
and finding shapes to fit the holes of everyone's mouths  
and everyone's hopes of usefulness  
in a perfect sheer drop  
corpses rubbing cobwebs together

## my dream of a nonbinary prison

as of this moment Aotearoa has no nonbinary prisons  
no unisex facilities for people like me I can almost  
taste the toilet soap and hear the fragrant stream  
of water slapping the steel wall of the urinal  
if not for the symbols on the door

my tūpuna would be so proud of how many  
have made it to these fine estates  
living on the land in the only way we know how  
weaving makeshift harakeke from matted paper rolls  
we dried with tooth paste and snot  
carving intricate geometry into the metal bars

I have no place in the entire nation state  
where I can be clothed and fed for the simple price  
of my freedom and my dignity  
if I push my phone far enough up my  
arsehole you'll never be able to touch it  
and I'll never have to call my family again

these closed spaces would bring me to

P R n g  
a a i  
p n  
a & u  
t i  
ū ā n  
u  
k u

churned up inside a gigantic mixer  
returned to each other their love cemented at last  
in the walls

then washed over:

brick painted white  
wallpaper painted white  
a face painted white  
knuckles painted white  
painted white  
panting white  
witness white  
judge jury executive white

but motherfucker

there is no place where I can be forced into a single cell  
for the benefit of my mental health  
be taught my own tikanga free of charge where I can run  
bitten fingernails over the hem of the plastic mat

there is no safe

place for me

to die as a criminal