

# Poetry New Zealand Yearbook

2022





# **Poetry New Zealand Yearbook**

**2022**

Edited by Tracey Slaughter



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# Editorial

## Breakage

The break in a poetic line — whether that line is broken by breath or eye, by pulse, footstep or thought — always says one thing (among the myriad other signals it may send by its breakage): Pay attention. Wait — let your awareness be brushed by this pause, or jarred by this rupture. Switch your senses back on. Look, it says, we stand at the edge — stop here for a second, wake up, notice life, notice language: there are edges everywhere. Our normal routine patterns of reading risk rushing ahead like our prosaic lives, half-conscious, left-to-right, function-driven, habit-numbed, adrift on the surface, body-blind; poetic breakage tips us, abruptly, out of the illusion that it all goes on in tidy sequenced form.

It cracks the model of dealing with life via language that would have us believe that we can translate existence into safe consumable units, coherent grammatical blocks. It breaks. It breaks suddenly. There are gaps, leaps, lesions. There are flights that make you gasp in wonder; there are pleasures that press you to the crest; there are dead-ends that leave you seized in cold. Either way, pay attention. Concentrate, harder. Listen. Open your eyes.

It all breaks in an instant.

A poetic break is a ‘location of interest’. What it wants, what it cracks the line for, is attention, alertness, awakening, response.

What happens at the crack then, as Leonard Cohen says, is the light gets in. The breakage fills with meaning. The breaking poet hangs that word, that trace, that tone on the gallery wall of the white and our gaze is forced to attend. The damage magnifies, whets our senses. Framed tighter, images gain translucence, call us closer to get transfixed. Our heightened witness casts light back across every line. Sound

intensifies, experience deepens, presence is registered, atmosphere felt. Significance pours in, echoes proliferate, connections are illuminated.

It's a complex kind of light, because in poetry the whiteness does paradoxical work. Poet Glyn Maxwell distils poetry down to its two basic elements — 'the black (something there) and the white (nothing there)'; facets that represent 'voice upon time', human presence against mortality. The line breaks, he argues, because ultimately *we* do, the pressure of the whiteness, the silence, the terminus, the fact of our transience always washing back upon the black. Spin the poem, he suggests, so the black lines stand upright and what you have is a graph of our resistance, vertical lines that push up into the white the varying energy of our voice.

Whether that line of voice managed to blast out a long track of breath that beats or rattles, or whether it managed to offset into the white a single displaced murmur, what matters is that an animal sounded its need, a voice made a noise in the void. Someone spoke out into the white: that act might be triumphant or fragile, might be clamorous or minimal, reckless or quiet; it might be both loud and vanquished, fearless and vulnerable in a single vowel. (I'm hugely drawn to poems that can both give the middle finger and nakedly lament at the same time: it takes a special gift to deliver the punchline from triage.)

You'll find examples of all these voices within this volume, running the spectrum from stripped-back confession to exultantly costumed performative pose. Whether hot-blooded chorus or fine-boned whisper, whether strutting persona or shaken utterance, the black is the sound we send out into the soundlessness.

And it always returns to the edge.

For a second, you are made to face the white.

Look, the poem says, for whatever reason a voice could not go on here, may have struggled in this instant, taken a breath, had to blink, had to surrender, had to break off. At this place, perhaps, the sound of itself rushed into its ears, with all the pressure that floods a human

voice: the heat of the solar plexus, the ache of the gut, the bloodstream's thresh, the feet in the dust, the trembling of the throat's chords. All that miraculous bodily music — whose traces the vessel of language *exists* to transmit — stood here, stilled for a moment, framed against the whiteness.

But go on, touch down again on the next line. Pay attention to the places we break, learn them: they are hard, as so many poems tell us, they are brutal, they are fatal — but for that very reason life shines stronger there. 'I came to talk you into physical splendor', writes C. D. Wright in the spectacularly broken 'Key Episodes from an Earthly Life', a poem whose 'use of space' is all 'leaning toward/what we came for'. It's a piece composed of sensual fragments agleam amidst the whiteness, urging arousal back on the reader, demanding their full carnal range of involvement, making 'perfectly clear' the imperative to pay attention that every poem issues:

Now it is your turn            to shake or  
provoke       or heal me       I won't say it again.

You heard the woman. Bring it all. Waste nothing. Use everything you are to open the poems in this book.

— Tracey Slaughter  
November 2021

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#### Competition winners

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

Ocean Jade's 'Route Back Home' appears on page x; Caitlin Jenkins's 'South' on page x; Sarah-Kate Simons's 'Gossip' on page x; and Jade Wilson's 'Café Vienna' on page x.







# **Featured Poet**

Wes Lee

## **You Had Fallen Asleep in the Chair**

Through the closed curtain,  
not terrible sounds,  
I have heard those  
I remember those.  
And Eamon, the nurse, had just been  
to check the drip:  
magnesium and drugs  
tipped vertical  
the slow veins;  
his half beard  
carefully sculpted.  
And he woke you  
addled into consciousness  
unbelieving (again) of the wall-less room  
as I was so rudely awakened earlier  
by my own heart  
firing outside  
its subterranean rhythm,  
suddenly finding a way up  
through ice caves  
to scatter mayhem.  
Earlier, I had weakly presented  
my wrists as a barrier to my breasts  
throughout the application of discs,  
the metallic grey nipples  
wired to the machine.

## Frozen

The sudden burst into the living room  
of two men in green uniforms.  
Tanned, muscled, tattooed.  
What year is it?  
Can you spell *world*?  
Now backwards?  
Does she always have a tremor?, directed  
at my husband.  
And I want to drink water  
and they give me a sip.  
*No more than a sip.*  
And you can live your life so quietly  
and suddenly this  
midnight rush down the concrete steps  
the porch light turned on;  
an Avondale spider, its legs frozen,  
a starfish.  
Was it there every night  
flattened like that  
unaware a harsh light could suddenly  
blare it into being?

## **The Lasting Image**

*After 'Lost Highway'*

The whitest white  
like Franz Wright's joint in a box of cigars  
or Melissa Lee-Houghton's cigarette burn on the arm  
of the  
'whitest smack-head in town'  
what is glowing in my life  
what remains  
what is burned  
and never leaves

a moment where the man (Robert Loggia) averts his eyes  
when the woman (Patricia Arquette) is stripping,  
when she is nearly down to all of it  
and stands there naked  
her eyes on his face, never leaving his face.

## **For Carbon Monoxide**

*After Anne Sexton*

For carbon monoxide you need a garage and your mother's old fur coat.  
I had a suitor in the 80s whose car filled slowly with fumes.  
I was lulled to sleep as he drove me through the night.  
His name was Joe.  
We'd drive to parties out in the hills, hastened by the blaze of bonfires  
and drumming;  
hair shaking; chanting; one hand waving at the moon.  
As the moon becomes some glorious companion under the influence.  
On the way home, the fumes, slowly leaking in the cabin of our life.  
His strong arms. His eyes on the road.

## **Dolls' Eyes are God's Eyes**

Who doesn't hate their female body?  
When I was given dolls I buried them.  
Given a pram, I rived out its stuffing,  
tossed its foam,  
mixed mud and water with a stick  
then tipped it over.  
I knew nothing  
then, but knew  
more than I will ever know.

Are they still there, buried under clay?  
Glassy deep. Spiky plastic lashes  
hinged (to open); the gravity of the tilt.

Unseeing/all-seeing.  
One of them as large as a baby.

## Archaeology of Blood

The way boys were taken, scoured and cut,  
brought back in triumph  
while girls hid in huts with a dark shrouded flap  
and dare not cross the fire pit  
or any sacred place with blood between their legs,  
fearing their shadows would darken:  
turn earth to ash. Bring famine, defeat.

The shame as I held my bloody gusset out.  
I knew nothing, but knew there was something  
wrong.

Some mothers throw parties:  
crimson balloons; red velvet cake.  
I was handed a nylon belt and safety pins —  
a contraption long consigned  
to the museum of menstruation. While other girls  
pushed tubes inside and released  
a spool of fluffy down,  
I was stuck with outside stench  
and stickiness. A constant wet reminder.

I longed for a hippie mother or a goddess  
with a shield who'd strike at it.  
Banish the rags and wrapping in newspaper;  
reaching through kitchen waste  
to hide it at the bottom of the bin.

*Its excavations; its shell encrusted middens;  
its lumps of blunt-edged crockery; its bones.*

It's been years of heavy welling  
and slick swishing, of fruitless build-up.  
And the way it ended — a year of struggling  
to expel something;  
three days of 'emergency room' pain each month  
that mimicked the pain of giving birth.  
The raw throb of an organ that did not know how  
to cease and desist.

A low gravel, a grave pulling,  
as if my uterus longed to join the earth  
and finally become  
a nest of fungus.

I moved around like a  
pregnant woman, trying to find  
a pain-free spot (when there isn't any)  
just a desperation to make it stop.  
There was hysterectomy talk, and  
'less invasive' — implants; of weighing  
up the weeks of recovery, pitting  
them against months. And testimonials  
from some who bounced back  
quick.  
And some who took to their beds and faced the wall.

But the blood just stopped.  
And I was spared the knife and the doctor's fingers  
widening and watching to see if I  
flinched.



## Michael & George

Why did Michael make jars of coloured water  
line them up on shelves in the garden shed  
then later threaten to kill:

‘The whole lot of you!’

Wrestled to the ground,  
my grandfather’s weight,  
my mother, a girl watching.

And why did they put Michael away  
and why did they drop off

George

one cold

winter night

outside The Salvation Army,  
leave him addled in the snow.

And why, when these moments were  
relived

did they laugh

and why (as children)

did we ask

for the stories again

like nursery rhymes or bedtime stories.

And Michael dips his paintbrush,  
making

gradations of colour.

*He could have been a concert pianist.*

*They put him in the army and he snapped.*

*George stole your pocket money to buy meths.*

I like watching how angry he is,

how young he is,

I like how he holds

his head to one side

to compensate