a fine line

TE RŌPŪ TOIKUPU O AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND POETRY SOCIETY

Guest Poet
Jackson McCarthy
Feature Article
Lee Murray
Cover Artist
Ethan Sheaf-Morrison

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a fine line staff

Quotation of the season

'…or music heard so deeply /
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts.' – *Eliot's Four Quartets*

Contents: Autumn 2025

Editorial

Cadence Chung

Tēnā koutou,

I am so excited to introduce myself as the new editor of *a fine line.* I'm Cadence Chung: poet, singer, composer. I've released two books – *anomalia*, 2022, *Mythos* (ed.), 2024 – and my next collection, *Mad Diva*, was released in April with Otago University Press. I love poetry, and much of my practice revolves around combining my disciplines in new ways.

So it's very fitting that the theme of this issue is Puoro | Music. When the previous *afl* editor, Gail Ingram, suggested it, I knew it would be perfect. All poetry has a sense of music, I think – from strict meter to avant-garde free verse, there is a sense of song that comes naturally with the form. Some of the very first poets back in Ancient Greece sang their poems while accompanying themselves on the lyre. There are so many interesting spaces opened up in poetry as music, poetry about music, poetry within music, and so on.

The poets in this issue figure many different interpretations of the theme. There are, naturally, references to musical instruments and artists – the red and brown accordions in Jane Bloomfield's "Accordion Crimes", the collection of 'plastic-edged' CDs in Megan Clayton's "Pre-nuptial", or the voice of Sarah Vaughan in Michael Giacon's "The Divine One". Yet music also finds itself in unexpected places. A river 'riffs in a thousand tongues' in Lyndsey Knight's "the river sings"; Alistair Clarke finds a miracle in his addressee's 'quiet breathing'; Mariam Rietveld asks how to keep a heart from 'drumming, wild'. The haiku poets also fill our ears with lush sounds, from cicadas to nightingales to trains.

Our featured poet is my wonderful friend and frequent collaborator Jackson McCarthy, who is, coincidentally, also a flautist and a conductor. Jackson's poetry always strikes me with its finely crafted lyricism; the feel that it is at once classical and distinctly of our era. This issue also features a haphazard little conversation between Jackson and I about the contentious subject of lyric poetry.

Lee Murray shares her journey through poetry in our featured article. She provides insights into the similarities between horror fiction and poetry which I found utterly fascinating. Lee held a workshop for NZPS members in April and I have no doubt that her knowledge was incredibly valuable.

Our reviews feature Claire Beynon's *For When Words Fail Us*, reviewed by Jac Jenkins, while Michelle Elvy reviews *Black Sugarcane* by Nafanua Purcell Kersel. Peppered throughout the magazine is art by o(l[~~i~~]ve) (bly(~~th~~)), Barry Johns, and Anneke Westra.

Our next edition is unthemed, and we're also on the lookout for our Featured Student Poet. Please send submissions through our Submittable by the 10th of June 2025.

I'm greatly looking forward to working with the amazing staff and members of NZPS. I look forward to hearing from you all very soon.

Ngā mihi,
Cadence.

Featured Poet

Jackson McCarthy

Maps

It’s the end of a hot day and I want something

cool to eat like a salad or half a bottle of wine –
watching for sunburn, for some sort of signal

to reach me where I’ve been, for my phone to divine
the fastest route home. Harry,

I don’t blame you anymore, not for any of it.

But they don’t love you like I love you.

Programme note

Thrown out, trashed, sloshed
after a night out at the ballet
or the opera – I was okay with that.

Doctors and lawyers of the world,
shrug off your dress coats!
Toe the levers of your bathroom bins!
Historians have a name for things
like me: *ephemera*. Like *ephebe*
I will accrue power with loss;
my fleeting youth will be the taste
of a small but important minority.

Among the more recent, dignified
garbage – yesterweek's flowers,
the bones of an apple – I will last.
But ah, I can hear those mortals
quietly laughing or making love in the other room.

Music

Whenever I am away from it for a little while,
I start to resent it –

even now, in the clouds,
with the clouds
coming down as fog
in a season I thought was summer.

Or even in summer,
with the yellow tufts of grass
strewn behind the mower
like beautiful boys' hair
or a million coffee cups
discarded on the street.

The only thing I hate
more than playing music
is writing,
which doesn't bode well for this poem
or for you;

for when contemplating your body's variousness
moving in white t-shirts
I am struck by the words,
not the thing.

And I look at you
and think of phrases like,
The sudden nudity of clothes,
and how it is a joy to watch you sitting in them.

I feel my life is full
of little cruelties like this
that I can't tell anyone about;

that there's always a distant cliffside
called Death
and somebody saying *No* on it,
refusing life;

that there are always those
fabricates of memory
that lacerate the present
with reminder of the past –

the flu that lives in the body
and fills up the jeans
and seeps out the nose.

Yet,
at sunset,
when I walk city streets
and streetlights come on
and there's a tuft of yellow grass
somewhere in the distance,
I think for a moment
it might be your head of hair
rising to meet me.

My worsening nearsightedness
indulges the worst
kind of trickery,
the optometrically explainable kind,
that makes a mirage of your face
in the faces I meet
and I close my eyes every time
to a smile's afterimage,
which vanishes slowly
as smoke from a chimney
letting out the day's last sigh.

Like the heavy way you breathe, asleep,
as if the trees weren't dripping
with post-rain exhaustion already.

These are tremendous distances
and we won't survive this life.

I know this,
I know.

Yes

And when I've lost
everything but still alive,
and the bartender moves
to make a last call,
and the wasted streets
merely announce your
distance from me –

And somebody screams
your name, opens
my throat for your dark
passage, and your bright
face shows itself
in new places, parties,
strangers' homes –

And when I come
to know myself,
dirty, foolish, often blind
to material things, and
the city begins to eat
at your mystery, black
hole I'm vanished in –

Then let me tell you how
I hated only Death
my whole life long, that
there's a life after this
one, where you return
in your favourite sweater
with no more sorrow.

Featured Article

Lee Murray

Untitled (2024) oil, charcoal on canvas – Anneke Westra

Untitled (2024) oil, charcoal on canvas – Anneke Westra

The Poetry of Belonging

‘You don’t belong here, don’t belong, don’t belong, don’t belong,’ whisper the ancestral atua in my prose-poetry collection *Fox Spirit on a Distant Cloud*, ‘yet already you are bound to this path, to this place, this distant cloud.’

I don’t belong here either. ‘One part willow and one-part mānuka’. I am ‘an out of place unbelonging strangeness’.What business does a writer of fiction – and primarily of literature’s ugly stepsisters, speculative fiction and horror – have here, between these pages, alongside Aotearoa’s best-loved poets? Perhaps therein lies the uncanny alchemy of poetry for connection, for offering a conduit between imaginary realms and bruising realities, across genres and generations.

Otherwise, I might not be here at all.

I have a vivid memory of my paternal grandmother, Laura Ellen (Nell), a former 1930s school mistress, coming to visit us when we lived on Dip Road in Whangarei during my preschool years. It was early morning, before I’d had my Weetbix, and I don’t think my parents were up yet, or maybe they were busy seeing to the baby. But I remember sitting with Grandma on our squeaky orange vinyl sofa (the sort that stuck to the back of your legs), when she took up a pen and printed some words in my scrapbook. ‘I’m not very good at drawing,’ she said, as she filled in the letters:

eggs in a frying pan from the ‘oo’s in cook

a pair of spectacles in l‘ΘΘ’k

and two scribbly balls of yarn in w@@l

I knew then that words weren’t just a source of meaning; they were also made up of images and sound and scent. A caress. Even now when I see these words, I feel Grandma’s arms wrap gently about me and catch the scent of her 4711 perfume. The sad thing is, over the years I forgot that lesson. Not entirely of course – because reading is breathing – but for a long time I got caught up in writing solely for meaning. I became focused on the rigour of it. Determining my thesis. Getting the citations right. Putting the method before the discovery. I was writing for clarity, my intent always to educate, inform, elucidate. Even the order of items on my shopping list coincided with the aisles at the supermarket.

When I stepped away from research science, giving myself permission to experiment with words in a more creative way, it took me a much longer time to step away from scientific rigour. I discovered a swathe of new rules, things like inciting incidents, character motivations, tense, perspective, show-not-tell, and four-arc structures; I clutched for these handholds as I tumbled into the chasm of fiction. There was a lot to learn, so I spent a decade in that valley, writing stories and working on craft. It was a wanderlust time, since there was a lot to learn.

I thought about poetry, of course. I read voraciously, collected collections, even wrote some poems which made it into publications. But someone in those early days told me I wasn’t a poet, and I should stick to my prose-knitting. ‘You don’t belong here, don’t belong, don’t belong…’

[We must always tread lightly on people’s dreams.]

For a long time, I accepted that I wasn't a poet. No matter. I set my mind to writing the best possible prose, mostly horror, typically told at the intersection of culture and myth – always chasing the 'savage spirit' of our Aotearoa landscape as Mansfield describes it. But I was a literary scientist, so I'd already learned that the stories that speak to us at our core aren't the ones hitting us over the head with the whack-a-mole club of education. Readers want stories that engage and provoke, that spark recognition, or a moment of shared truth. The stories that stay with us are the ones that make us feel something.

As it turns out, there is a lovely juxtaposition between horror and poetry, since horror demands we examine the things that make us feel fear, whereas poetry simply allows us to feel. If I couldn't be a poet, I resolved to use poetry to inform my prose. I would cram my prose with emotion and experience. *Qu'ils mangent de la brioche!* Poetry became my new handhold. I attended courses, and workshops, webinars and presentations. Horror poets Linda D. Addison, Donna Lynch, Stephanie Wytovich, and Christina Sng became my go-to gurus. I learned to conjure poems between the lines of stories, to steal cadence from Snowy River or Innisfree, to explore facets of imagery, memory, and vulnerability.

From the moment I rediscovered poetry, I was determined to squeeze it into my prose wherever I could. I became the little girl whose favourite colour is pink and insists on wearing it everywhere: pyjamas, gumboots, swimming togs. Like Grandma's 'oo's' in 'cook', I slipped poetry sideways into stories or pushed it proudly into paragraphs. I resurrected Shakespearean statues who spoke in sonnet, explored alien worlds where the inhabitants spoke in proverb, told a tale of the moon goddess in the phases of the moon. Editors inviting me to submit stories got long-form prose-poems instead. And when I'm asked to submit an introduction to a poetry anthology, I include a poem. Several poems. Weirdly, I got away with it, perhaps because horror has always been a subversive genre, or because editors of speculative texts are open to speculative approaches.

Slowly, I stepped over the willow-pattern bridge from prose into poetry. On the other side, I found community and belonging. Friends opened their arms in welcome. After the publication of Asian diaspora anthology *Black Cranes* (co-edited with Geneve Flynn), while my crane-sisters and I were all still reeling at the acclaim, horror poet Angela Yuriko Smith suggested we continue the dialogue through poetry. She proposed a collaborative collection between herself, double Bram Stoker Award-winning poet Christina Sng, Flynn and me. Except I wasn't a poet. Flynn protested, too: 'I've never even written a limerick,' she wailed. Smith and Sng disagreed. 'We're all poets,' Sng said. *Tortured Willows* was published in 2021, with my name on the cover. The collection went on to win a Bram Stoker Award for Poetry. My poem "cheongsam" from the collection won an Australian Shadows Award.

By some uncanny alchemy, I had become a poet.

My debut solo collection, *Fox Spirit on a Distant Cloud*, was released in April 2024. The work seeks to explore the lives of Aotearoa Chinese women through the lens of the fox spirit of Asian myth. It is my own prose-poetry creation, a kind of extended haibun, or lyrical prose with haiku inserts in keeping with the collection's Asian theme. My publisher at The Cuba Press describes it as a novel in verse. The title might be interpreted as 雯, made up of 雨 yu3 (rain) and 文 wen2 (literature, pattern) or 'an essay composed of clouds', writes Chinese translator Yi Izzy Yu. Certainly it is a nebulous thing: straddling fiction and non-fiction, part historical fiction, part memoir. In its pages, I am the fox-spirit, telling a tale of generational trauma, a shapeshifter between prose and poetry, between genres…

> ‘*A skilful weaving of humanity and mythology, finely drawn portraits of lives in Aotearoa steeped in longing to both belong and return home*.’—Renee Liang

I hope Grandma Nell will be happy to know I’ve found my way home to those scribbly balls of w00l, just as I hope my por por, Wai-Fong, will approve of the delicate willow-bridge I have built to my Chinese heritage, hoping to give voice to the stories of the Aotearoa Chinese women who have gone before me.

‘It is time to throw off your human form and be your true self, to discard the ancient, misused flesh, shake out your weary bones,’ the fox spirit says. ‘The waiting is over.’

Cheongsam

my grandmother's *cheongsam*
sewn from a Shanghai sunrise
with deep slits and black piping

and those tricky filigree buttons
that only a child's fingers
can operate

I've seen a photo of her
wearing this very dress
at the age I am now

as slender as an *erhu*
dark hair shining like lacquered cabinetry
she's a picture of tradition

I lift the dress from its camphor chest
hold it against me
and reflect

on decades of dynasties
of we two, both daughters of the willow
and one of us a child of the devil

all it needs
is a minor alteration
to make space for me

I use the kitchen knife
slicing slivers from the hips
carving off the excess

and when at last I slip it on
my tainted blood blooms
red lotuses on sunrise silk

and I smile because it's fitting

In Conversation

Days Bay Wellington, As Remembered – Barry Johns

Cadence Chung and Jackson McCarthy in Conversation on the Lyric

Jackson McCarthy, 17 March, 8:56 pm

I think we both keep thinking about the lyric, and in particular: what is it? where is it now?

I remember you sent me this poem called "Lyric poem (Murano)". It's still one of my favourites of yours ('I was wearing the skirt I bought the day after I died – / you sat on my bed reading a novel a minute'). It declared itself as lyric; yet when I opened it up, it was laid out in beautiful but rather prosey lines. I think at first, I suggested you might change the title, but now I'm sort of fascinated by the way it gestures toward a form that the poem itself does not, or not fully, or not *yet* embody.

I suppose that sums up a lot of what I've been trying to do with the lyric, too: trying to figure out how a poem can still be recognisably lyric while also being rendered in prosey language, in language that feels fresh and contemporary.

What are the lyric markers that persist in our poetry (perhaps personal address, confessional tone, extended metaphor?) and what are the ones we feel free to transpose, transform, trash, and transcend (namely strict rhyme and metre)? I guess I'm also just wondering about *how* you think of your poems as lyric, because it seems clear that you do, at least to some extent, consider yourself a lyric poet, right?

Cadence Chung, 17 March, 10:15 pm

Yes, I remember when I first sent you that poem. You said it gave you a 'jolt' – then the next day, I opened up my inbox to find a poem you'd written, "Louis, August", also about a lover with a book.

The question of lyric is such a strange one. Really, I was writing lyric poetry for much longer than I even knew that's what it was called. You're right that the modern lyric still uses personal address and a confessional tone, while often disregarding strict rhyme and meter. Something that I think is perhaps more interesting than those qualifiers though, is a sense of transformation. In a way, a poem is a last resort, right? If you need to confess something, you can write in your Notes app, call a friend, post on Instagram, etc. But if there is still something persistent and lingering in that confession that somehow evades any other method, you transform it into something you want to share as art, and you call it a poem. I don't know if a poem that fails to transform its original inspirations is not a lyric poem, though – perhaps just an unsuccessful one?

But then of course we come to the question of failure, which is maybe also a qualifier of lyric poetry if we're thinking of my 'transformation' idea. One of my favourite lines of yours is from your poem cycle *Three Spells*: 'If poetry could make you love me, / it would, I think.' I mean, where do you go from there? When I read that I felt like my career was over. You'd said it all.

When I set Three Spells to song, you wrote in this very anticlimactic chord at the end, because the speaker only wrote about their love and didn't actually fulfill it. So I guess I wonder if you feel that your poems fail — and if this is perhaps a feature of them being lyric?

Jackson McCarthy, 18 March, 3:31 pm

Oh my God, we've really opened a can of worms here. I like these ideas of 'transformation' and 'failure'. But surely these things happen in most, if not all, poems, whether or not they're lyrics. So perhaps we can say that the lyric intensifies our senses of transformation and failure? I love your idea of a poem as a ‘last resort’; I think it might be related to ideas about intensification, pressure, or compression. Traditionally, the constraints of lyric forms (such as the sonnet) put language under a sort of pressure-to-mean; there's no space for wastage. These days we seem to be able to affect this pressure while writing in free verse.

In terms of failure, I often think about Sappho's fragments, which I only really know as Anne Carson's translations. Sappho's lyrics 'fail' in so many ways: thematically, they often picture the poet alone, spurned by her lover, turning to her verses for solace. And they’re often subjunctive in tense or imperative in mood (‘Come to me now: loose me from hard / care’). But also – they're literally fragments (!) and they record what is now for us a kind of lost ancient music. When we read Carson's chilly, clear-eyed, startling renderings of Sappho, we're hearing essentially plain language, and being asked to imagine it as music. I think this imaginative aspect has a lot to do with the contemporary lyric, and why I so like that you declared your poem as such ("Lyric poem").

As for the *Three Spells* – thanks! But as for that ‘anticlimactic chord’ I wrote at the end of your song setting – for me, that chord (and that poem) actually reaches a point of climax, or at least finality. Whether the speaker gets laid or doesn't is something that happens off-page, off-stage, in real life. So I kind of reject this reading that the spells, as love spells, don't work, or that you can know whether or not they work, because for me, they're really deeply invested in poetry's incantatory, even magical, capabilities.

I hope they fail in more interesting ways. I'm sure you must agree that 'failing interestingly' is the essential question of writing poetry. For me, the poems only ‘fail’ insofar as they can’t speak about the fulfilment of the desire they describe; there’s a certain future the poems are hopeful to bring about, but that future necessarily lies out of their reach. And I think this has to do with a notion of ‘faith’. Lyric poems have faith in language; they’re pleas for connection between minds in a strange world of bodies. I wonder if my notion of ‘faith' could synthesise these ideas we’re percolating about 'transformation', 'failure', 'intensification', 'pressure', and 'compression'; that what we're really talking about is a lyric faith that poems can speak created worlds into being.

Cadence Chung, 18 March, 5:20 pm

Sure – I guess I wasn't really saying that your poems 'don't work', but more that they work as poems and not, as you said, any physical acts of love/desire/sex. The 'failure' is more the fact that they, being poems, embark on a different mission than the reality of their given circumstances. A beautiful failure indeed!

I'm sure you know that I love Sappho. Anne Carson's translations were really monumental to me. I love Sappho for many reasons, but I agree the imaginative aspect her fragments force us to confront is striking. And maybe this also links to your idea of pressure, right? The words are put under a certain pressure that makes us read into both their entwinement and their gaps; what is on the page and what is notably being left out. 'You are not even here', as Ashberry says in "This Room". But there are also so many beautiful things in that poem: quails, portraits, dogs.

Something I was thinking about when I wrote my first response was how much I want a poem to convince me. 'Faith' is a good way to put it. I as a reader want to have faith in a poet and where they are leading me; and the poet themself should have faith in their own mission. Something you’ve

engrained in me is the preciousness of time. If you're asking someone to spend a chunk of their time – or if it's a book, their money – reading your work, then you really have to be convinced by it, right? Maybe a poem fails in 'speaking created worlds into being', but when you write a poem you have to still kind of be aiming for that. Do you think a poet's conviction in their work transfers to a reader? How do you conceive of your faith in your own work and poetic mission – if you have one at all?

Jackson McCarthy, 18 March, 7:07 pm

Yes. I think that you've really been talking about a writerly process, whereas I've been talking about a readerly experience. But I also think that this idea of faith joins the two up: both the reader and the writer have to believe that the language is working.

I'm not sure I have a mission per se. Or if I do, it's more like an emergent property of the fact of having worked, not something I think about with any intention. I have a strong feeling about what my subjects are and what my style is, but really all I want is to keep writing poems; I'm just never quite sure when they're coming. There's a lot of mental preparation for a poem: you feel it out, whether first by phrase, form, or image. Of course, as a writer, there are some things you can (and indeed probably should) take into your own hands and make happen – and these factors constitute what we might call a writing practice. For me, I often walk around plucking certain phrases from my internal monologue and jotting them down somewhere. But the question of transformation, as you put it, is a deeply mysterious one. I think that's one very good reason not to die today; you might get a poem tomorrow.

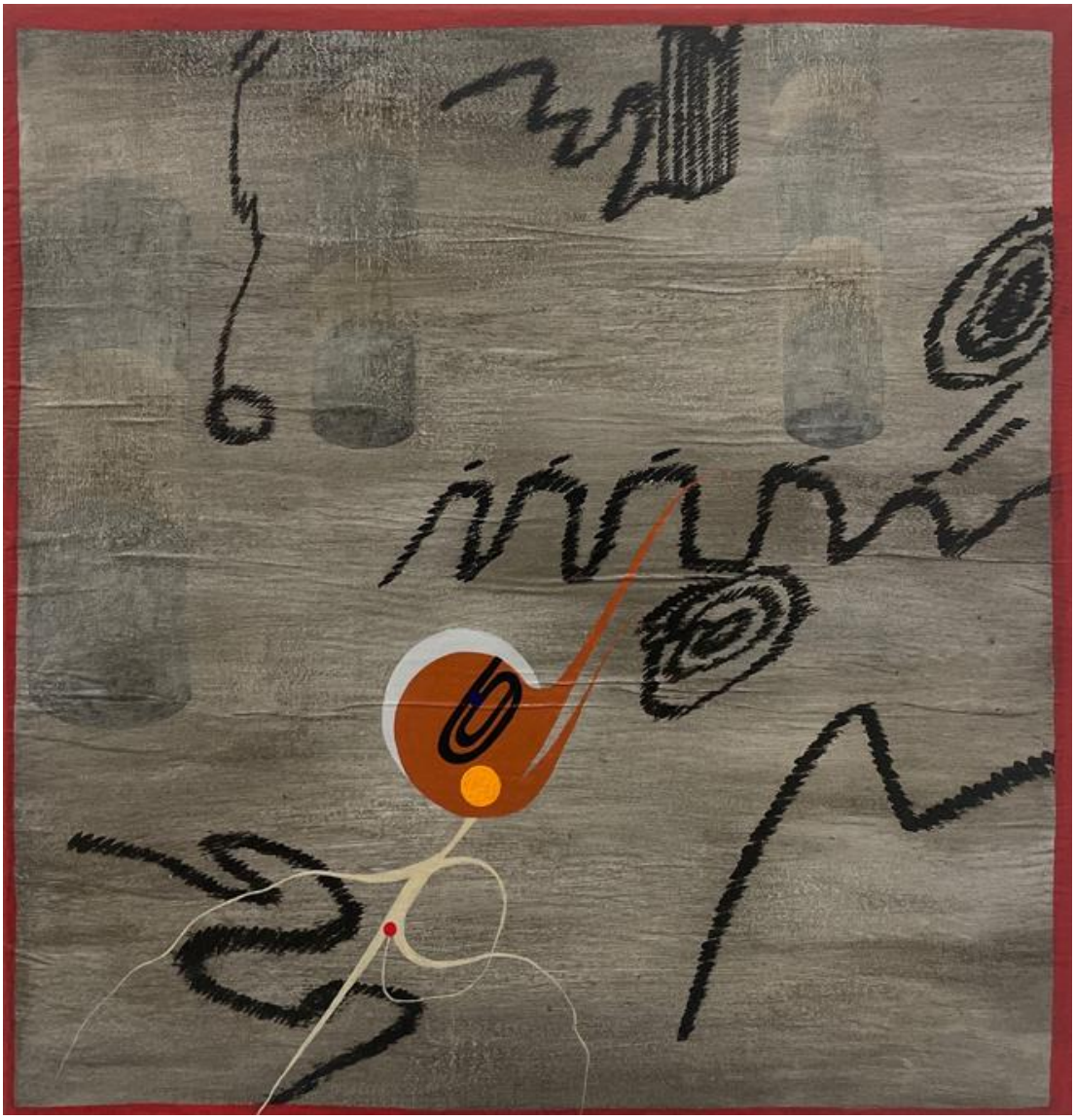
Let's wrap up by bringing this back to the question of lyric. Well, we've identified a range of things that lyrics do or conspicuously don't do, and we're trying to think of reading and writing as joined by their faith in language. And I think we both have the sense that lyrics intensify and pressurise language somehow, right? So I'm curious as to how you go about writing a lyric poem – when do you know to call a poem this one thing and not another?

Cadence Chung, 18 March, 7:16 pm

I also find myself taking little pieces of things I've thought about or seen and combining them into a poem that often comes to me in a sort of unconscious mystery. It's such a natural process to me that I don't even really conceive of what I'm doing as writing a poem, much less a lyric one. But maybe that's it, right? There's a sort of naivety, or a simplicity, to a lyric poem, I think. At the end of the day a lyric poem is really just a tiny letter. Or more like a postcard, maybe – something tiny and compact and maybe not as articulate as we'd like, but a calling card to a particular place/emotion/time.

And also perhaps by naming something as lyric we fulfil that destiny. My "Lyric Poem (Murano)" becomes a lyric poem because I wanted it to be one. We talk a lot about perception, and how we often only fully conceive of our works after they've been read by others, actualised through someone other than ourselves. I think I once saw some study on *Fair Go* when I was a child where people could only tell what chip flavours they were eating after they were told what they were. I don't think it's as simple as 'it's lyric if you call it lyric', but maybe there is something in that idea of a poet's conception transferring to the reader; from interior to interior, mind to mind.

Poems



100 Willis St – o(l[i]ve) (bly(th))

Alastair Clarke

Soundings

These particles jazzed to surprise –
like breeze jamming through grass,
or the strangeness (today)
in the clouds. Like your quiet breathing
(the miracle in this). (While a door
slams, somewhere. Cats scream. A man is shot,
somewhere, somehow. This fury).
Beyond, blood's steady pulsing,
muscles easing: soundings.
Now saxophone, now guitar, now
bass, drum – each brief sharing,
each brief flirtation with air.

Mariam Rietveld

Puoro

If, even now, I am tuned to it: every wind against wire,
every tui call stretched into morning—
If, at dusk, I hum with the river's hush, let cicadas syncopate
in the rafters of a half-lit shed, if I tap my knuckles
against the rusted frame of a swing set, let it ring,
then, I can only imagine your ears three years back:
the eldest son pressing a ukulele to his ribs,
his mother mouthing waiata from the back row.
Today, I am a broken radio – fuzz, static, a half-sung line
caught between two frequencies. Tell me: what did it take
for your father to let go? To type 'Scholarship for Performing Arts'
into Google Maps? Did he hear those chords as bridges breaking?
Did he count beats between his voice and yours,
feel a harmony unraveling, measure its loss in decibels?
I think of my father; wish my music larger than an open window.
Larger than the church hall where my sister played piano,
than the pāua-shell pendants we clicked like castanets.
When you left, did yours sit in silence? Did she picture
the empty room, the guitar case gathering dust?
Tell me: how did you still your hands at a new melody?
How did you keep your heart from drumming, wild?

Mercy Williams

Taonga Tuku Iho

It’s buried in the crevices,
second knuckle deep,
it curls around my fingers
always just eluding me.
It’s looming in the darkness,
a rustle on the wind,
it hides behind the promises
our governments rescind.
It’s tucked up along the jawbone,
just behind the teeth,
it catches on the sea breeze
struggling to be set free.
Ka rere ana tōku reo,
taonga tuku iho,
he karanga nā te papa,
mauri ora mō ake tonu.

[My language, it still flows,
a treasure handed down,
a calling from the earth
living on forever.]

Jane Bloomfield

Accordion Crimes

My mum tells the story of her dad
returning from war
how the train stops
at the station in Dannevirke and
he's the only soldier to get off
bearing gifts – himself warm flesh
surprises for her and her brother
back home accordions are placed in
small shy hands as parents retreat
into the bedroom
the door firmly closed
children make squawky music oblivious
to the making of a sibling nearby
mostly a little sister is cross and confused as to why
in the heat of the moment
she was given
the brown accordion
her big brother the red.

Megan Clayton

Pre-nuptial

We were confident to marry,
but to merge our collections of

CDs, oh, less so. Plastic edge to
plastic edge, but by genre or by

artist, which? Who, coming into
our living room, would recognise

the strange beast of our shared taste?
Who made you? Now, we

would have to be careful. Every
disc in its correct case. Every

case in its agreed-upon location.

Isobel Christie

remix

headstand twice a day / blood rushing into your head like red wine
feel your vessels dilating / like daisies in the morning

sweat it out in hot yoga / then go to some beach
remember to pack lunch / feed yourself not the seagulls

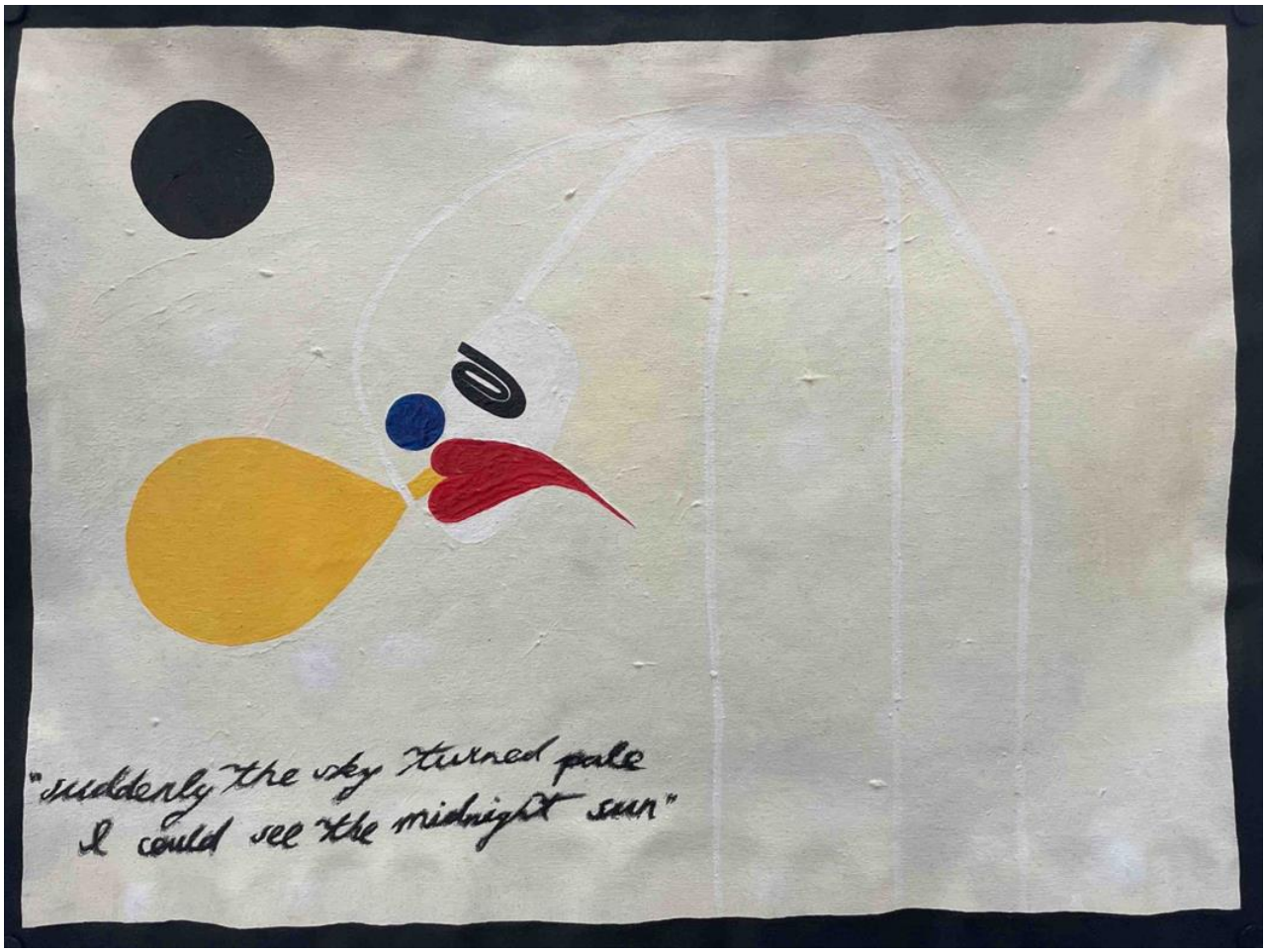
pour some vodka in your pasta / watch all the right movies
try to be a selfless person / decide to be a selfish person

soon your soul will feel like a japanese garden / hydrated and hemmed in by four walls
soon you'll feel your heart expanding / noise cancelling

and wait / for someone to say something
you'll quiver and draw back / branded for a moment.

it hurts, which sucks / until you realise
you haven't felt anything at all / for what seems like ages.

this is the start of something.



Ode to Dr Shane Retit – o(l[i]ve) (bly(th))

Laurice Gilbert

But later it was completely different

There was loud music playing softly through the window and teenage girls relaxing in wooden chairs. There was carpet that squiggled over every floor and too many shelves with too many words. There was a voice telling you all you didn't want to know about Avril Lavigne and Chad Kroeger. There was a girl in a pink dress and a ponytail who couldn't read picture books and Sylvia reading Dolly to find out how to spell Avril Lavigne. There was a security guard and a leather couch that cratered your bottom. Floral pants fought striped socks and you smelled the rawness of books with nothing to say and the ripeness of books unread.

Michael Giacon

The Divine One

Spring will be a little late forever.

Before the day dawns red look out
wish on half the moon
the dream won't come true the miracle end.

The loveliest sound is changed what to do?

Talk about silence as autumn pauses
lonely to hear something never so fine
in the dream of her voice.

Listening to Sarah live
might as well be
spring and The Divine One gone.

Lyndsey Knight

the river sings

sings a super groove of watery things

of the birds above that swoop and dive

of vessel-bob of fish-weave of eel-slide

and then some ancient nocturne for the sea perhaps

for life returning to the source.

river sings river-weed sings river-ache

songs the layered mud on the far bank

songs the breathing trees

their arms rearranging the sky

their roots deep and fast in its grassy sides.

it serenades stars all flirty twinkle

the moon her cloudy face tender

with changing moods serenades

the lovers the lonely the newborn

serenades the dead scats

with child squeal with siren wail

riffs in a thousand tongues

voice deep with life-pulse fills

its lungs with summer air takes

a long slow glissade towards the sea.

Sherryl Clark

Autumn Turning

I washed your hair and saw
the sun through your eyes,
pulled down the black shades,
held the sky for one moment,
clouds pulling at the rain.
At the back door,
I remembered how the water ran
over your arms when you
rose up in the pond,
and clutched at your heart,
wanting more than the bones
you held out as peace offerings.
Yesterday, I followed the sea in,
a whale in tune with the tide.
I no longer tip over boats
or drown sailors, no longer
sing as they ride past me.
I look through the fading trees
and see a padlocked gate,
unlock it with my flesh
and let the black dogs
run free again.

Sara Qasem

The right of return

Take a key.
Wear it around your neck.
Feel its weight –
ancestors resting on your shoulders.
Sing words in perfect rhythm:
it stops with you, it stops with you, it stops with you.

All things are better in threes.
Like triads.
Like *Fairouz, Abdel Halim* and *Umm Kulthum.* Like *za'taar bel labneh* with *zeit zeytoun.*
Like looking back and saying *never again*
and never again and never again and never again—
even when it happens
again.

Call it emphasis – call it
irony – a refrain of remembrance or
perhaps ignorance. A chorus
of history repeating itself
and repeating itself and repeating itself and repeating itself– as you repeat to yourself:
my parents own a land – it
belonged to them. Or maybe they belonged to it.
Fields of thyme, jasmine flowers and
a perfume of exiled dreams.
Forced to leave the land or
leave this earth. They
gave us choices – you see
people may forget but
the soil never forgets.

Though if the soil were to ever forget then
may this body never forget and
if this body were to ever forget then
may the weight of this key grow heavier each day *and heavier each day and heavier each day and heavier each day and* anchor me.

Back to myself, back
to my truth, back
to my land and
more than anything;
may my soul never forget, may my soul never forget, may my soul never forget—
of my right to return.

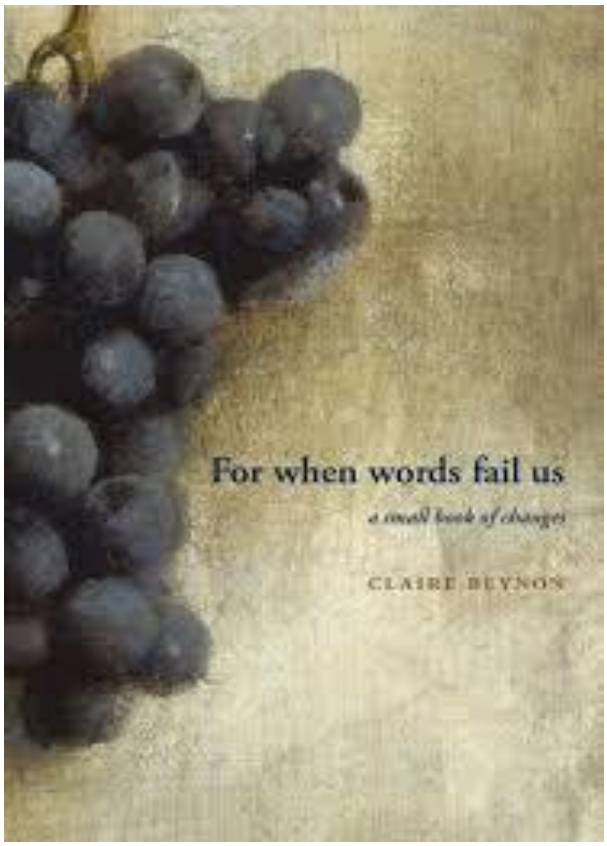
Reviews

On (2025) oil, charcoal on canvas – Anneke Westra

Jac Jenkins

For When Words Fail Us / A Small Book of Changes – Claire Beynon

Wellington: The Cuba Press, 2024). ISBN 978-1-98-859586-3. RRP $30.00. 234pp



Two-thirds of the way through Claire Beynon's memoir in verse, *For When Words Fail Us,* I stopped reading in shock and put the book aside for two days. Until then I hadn't realised how subtly and masterfully Beynon had intensified the tension from the early,

> A twist in her stomach.
> Something like recognition.
> Something like dread.

("Scrambled eggs & straw for the fire")

to its later, almost identical partner,

> The twist in her stomach.
> Something like recognition,
> something like dread.

("Grapes the colour of sea glass")

that prefaced a clench in my own gut. It is uncommon for me to experience this kind of visceral reaction to a piece of writing.

For When Words Fail Us is 'a work of memory and the imagination' that Beynon adapted from eleven years of communications (emails, private blogs and others) between herself and a man she refers to as 'Satyr'.

I read broadly – poetry, fiction, philosophy, science and psychology – but only rarely stray into memoir, primarily because I'm more interested in what a person has to say about the world (or the way our bodies and brains experience the world) than what they have to say about their lives. So I was a little hesitant about *For When Words Fail Us*, but, hey, it's a memoir in verse, right? And I read (and write) poetry.

For When Words Fail Us is 'a work of memory and the imagination' that Beynon adapted from eleven years of communications (emails, private blogs and others) between herself and a man she refers to as 'Satyr'. They meet at a photographic exhibition in upstate New York not long before she is due to return to New Zealand and, once she is home, they begin the extensive correspondence upon which the book is based. But her body sends warning signals from that very first meeting. They meet in person several times and it is during those visits that she feels most in danger – yet she continually moderates, corrects or even censors her thoughts, replacing them with a more tolerable version.

It is this self-censoring made plain that I find most curious and exciting. Beynon uses

strikethrough as a device to achieve this, as in the following example: 'it hums like a ~~wild~~ wise child' ("Not all fires offer up a phoenix"). Initially, I found the strikethroughs disruptive and a bit annoying, but it feels like the disruption takes up just the right amount of space to represent the act of mental censoring, and I am now a convert. Strikethroughs are not a new literary device, but Beynon's use feels fresh and clever, and they are not too overt in a work that is already undisguisedly crafted. She also sometimes chooses replacement words or phrases that are so close that it seems the word struck through was a Freudian slip: for example (my favourite):

> She's grateful to the oceans
> and continents for ~~defending~~ defining
> the distance between them.

("Scrambled eggs & straw for the fire")

As a point of distinction, the verse form or structure of *For When Words Fail Us* is strictly controlled: with very few exceptions the text is formatted as groups of three lines; separate pieces within the parts are titled by glyphs designed by Beynon herself; stanzas from "The Waking" by Theodore Roethke regularly appear, mostly at the beginnings of parts, and are repeated as mirror images; and different fonts are used to distinguish some parts. To create and manage this structure – and make it work – must have been a huge undertaking. And there is a point in the book where it feels like Beynon is teasing herself about the strict form:

> …She sends him a proposal.
> What if he were to remove
> the scaffolding from his manuscript
>
> in much the same way
> conservators in a lab release
> a painting from its frame?
>
> The expectations and constraints
> he's imposing on himself and his
> subject will surely fall away
>
> without the content collapsing?...
>
> ("Nymphs & Satyr")

It is this self-censoring made plain that I find most curious and exciting. Beynon uses strikethrough as a device to achieve this, as in the following example: 'it hums like a ~~wild~~ wise child'

Like all good poetry, the language is succinct and lyrical,

> …three
> translucent children skimming
> stones across the afternoon

("Scattering the shadows of dark-bellied fish")

with so much of what is unsaid driving the tension. In the example below, she has planted a pair of maples 'to ground herself':

> She positions them conversational
> distance apart, which is to say,
> not so far apart
>
> that in driving wind or rain, the
> branches cannot touch, but far enough
> for each tree to inhabit its own space.

("Scrambled eggs & straw for the fire")

And then there are little gifts that satisfy my science/philosophy tendencies, such as:

> They agree, it's not so much
> that we put down roots
> in a place.
>
> It's that a place
> puts down roots
> in us.

("Scrambled eggs & straw for the fire")

And:

> Do we expand into all
> we are, or is the process
>
> more like a reduction,
> the way maple sap boils
> down to amber syrup?

("What falls away is always")

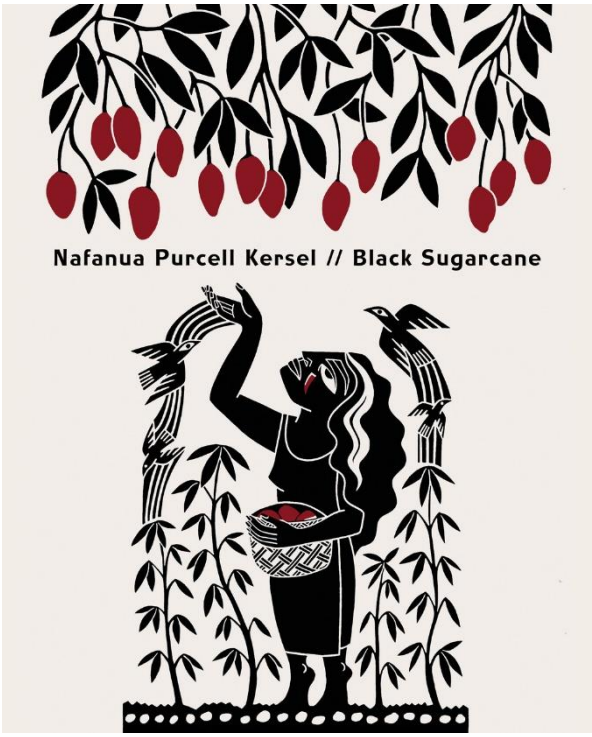
For When Words Fail Us is extraordinary – in its structure, its poetry, its devices, its depth. It is the sort of memoir I could (and did) lose myself in. Its blurb promises 'a spellbinding story of tenderness and obsession, art and the imagination, fracture and repair', and it lives up to that promise. The audience for *For When Words Fail Us* will not be overly broad – it's a challenging read, and a full experience of the book requires curiosity, multiple revisits, close attention and an appreciation of technical skill. I've not yet deciphered the glyphs – what they signify exactly – and there are some niggling questions about the odd element (the chameleons that 'took leave of her [NZ] garden', for example) but I know this is a book I will return to many times and there will be answers to find.

To review books for *a fine line*,
please contact Sarah Scott,
reviews@poetrysociety.org.nz

Michelle Elvy

Black Sugarcane – Nafanua Purcell Kersel

(Wellington: Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2025). ISBN 9781776922222. RRP $30.00. 128pp



Nafanua Purcell Kersel's debut poetry collection *Black Sugarcane* is a generous invitation into community and family, storytelling and history in their many layers – presenting cycles of birth, destruction and rebirth.

The cover art is *Toto maligi i le ele'ele* by Momoe i manu ae ala atea'e Tasker. Tasker notes on her website: 'Re-Generation of Indigenous land our tupuga are always present. Above and below, they surround us . . . The connection between blood and land is very significant to Fa'a Sāmoa, the Sāmoan Way.' And the collection is, not surprisingly, dedicated to generations of women – ending with '…and all grandmothers'.

There are prayers and gifts and affirmations, and the rhythms are playful, sometimes echoing the sounds that bond people together

The poet's attention to language is especially important; there is a song quality to the poems. The book is divided into the long vowel sounds of her Sāmoan language: ā, ē, ī, ō, ū. It's as if we are being led through five acts of a play, or five conversations: each has its own integrity with clear threads, but the five parts work together to create a story arc.

Parts one and two – the ā and ē sections introduce – us to the themes and characters that recur throughout. We hear laughter and mourning notes; we sit in frustration with bureaucracy; we are introduced to feelings of exposure and protection. The opening invites us into an intimate portrait:

> We build a safe around our birth stones.
> Craft it with a dream, a gourd, a drum-made
> chant
>
> Pile it high with frigate bird bones,
> song bones, bones of
> cherished names
> ("Moana Pōetics")

These lines set the tone for the sonic and tactile storytelling that resonates throughout the collection – a 'drum-made / chant' and 'song bones' settling on the reader's ears. There are prayers and gifts and affirmations, and the rhythms are playful, sometimes echoing the sounds that bond people together:

Aunty Sia's laugh is like a
perfectly ripe pineapple
A sweet refresh of vowel sounds
–
Ha ha ha ha! Hi hi hi hi! O ‘o o
‘o! U ‘u u ‘u!
(“To‘ono‘I”)

Family is a central structure. “Grandma's lessons”, for instance, takes us to fashion, garden, kitchen and voice, looking backwards and forwards, carrying the wisdom of place and experience. In this way, the poet demonstrates a kind of calm and grace, and I found myself thinking of Selina Tusitala Marsh's poetry.

More bite comes with the titular poem, which carries a subtitle: “Black Sugarcane (is a remedy for centipede sting)”. The ideas of sting and remedy, venom and sugar, weave this poem into a sharp rumination on the poet's existence.

Kersel also brings her observational eye with a keen sense of sound and metaphor. Often, the reader is struck by the poet's wit. Connected to this, inevitably, is also bite:

Even before you know *all* of my
names,
you ask me to teach you
how to say *shit* in Samoan
so you can, what? offend me in
my own language?
(“Names 'n shit”)

More bite comes with the titular poem, which carries a subtitle: “Black Sugarcane (is a remedy for centipede sting)”. The ideas of sting and remedy, venom and sugar, weave this poem into a sharp rumination on the poet's existence. There is a fierceness here, reminiscent of Tusiata Avia. See, too, lines from another poem:

I'm that
thick-thighed,
pumped-up booty,
lumpy-bumpy dimpled-fleshed
dream bitch.

That stirs-up-all-the-cream bitch.
(“Bitch”)

Two longer sequences must be noted. The ‘ī’ section includes a set of poems depicting the impact, devastation and aftermath of the tsunami that struck Sāmoa in September 2009. The reader is transported to this place, with some poems in the Sāmoan language, bringing the weight of distance and time. Here, the opening lines of “I dream of palolo”:

I spy the palolo moon
as I turn in my cold bed
two thousand miles away

In my sleep
I am there with my mother
by the predawn fires

where we commit
to the usual ways of waiting –
cups of loko and playing cards

that feeling of stories
that feeling of
before
and before.
(“I dream of palolo”)

In the ō section, we come to a series of erasure poems, created from the essay ‘In Search of Tagaloa’ by Tui Atua Tamasese Ta‘isi Efi. Here we have a striking visual presentation – white lettering on black pages – recalling the vastness of space. Reading these poems is like floating: the experience is disorienting, startling, illuminating. In the hands of the poet, images are linked with conceptual frames. Again, we see the poet's close attention to language and detail. One poem opens with:

‘I want to begin for
Tagaloa’
(“Artefact I”)

and the final poem opens with

> ‘I want to legacy /
> for Tagaloa’
> (“Artefact VIII”)

Each segment holds space, significantly, for ‘wind’ and ‘people’.

This collection of poems is a finely tuned songbook of generations and geography, of threads that connect the poet’s family across tumultuous seas. The ū section lands soundly with themes of home, with the final three poems: “Great-grandmother”, “Great-grandchild” and “Koko Sāmoa”, which closes with these lines:

> we mature by the moon
> and return to the banyan tree
> with our children.
> (“Koko Sāmoa”)

This takes us back to the beginning. See here, how the poet gently tugs and encourages the voices that sing out – always a ‘we’ – from the past, through the present, into the future:

> We are a tidal collection, hind-waters of
> the forever we rally on,
> to break the staple
> metaphors from the fringes.
>
> Safe.
> We sound together on a dance or
> bark an intricate rhyme.
>
> We, the filaments of a devoted rope. We,
> who contain a continuance
>
> and call it poetry.
> (“Moana Pōetics”)

To review books for *a fine line*,
please contact Sarah Scott,
reviews@poetrysociety.org.nz

Members' Haiku

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Windrift Haiku Group. Their generous donation to the NZPS will support ongoing haiku projects, such as this haiku feature in *a fine line.*

Into the Dawn – Barry Johns

Wanda Amos

first frost
the throaty chortle
of a tui

Heather Lurie

a clock tower
counts the hours
nightingale singing

Debbie Strange

the arabesque
of cherry branches . . .
frayed toe shoes

Honourable Mention, 2024 Solitary Daisy Haiku Contest

Sue Courtney

fiery sunset
a circle of red around
the oystercatcher's eye

cicada song
a cadence along the edge
of sundown

Julie Anne Bates

even
in this dream
a scent of pine

departing train
my thoughts in
the distance

Contributors

Wanda Amos is from Ngunguru, New Zealand and now Old Bar, NSW. She combines her hobbies of photography and haiku writing, and her love of nature and travel inspire both. Websites: *wandas wandarings* on Facebook and Instagram.

Julie Bates is from North Beach, Christchurch. She is a published poet and haiku writer locally and internationally. Her loves are her husband, walking along the beach, gardening, meditation, yoga, and most of all, solitude.

Tahuna | Queenstown writer **Jane Bloomfield** is the author of the *Lily Max* middle-grade trilogy. Her poetry is published in *Tarot, Turbine |Kapohau, a fine line, Does It Have Pockets, Roi Fainéant Press* and *Dust Poetry Mag UK.*

o(l[ɨ]ve) (bly(~~th~~)) is a wiggly, circular primate/process(ing) and outer-disciplinary artist(ing), primarily based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa(...) she is parasocially attached to Ella Fitzgerald, plays the piano, writes poetry, paints, and ponders(...) [her] debut solo exhibition 'don't be afraid (the clown's afraid too)' was held at Meanwhile Gallery this year(...) she studied philosophy at Te Herenga Waka and [her] poetry has previously been published by bad apple, Mote, and 5ever Books(...) @wiggle.wiggle.inc [Instagram]

Isobel Christie is a writer, student and dramatist based in Wellington. She writes from a intuitive place informed by improvisation, puzzles and environmental escapades.

Alastair Clarke is a New Zealand writer. His most recent work has appeared in *Orbis* (UK), *Live Encounters, Ezine, Landfall, Fresh Ink, Antipodes,* and in the collection *Green Rain.*

Sherryl Clark writes poetry and fiction, both for adults and young readers. She lives in Whangarei and works part-time as an editor.

Megan Clayton (she/her) is a writer from Ōtautahi | Christchurch, where she works in higher education. Poems and essays by Megan have been published in journals in Aotearoa and Australia.

Sue Courtney lives by the estuary in Orewa. She writes haiku for her creative well-being and finds inspiration from her surroundings and the changing seasons.

Michelle Elvy is a writer, editor and teacher of creative writing. Her books include *the everrumble* and *the other side of better*, and she has edited numerous anthologies, including *Te Moana o Reo | Ocean of Languages*, edited with Vaughan Rapatahana (The Cuba Press), and the forthcoming *Poto! Iti te kupu, nui te kōrero| Short! The big book of small stories*, edited with Kiri Piahana-Wong (Massey University Press).

Michael Giacon grew up in a Pākehā-Italian family in central Tāmaki/Auckland. He completed an MA in poetry at AUT in 2015 and self-published his first book, *undressing in slow motion*, in May 2024.

Laurice Gilbert has been published in 9 countries because she hates networking and hasn't the emotional resilience for the NZ literary circuit. Life Member of the NZPS; three Pushcart Prize nominations; once shortlisted for the Bridport Prize.

Jac Jenkins farms and writes in the Far North. In 2018 she co-founded *Pavlova Press*, an independent publishing business in Kerikeri, with her sister. Outside of her publishing work, she has been editing a mixed-genre manuscript she began in her MA year, and fixing fences.

Barry Johns is a Christchurch based writer, poet and artist. His preference is for imaginative poetic writing in prose form. His paintings are acrylic on canvas with a focus on the abstract.

Lyndsey Knight lives in Auckland. Her poetry has been published in various anthologies and journals including the NZPA Anthology, Landfall, Ginosko Literary Journal, The Ekphrastic Review, and The NZ Listener.

Heather Lurie was born in the US and has lived in New Zealand for 19 years. She enjoyed reading haiku whilst growing up, and discovered in 2022 that she enjoys writing them as well!

Jackson McCarthy is a poet and musician from Auckland currently studying in Wellington. He is of mixed Māori and Lebanese descent. His work has been published in *Ōrongohau | Best New Zealand Poems*, *Landfall*, *Starling*, *The Spinoff*, and elsewhere, and he currently serves as an editor at both *Symposia* and *Salient* magazines.

Lee Murray ONZM is a writer, editor, and poet from Aotearoa New Zealand, a Shirley Jackson Award and five-time Bram Stoker Award® winner. With more than forty titles to her credit, she holds a New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Fiction and is an Honorary Literary Fellow of the New Zealand Society of Authors. Read more at leemurray.info.

Sara Qasem is a Palestinian writer and spoken word poet based in Ōtautahi. Her work explores grief, resilience and advocacy for marginalised communities, using storytelling with the hope to inspire meaningful change through shared human experiences.

Mariam Rietveld is a high school student in Dunedin. She loves to explore the arts and academics. In her free time she loves to hang out with friends and read a good book.

Ethan Sheaf-Morrison is a designer and illustrator based in Pōneke, Wellington. His creative practice emerges from a fascination with the intersections of design, art, and writing. Illustration, for him, serves as an expressive outlet—allowing space to reflect on, explore, and give form to the ideas that flow from design and research practice.

Debbie Strange (Canada) is a chronically ill short-form poet and visual artist. Her daily creative practice connects her more closely to the world, to others, and to herself. Please visit her publication archive at: debbiemstrange.blogspot.com/.

Anneke Westra (she/her) is an emerging visual artist and writer. Born & raised in Rotorua, she is currently in her final year at Te Herenga Waka University of Wellington, completing her degree in English & Art History. She's interested in exploring abstract representations of unexplainable / ephemeral memory & phenomena through an engagement with repetitive bird-creature-forms & experimentation in medium.

Mercy Williams is a poet/artist/academic from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently living in Canada as a folklore Master's student. Her work explores the interconnections of queer identity, cultural heritage, and frustrations with modern settler-society living. Further, as a body wrapped in awe for an unbounded cosmos, themes of magical thinking, environmental relationality, and multi-species epistemologies also feature prominently throughout her practice.