

Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook

2023

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Edited by Tracey Slaughter



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Editorial

Poetry Aotearoa: Poem as encounter

That space asks for something to enter it.

— Tessa Keenan

When the crises of our past years closed so many doors, it's not hard to see why we reached for poetry. A poem is a space of encounter, a room of language that invites us to move our senses over its living surfaces, to brush our bodies against its echoes and pressures, visual, sculptural, sonic. A poem refuses to let us be shut down, locked out, cut off — it uses language to frame a gate to experience, calls our bodies to enter. Nothing human is off limits, no experience beyond its horizon: everything we hold is welcome in a poem's meeting place of sound.

Its thresholds shiver with aliveness, its textures with intimacy. It's pluralistic, participatory. A poem shares its breath, presses forward for you, forehead and fingerprints, ushers you across vast distances, to lay the weight of your living skin against its own, knowing the translated state that elicits: the miracle of transmission, connection, communion, exchange.

When you read a poem, you mingle with it — it's a third-degree transfer, subcutaneous. To lift from Janet Frame, when you enter a poem you are re-entering the human voice, the ribs it once hollowed, the throat it drew taut, the palate it rippled, the teeth it insisted against — it asks you to use your mouth to raise the words from its chest, grant them fresh harbour in yours.

A poem's presence opens and moulds to us, mouth, hands, memory, empathy, musculature, heart. It sanctions leaning in, it solicits lingering, it licenses touch, inhalation, taste — and it wants to leave a residue, an afterburn, the scent of its intentions, the pulse of its

tissues, the trail of its tongue and its secrets, the brimming of its yesterdays, the burden of its scars.

Even if what it sometimes calls us closer to witness is the tolling of remoteness, loneliness — perhaps a flatline vista (as in Tessa Keenan's 'Ōākura Beach') where 'extinction / is the only thing' on the shore — a poem is populated, its cold sands resonant, its shadows animated, playing on the edge-dwelling voice, the urge to speak which still drags its stick along the coast to scrape out some trace of self.

'Sometimes you have to go in the heart alone', as the child says prophetically in Leah Dodd's piece, clambering through the museum's fake heart-cavity, but such is the paradox of poetry that even this stinky exhibited plastic organ can raise an image of indelible love as we sit with the speaker to contemplate the contemporary planet-wide mess from the 'allocated black bench' of adulthood.

Whatever bittersweet shreds we can scrape from the carcass are enough, more precious for their shimmering scarcity. Even in sharing the deadweight of isolation, the stillpoint of mortal frailty, a poem somehow restocks our senses with shape and graze, the play of light and mind, whisper and fingertip, motion, longing and utterance.

The poems in this remarkable issue will call you to enter scene after scene: 'a haven / a shithole / a murder scene / ... an edible garden / ... a site of pilgrimage / a meeting ground.' It may be a space bathed in reverie or blooded with history, a shelter woven from ancestors' softnesses or nailed from stark forbidding boards, a shoreline that stretches in fathomless glittering or slides wasteladen to industrialised gulf, a cityscape glinting with electric galleries or towering with multistoreyed poverties. But whatever direction it takes you, it urges you to cross whole, to witness 'the sheets and the piss / ... and the spit and the sweat / and the semen and whenua blood', to feel what the speaker, and even their forebears, knew, felt, suffered, lost, praised, decried, broke through, withstood, held sacred, loved, set light to, 'in that place between the cross / and the chimney, above the buttercups, over the river', among these spaces of resistance and resilience, amid these rooms.

You'll see that we've re-titled this annual collection of spaces *Poetry Aotearoa* — a name-strengthening, a name-deepening, a fuller sounding of the same encounter; a call to the closer voicing and sharing of who, at our kaleidoscopic but tightly interwoven core, we really are.

Tracey Slaughter November 2022

Competition winners

This year's *Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook* is pleased to publish the winning poems in its annual *Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook* Student Poetry Competition.

'William II' by Jayne Ault (Wellington Girls' College) appears on page 54; 'Medusa' by Hannah Wilson (Raphael House Rudolf Steiner School) on page 198; and 'Aged' by Chantelle Xiong (St Andrew's College) on page 209.

Featured Poet

Tyla Harry Bidois ouroboros

TEETH

i.

there has to be a tooth somewhere — inside the words, a sharpness;

if i can't love you without hurting you, would i live in you like a wound; something you tend under the bandage of your rib that throbs; the part of romance that is

the longest dusk and throne — pain infinite as moonlight, systems amassed of breaking as all supernovas a cloister of many tiny deaths.

ii.

hope like a fever, an unreasonable illness, incurable; i am back to hiding it inside my skeleton again, inventing crooks for these small, foolish allowances.

iii.

breaking; perhaps the most beautiful word, breaking; to break; to be broken; his mouth broke against mine the value of fire, his hands break against my hands the injury and cure of what skin amounts, the heart without a name; & the heart — rapture — breaking; this, the first house and coffin of grief, of love, of god.

CANNIBAL LOVE-SONG

i.

his eyes were on the scythe; how much it was shaped like a mouth, kissing wheat goodnight as though a thousand, half-sleeping orphans.

that is the way to end things, with the red blade of a kiss.

ii.

dark compliments; you have used eros' arrows as toothpicks, snapped their bones inside your jaw, the full taste of the organ alive on your tongue like sap — you sleep the sunlight out of the skin, one weeping bloodstain of dark: fishbowl of a world, heaven has been sacked. apple-trees on fire, punctured fruit crimson as curdled veins you must imagine paradise as match-lit rose, perfection wilting into gold; immolation that is nearly a swoon; something unbearable; you have fed me the awful words, many syllabic murders — there is always, there is forever, and there is never, never, never, the knife in my hand and chest.

iii.

scar tissue, the way it shines; the frozen lake of the skin, little moon hidden in you. iν.

the black sweatshirt that contains the shiver, sweat-laden; modern life; i am angry,

bleeding eternity out of you, the technologies you made me use to clog the flood — watch, my mouth around plastic, chirping fish. i am addicted to my own murderer; so much him, i have injected into my skin a promise to his machine.

ν.

but when i eat your heart, you will hate me. but when i eat your heart bloody, and the valve explodes into my throat as though it were a small and fragile star; cannibal love-song, you will hate me.

νi.

i.

there's an aftertaste — something in your mind that lingers like a stain. substantial, the agony you've tolerated into desire. you will search for it again all your life.

ii.

how glorious, a soul; tender preciousness, terrible secret i protect between the rib and the wool, the cotton, the silk; in nakedness, i hide you in pale, the gentle humiliations of a body, whatever womanly line and curse there is, the claw inside the breast; i wonder how you would burn.

iii.

cruelty is a stem, a creature that can flower; i don't know where you come from until you crawl into my bed with a new mask, a new skin slick with story — the great shape-shift, even you adore most where you aren't found; our fondest joke, alien-thing, intruder; alone at last, you would calcify.

iν.

because. this, explanation. this, causation. i want to rip you, the ocean apart, with it — i want it to be the only purpose, reason for love-make, the nether-wound it leaves behind.

vii.

yes, fall headfirst into hurt; this is the way i like you, strong inside the injury, it is the only manner of knowing you are human. of the first well-spring. we are born weeping; pain is our first language, the meeting place; amputate yourself from this and you are already dead — you feed on me feeding on you, this current of sickness and cure that sprouts bright and dreadful as tears — even stars collapse.

viii.

to hands, touch is prayer; to a mouth then, speech is ladder to god — song, a thousand doves. we are transparent animals, primitive, everywhere we architect whispers to who we are; the absence of ourselves is madness, its remedy creation. i remake the tower, the tiny prison cell, the university dormitory; i reshape it all into myself — even you. the liars we are in confessing we don't want it all beautiful, the agonising kind of perfect, the liars we are, lost in our own eyes, holes only the pretty artefact mends, flawless and without a soul. be a mannequin with me, marble and cold.

ix.

banknote of a life, though the price is steep; fearful economy, this expensive flesh. i watch my tear-ducts produce a waterfall, my diamonds, swear this is how the man does make me pay.

x.

time is a ruin — though i want it all regurgitated neatly inside my hands, but i want it all saturated inside my molars, but i want it all syrup inside my guts, but i want it all wallowed and decayed around my fingers, but i want it all bleeding as i bleed, dying when i die — in this, the both of us are selfish, the sickness, the thirst of thirsts.

KELLY

numb to the lap-dance. the body's million open mouths, the pink-saliva and crash of it; as being near you is one seduction all the same, and by your right of what control is, i expel you so in parts that we are insects to each other. and fuck, what power there is in such a desex, i think that i stare eye-to-eye with god.

BOYS ON CRACK

i.

the rose is the garden's greatest metaphor; it is all beauty and its suffering.

ii.

methamphetamine in the bathtub; is this what your tears are made of? you have turned everything into a narcotic. i am a freckle floating in a pipe, the silhouette of soot in a decapitated lightbulb, the fire and gasoline of lighter singes into me the day. crystalline stain of a smile into your smile, is this where happiness lives? a breath, an hour, an afternoon of glorious stupor, only you and the rain, only you and the divine abyss of your instrument, sooted, the coal and sleep in your tonsils; is this where happiness lives? is that where it escapes to, and so, is that why i haven't found it? the two of us severed from each other by the chemical's knife, scissor, the tinfoil of your teeth in the dark where i'm not. recognising the unbelonging of yourself making flaw like love into my soul.

iii.

the cigarette that makes the hand into a pair of pliers. only the fire and the kiss bruise the chest on purpose, as all life is — the fire, the kiss.

you are an antagonism, an intruder. the same as a leech, a small and benign cancer. you hurt in the way of nuisances, cruel and common snickers, hiding the thorn inside consistence, the everyday of me that you drive into your life. you will let me go, or you will not have limbs; you will go laughing, spitting, howling the monster of my figure into the moon, the morning stars, the great joke you have bitten your nails into; who will you be without me?

ν.

i will shake you out of art; all the wombs i slipped from. i want you delirious, enamoured, dying without me. i want you in hell — married to irons, the black python of night about you, sweet the nectar of coma — you of the black touch, tainted me of light; look here, i sound like you, look here, my butterflies, gathered around feathered bone of their mouths where, in haste, like all else, is prolonged thirst; seed of want, but where are you? i have become the wood, its horrible neutrality essential as roots.

IT IS MIDNIGHT AND I HAVE HORNS