Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook

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Edited by Tracey Slaughter



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Editorial

Breath

One way that poetry always lets us know that it arises from a human body is through its evocation of breath. Read a poem and air is set travelling through the body, transits from belly to throat, arches the thorax, opens spaces, and warms and cools according to pressure and pulse. Words are air over musculature, vowels swelling our vessels — a poem is afloat in our mouths, its meaning whispering or rushing into the mainlining sinews through which we suck life: the soundings of poetry always bring us back into contact with that fact.

Any poetic line involves the ribs' transcription, the way our lungs heat its silence, gasp against it, sigh its beauties, hiss its tensions, loosen along its laughter, exhale its white space. Chant a stanza, croon it creaturely, murmur its syllables, slam its plosives, submit your lowered breath to its near-hush — whatever its pattern of release and contraction, your viscera belongs to it, it moves you at tongue and trunk, it takes your tissues before it makes passage to your mind because breath is the first point of access — to 'muse', as Denise Levertov tells us in her essay 'Notes on organic form', is to 'stand with open mouth'. A poem is pulmonary, graces and stresses your airways with the physiology of language. Flooded in shout, suspended as filament, your breath is drawn in and out by the poem, made of it.

Breath was what this year's poets were signally concerned with, a common echo that stood out instantly as I sifted through the thousand-plus poems that came to me from across our islands. The shift and brush of oxygen, the gift and vanish of it — over and over, motifs of breath drew me close, wrote their names. Breath was invoked as a source of connection — 'When I breathe I feel the forest in my lungs, / my tongue open soil for the world's fruit' — but also as a channel

of pollution, as poets bore witness to the toxins that infuse us, the airborne particles that drift to us from distant horizons, faceless institutions.

There was a focus on how we breathe in power, how our mouths clear and cloud with the taste of history, the insides of us awash with the currents outside, as wider world structures press patterns into our private lives that we can't intake, the climate of a wracked planet 'whistl[ing] through the gaps' so we wake with 'breath suspended ghostlike in the air'.

Breath is there in this issue from the outset — stopped in the 'long, long quiet' of loss descended on the 'Nurses' station', where 'we are always trying to resuscitate our friends'; smoke-filled and 'taking in second-hand carcinogens' in 'a light in the dark for limbonic soul', to reveal in its 'drag hard, sharp inhale . . . that hidden thing that makes us'. It 'glows like a gas-lit radiator / Anima Mundi: within the haze we blur / fleeting connection'. It trembles 'beyond card-locked doors', and is gulped in a 'car with the windows down . . . the radio on and the heater turned right up', where the misty slumber of long-ago sleepovers is a source of endless yearning: 'All that warmth, quiet breathing.'

A lover rests their head against our breastbone, and we ask what 'he heard, / his words humming along the ridges of my spine: / *something ancient*'; death 'soars above us like a kite / The string tied around her wrist.' It's still there 'in the soft opening / of the warmest "hello", our dreams 'engrav[ing] the airwaves' — yet it's also 'sputtering' in the mould-spores of a housing culture where 'rich men . . . get richer / while everyone else just chokes': 'I thought I was gonna be able to / finally breathe some clean air / but I'm still coughing up a lung'.

This was one of the most insistent motifs that surfaced in this year's submissions — the breath as an index of intersecting crises of housing, precarity, mental health. There was black mould spattered like Rorschachs through a devastating number of poems, the rot of capitalist policies searing lungs, smothering futures: 'show me that patch of

mould behind your wardrobe and I'll introduce you to my friends who will never breathe again like they were meant to.'

Endless versions of the landlord and the rental manager stalked across thresholds, inspecting, evicting, 'to remind you that the air you dehumidify and then breathe isn't really yours'. The 'new normal' is a crushed airspace, where the have-nots scavenge, 'hanging on thermals' — the hyperventilated prayers 'to the housing market' that paper this issue (and I simply could not print all of them) are an urgent national register, a mildew-blistered testament to why all the "Eat Your Landlord" t-shirts' sold out.

Asthma is the correct response to the current political atmosphere 'as tepid fingers dig in / pleura, raw aglow / with fuck-you nails painted red / dragging breath / down long gravelly stretch / from the suburbs / to the swamp'. Vast rage at global abuse respires here too, a sky-wide yearning to somehow haul the ordnance launched against the innocent 'up into the mouth of the universe' and 'spit [it]' back at the 'unholy pipeline' of 'spokesman, / advisor, policy maker, politician, donor, shadow'.

'Be aware . . . of the rhythm of your breathing' is the catch-cry of this volume. 'Feel your chest rise and fall. Feel your chest tighten and burn', Olivia Macassey urges us in 'Cyclone', a poem that presses a microphone to a lone chest and our collective destiny at once, magnifying one panicked breath washed through with the static of wider crisis. Macassey's hypnotic tracing of the breath, which slowly layers the listener's chest with stones, is subtitled 'a sleep meditation' — but there's no respite offered by the realities that come to rest on the reader's torso. Instead, the colossal weight of global wastes sinks down on us, the sound guttering, eddying, flooding, shucking, juddering, scooping, mangling, as Macassey's stanzas rush us through the disintegrating roar of weather patterns our bodies can't encompass.

It is breath as register of the oncoming unbreathable, breath prised and plied by 'the dense air' supplied by dominant culture: 'all that holds you here are the stones'. Yet if its grim ritual seems to wrest any possibility of pushback from the diaphragm, it is utterance as activism too, its stark acoustics underscoring, as do so many other poems in this issue, the breath as network of connectedness, resistance, tenderness, something of us that stays aloft, glistening.

'I wait I wait respirating in / stills for miraculous conversion' — the poetic line may seem personal, small-scale, slender, but will always shiver with the worldwide. The breath that drives it is drawn from an atmosphere inescapably wrapping all of us, born of a body that can only filter the Anthropocene. That's both hard and hopeful to ingest. One thing this edition of the yearbook marks is that, despite all the currents swirling against it, 'spirit [is still] reaching out / from grey lips'.

Featured Poet

Mark Prisco

earth to

when the decision was made to invade i was lying in a canopy of flowers thinking

about the language poets use.

i stretched my limbs. was stricken, first w muscle cramp, as of lightning, then with

you, burning.

Oct 6 (ante christ 6): serviced: odo 132726
km. oil changed — fully synthetic; oil filter changed. air filter changed . . . in the

field flamed

her hair & the smoke she emits does not, miraculously, sting the eyes. one turns on a sixpence, dreams post-mortem on the pillow. what the dead see.
blissed, no text can storm me the mind fixed purposefully, long metal rod driven

down.

discord

Ι

this is not a time of tranquillity. i am not mollified, not ok, not wise with hindsight. i have tried pain moral heterodoxy, those little toys, time-killers that buzz about the soul.

i recall now in a bottled rage.

II

so what if i stride over hills, wandering lonely, inhaling the roses, conscious of the moment, how it steals the odour of roll-on, waves like distant advertising, bowed in the phone glow, a satellite no one names.

III

this is not a record of experiences a recollection of dead hours; but now, the unexpunged unexpurgated unadulterated tale, a heart smoking in the corner, no one talks to.

IV

here's the glass, the marble index i crack your skull with. you exhale. we stay close, like bruised skin.

we are friends.

we understand each other. we know when to say yes. when to stop

mostly, to not let go.

one dying animal to another

1

there's no before no afterwards, but the consequence of what's gone, reminders &, blind prognostications. it's hell, to feel these presences, buoyed by the floods like cattle so long, & friendless. we have no gods no idea we're done for. we dig anyways &, flayed rise like flies flush with spring.

2

let me in even if i'm violent & look awful. you can build me up from scratch, of what's left, in the dirt, which is the death of me.

what i want to say, i guess, the short of it is: raze me til i'm fine like dust & when you sigh i'm the flowering of trees in spring.

3

a car door slams, & another. there are 2 men, 2 sets of footsteps, which get to me, not like heartbeat, more flexible. a new sound almost, not an emotion but close.

take a walk by the river when the shops close. take a breath in 1910 or 1912. on the bridge drop your spit, & when you're spent spread your hands on the parapet. ask to see the nurse, check your messages. list your friends in order of preference. when the old man coughs cut your wrist & turn the television on. if you must, breathe. there are 15 years to live, to think of it, to kill, to think Oh how my holidays fly like barn owls & burn like

harvest moons.

4

i saw a man kill a black dog at the side of the white road, but you know what memory's like.

he might have just picked it up, slumped its corpse over his shoulder. i was a passenger back then pressed against the glass. this is the wilderness i love now it's almost winter & darkness flames across the sky.

when i'm alone like this, or on the porch tonight w my heels upon the rails, & when the moon hangs close: i could fall for a tall lonesome god if he looked like you, was personal, good to talk to, when it's dead, late on sundays, at the takeaways, & if it's punishment to wait more than 20 minutes, looking out the windows, to be deprived of him, then so be it.

sign

there's more chance that a bullet finds me than you crashing thru the glass feet first, but the dream repeats itself, babels in the corner, clings to it, has potential, coiled in its darkness, maybe sleeping. there are personal

animosities, loves, that circulate sickness, that breed vice, that cast us, egregious, marked, first born discontinued. when you wet yourself you feel simultaneously the clanged bell & the roots within you,

entrails, new dawnings; the universe Yea unfucked remakes itself & there is s/laughter, wild jubilation, collision of elements, of members restored, of lost limbs. wine on sundays. my hands

have sought you, nailed themselves, with anticipation have yielded, relented; have gestured like it is what it is &, have taken it upon themselves to demolish, to rubinate &, make the world in your image.

plane crashes in the mountains

where the full stop lands is where you are a boulder in the white wonderland. it's no good arguing about it. you could shake my hand

with a blade, shot or baseball bat. talk the talk. walk diplomacy. use an interpreter with no ear for the poetical. i'm going

places even if it's sideways or back. i don't talk your language but i'll piss my name on the snow of your country. dispose my empties.

if i'm killed for it, what's that to me? the violence of getting taken out, stopped short — gone: & who cares what was on some stupid bucketlist.

because when ur done there's no one apart from you & the spirit's off to mondo bizarro — ideas zeros. minuses. unreal city.

i have not come here to kneel but to be struck down & later, when all this shit's under the bridge, forgotten.

when you're dead there's time to think

what comes my way goes thru me, like when you step on my grave.

i'm opened, glazed with light. part of you remains but u don't notice.

i bear what is said, what is presumed & chew a long long time.

i don't write it down. i am not the subject or the object of your discourse,

your wicked temper, when you twist the stalks of live roses. i am not the victim

of your terrorism, eye-deep in water. i wave & you wave back.

you think you must know me somewhere. you realise that you don't.

remembers

it's only terror half remembered, torched mangers, kids torn, & their mothers; makes me fail, in

god's name, blasphemies tossed in sleep, tongues you haven't heard of flamed like suns. do we have to go thru this again.

where do i sign which way do you want me to face.

*

let dawns come. night falls &, the mediocre dread, hum of loneliness of tinnitus. we have been thru this.

i remember the curtains sunstruck tombstones, wails of black women at the funeral, the unyielding spine of a loved-one, & when my mother died

there were these 2 guys w a digger. we didn't even have to walk the coffin but bowed

photo — 1991, i think

this is me in a black hood turning his back on a man kneeling in the snow like he's done. thought i'd die but that was my choice & i light one in the wind & my lips are numb. i'm moved on

up the road by 2 cops, a pair of cunts & i bet the older one, the white one, has a family. a wife who sort of loves him & kids who feel safe when he's on the job. they're only human. it's fucking heartwarming

like you say but i prefer a cold pie & indigestion to getting slammed in a cell w a truncheon like i'm queer or something just because i'm into it, that gladiatorial contact. young man!

remember Salamis. if it wasn't for us you'd be on ur knees getting stuffed by the Persian navy, charmed by the patterns on the carpet thinking What the fuck happened here!

i'm just the messenger, a diplomat: now i'm sucking the milk of human kindness. you get the drift, i digress — & yet, & yet . . . i marched home, a doss house in Islington, off

Holloway road, a hole back then but now unaffordable. that day i couldn't get warm & the cut on my hand stung & froze like glass & the blood stopped

as it got to my feet & i couldn't walk but the next day i'm on the Kent coast & board a ship to Calais. i left my gauloises on the train. a score

for the conductor, considering the shit wage he's on. it's no consolation especially now when i'm dropped at some motorway gas station between Paris & Lyon: a small town i steal some fruit from. nevertheless i'm no Augustine: i've nothing to confess except i lied to the priest at confession: told him

i swore which was bollocks. but what i kept from him was nothing either or not his business & all this was tacitly assented to & anyway, who knew. i slept

as i've said on ice in sunny Switzerland, a relief after the brown fog of Lombardy & when i got to London, what a night that was. we opened the brandy & watched as the football scores came in.

it was a saturday, dark & 5 in the afternoon.

cat

the cat mourns like it feels pain, silently. he doesn't give himself away like a nightingale.

talks only when he has to; slinks crevices of what you think when you're not thinking looking out the window.

he came to inspect the hole i dug at the end of the day & sniffed it before i filled it up again.

he knows death. like me there's a dark spot in him somewhere which he gets used to & forgets.

travel's good for the mind

i too disappeared, trailed off watched the cherry sky, high waves blossoming like sails

apparently. i am not nowhere to be seen impossible. if i send

postcard still i'm uncorroborated sliced out of

jib. let the white dust be parched body parts. when i fall you're

gone but infer my absence. the loquat's snatched a power line.

the moon's light bends it towards me. should i be tied whip

lashed for what i've done not done thought of or strung?

up feet first. I'd sooner starve than swallow, suffer these holy iPod, life-bearing luxuries. grateful for the minutes

the Xtras i live. you think i'm done but, never. sucked

in shoved down upcycled re-live it w

m/self i might have drowned in the bath but no hands held me

contact

A white butterfly follows us down the sun-dipped path by the green river. light shreds the shade of flora — ferns; cabbage trees, palms in the languid air &

when they dance they're like our ancestors, arched across the endless curve of days

I write to be near you, for no reason, to be for no ultimate purpose, suffering, bored

a spirit of the 3rd circle torn by divine winds. if there's no god, make her up

Burn when it's cold. mouth incantatory vespers, let our myths mingle circulate the veins of our corpulent spaces, the primo nightmare of where we came from, the white-hot light. you step

The abysmal gap between banks, the untrodden dark racked across the sky, the unmissable hole among the stars that is yours

And mine which is like which is like which is kinda like which is like nothing you want to talk about, because like it's kinda null? the unwanted addition to the already-saturated

Market of sound, right

Shut up. listen.

be attentive. notice the difference. how many finger/s am i holding/up? you say, i have lost my vision; i miss the furniture because its presence is palpable; the sun to me is dark & the way down & the way up is the same, etc

When i go up the escalator of a hospital or a department store it feels true. i am somewhere new & all the sick bric-a-brac corroborates the story

In the east the morning glory, pink & it's tuesday & it's good to be high in the bedroom leaning ur head on the cool condensation. i make eyes with a blackbird. today we are mute. today, also,

Is the equinox & everything is about to fall but doesn't. it just gets bigger & better. me & you outside! 12 hours from now we walk into the sunset but this isn't over

the blue curtains

the curtains are still there unwanted. had clashed with your jumper no longer with us. i'm not

either, have brain waves i shouldn't, that are incommensurate with accepted standards of living. i'd have you

share it with me. don't let me go, in a hospital bed, gagged by an oxygen mask, serviced by indifferent staff. don't let me fall into the hands of

placid bureaucrats, officials with the morals of robots, the legally entitled, shit-wipes like in Kafka. i'd lie

on the pavement, admire the red rivulets, the bland 2-tone psychedelia; claim the land, chained to the iron rails some red-neck brother erected against us. i'm torn between burial cremation, stranger than fact; i belong where you are, in a

dark corner, a lamp you switch