

a fine line



TE ROPŪ TOIKUPU O AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND POETRY SOCIETY

*Winter 2026
Student Issue*

Featured Poet
Freya Turnbull

Featured Article
Phoebe Robertson

Cover Art
Sofia Drew

a fine line

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NEW ZEALAND POETRY SOCIETY

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Quotation of the season

*'Splintered hairs mark your
crossroads*

*In whirlpools you can't escape
you cling to them. You've left
strands of your hair in places you
couldn't stay*

That's how it is

*When people break, it's their hair
that first starts to split'*

— Karin Karakaşlı, *Real / Asli*,
(World Poet Series, 2024)

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Nasta Martyn



Cadence Chung



Cadence at the latest Salon in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington .

Tēnā koutou,

The student issue of *a fine line* is always a special one. I began writing poetry in my tween years, and received so much support and encouragement from youth writing initiatives such as *Starling*, *ReDraft*, *Write On*, and of course, *a fine line*, where I was the 2020 Featured Student Poet. It's always exciting to see new poetic voices coming out and keeping our tradition alive in unique and multifaceted ways.

The featured student poet in this issue is Freya Turnbull – a familiar face, having been published in the last few issues of *a fine line*, as well as being a reader at the Wellington NZPS Anthology launch earlier this year. I selected her work for its unflinching revelry in all aspects material and metaphysical, its celebration of both beauty and viscera. Freya, being a literature student, calls upon older traditions of art and poetry (such as in the biblical nature of “PLEASE SEND XANAX”, or the potential T. S. Eliot reference in “PHANTOM LIMB” – ‘baby, twist / the knife again’), while still maintaining an undoubtedly fresh sense of voice. The four poems highlighted in her slot respond to each other so wonderfully, with recurring imagery of churches, bodies, and cicadas, among many others.

Alongside Freya, runner-up Ox Maitu plays with queerness and legend in “tales of a trans taniwha”, while Ella Quarmby provides three beautifully shaped vistas for us to gaze upon – ‘All the eating and surviving’ is ‘served at once like an egg’. (“The Egg”). Finishing off our student slot, Ella Van Stipriaan beautifully describes various shades of pink, in a poem written when she was just twelve years old.

The other poets in this issue, including students and non-students, reflect on winter themes of chill and stillness, yet still bring an undeniable warmth. Will Whiten promises to ‘change the faulty bulb’, Robert Rinehart serenades a ‘second-person pronoun / of indeterminate gender’, Michelle Elvy reflects on an old annotation in a second-hand book. Other poets reflect on genealogy and ancestry, while some face the winter cold in a bold, cascading fashion. We received a record number of submissions this issue, and the quality and variety of these poetic voices is truly a treat.

In the featured article, Phoebe Robertson of *Salient* Magazine writes about editing a student publication. In the reviews section, Janet Newman takes on Lynn Jenner’s Kathleen Grattan Award-winning *The Gum Trees of Kerikeri*, and Tim Upperton examines Johanna Aitchison’s *YOU LEFT YOUR HEART*.

Our cover art comes from another familiar face – Sofia Drew, an excellent poet and painter, as well as our Newsletter Editor. You’ll also encounter a few other artworks throughout the issue.

Our next issue is the spring edition, which has the theme of Fragment | He tūāporo. I’d love to see ancient poetry fragments, broken items, memories filtered through time, fragments of overheard conversations; all the broken-up bits that make up this thing we call life. Submissions open on the

10th of August and close on the 10th of September, and are to be received through our Submittable. Members submit for free.

Keep warm and safe, and I look forward to catching up again soon.

Ngā mihi,
Cadence.

Featured Poet

Freya Turnbull



PLEASE SEND XANAX

lightning puts its mouth on me,
arched against the church fence,
not quite a sin but enough to
raise god's eyebrow.

think of how you struck me twice,
braiding cologne into my hair
for the walk home,
the bell tolling crooked
come sunday morning.

it's a haze between
the weekend and the workday,
a.m and b.c.e,
your torso cut of wire and alabaster,
that jesus look with your long hair.
in me, all your gold could live.

whatever i gave you on saturday,
keep it.

IN UTERO

here are the things that i remember:

the air stopped breathing when i turned 21.
the frozen steel scales of blue-lipped mornings,
afternoons anaesthetised by the TV light,
dragging smoke through amniotic fluid evenings,
aborted nights of xanax.

i tugged at any sleeve.
salted every hand that fed me.
sloughed the afterbirth off the soy milk.
gave away my skeleton for safekeeping.
i scrubbed at four years' sweat and let enzymes
eat the death days off my shoulderblades.

sweetheart, i promise to strip no more of me
from the porous bone.
turn this spring over like new cells.
let me know the lipid light of rebirth.

LIZARD DAYS

here is what you'll do.

you'll take the bus & you might cry on it &
you'll go to the grocery store so much the
aisles will become a second skin, apple & quick
math & callouses. you will buy a dish rack.

you'll live lizard days & you'll shed your old skin.
be anew & articulate new bones & bask
until the redrawn reality of you crawls in.
your birthday will be just another ache,
another excuse to drink until you're 17 again

& there is glory in it but you miss the seething
days of a new growth, of a new body, the
white blister of tequila & hollow of hunger
you are slow and gentle like a big bunny &
it is better this way, but you'll always be
a body and you'll write about it endlessly.

you will be a jar of cicada skins or a slasher film
you won't know where to put your grief
so you'll shape it into rage, sloppy and ruthless.
but you won't know what to do with that either.

PHANTOM LIMB

i have heavy-handed dreams, holy opiate,
braiding my brainstem with your cruel confessionals.

you are a phantom limb.

speaking psychologically, i'm cooked.
everywhere, thirsty wings in the skirting, reedy cicada choir.
i am a bad poet because i kill spiders.

i wake gasping like lazarus, dead tired
from a four-days-dream where i am
the tongue rooted to the sculpture of your jaw.

we had fifteen minutes where it wasn't filthy,
tracing your temple in the pollen-wracked world.
baby, twist the knife again.
i'm close.

Runner-up Featured Student Poets

Ox Matiu

tales of a trans taniwha

Tangaroa tongues and teases the
shyness from my bikini
barrel chested forest
of fur choked
breasts

hook
line and sink
her till there he blows
hair from scalp and carves
rib shadowed scales in wanton wrest

switching sides for sounder tides
salt slatted lines fried
fished and fattened
fashioned up
fresh

bite
down harsh
marsh metal burnt
tongue twisted and cursed
curled sparse sound some sailors flesh

Ella Quarmby

Through the Window

It's completely because of
your old driftwood collection
out under the back deck.

All down to
label-makers, their stringy
residue, dust jelly.

Window on the window.

Door on the floor.

Entirely thanks to your
yellow bedroom under its
sieved light, and all
because of the wall
it shares with my pinker one.
It's overall the dog shit rabbit holes,
knee-scrape nails,
all the bougainvillea, backboard fence.

And partly because it is April
which means you are older than you
thought you would be
by three years
and with those you are making
my little room square-shaped
and even littler, carrying it to the car
and letting away things like
an origami cat and a wilted beach-flower.

We are going down the road

and thinking about how difficult it is to catch
the fleeting caps of water-peaks or to fix our eyes
on only one stone

But the orange balloon buoy,
a big target, grows closer as all the little dots
are pushed to the edges.

Like the forearm sharks who trace Balaena's
small semicircle inside a husk of finger-waves
and their inkling of white water.

This hammock of a spot hangs off the bottom
of the loop road that ticks back up
to our beds under the arch of the hill.

It's nice enough to make a habit
and easy enough to imagine it all
expanding outward, concentric.

But Rosie and I have been smoking too many
cigarettes, so we are thinking about
our insides this evening.

The Egg

This lake is flat smash bang
in the centre of a great stone pan,
suds and all kinds of
gunk browning the beaches.
The swimmers and their heads,
great orange yolks marked onto
marble bodies,
mouths wide open,
gulping in all the fish brine,
the bugs with their small teeth
chomping onto all the skin and the skin of the water,
spines crunched open as peppercorns,
little bloods tanging.

I think the swimming is like sustenance,
the figure broken outwards by great thumbs
to lag without a palming weight.
The whole yellow meal of
sunlight come undone.
All the eating and surviving
served at once like an egg.



The Egg – Ella Quarmby

Ella Van Stipriaan

Pink

Colour poems ~ pink ~

A fresh clean start, soft edges almost invisible,
fluffy clouds.

Provincial Pink.

Comforting and warm, bright and happy,
dusky sunsets, family time.
Shilo.

Freshly picked flowers, a splatter of
paint on a blank white canvas.

My pink.

Late nights and early mornings, mud splattering
onto clean clothes, annoyance.
Copper Rust.

Newly laid bricks, burgundy like the Howick
Intermediate uniform.
Red Ochre.

coffee beans, A thick layer of icing dripping along
rivets of cake, warm drinks on cold winter nights.
chocolate.

Ella



Featured Article

Phoebe Robertson



The Universality of Failure

There is something embarrassing about admitting failure, as a writer. I don't believe anyone lives without it, and yet almost every writer I know has learned to write around it. We can write about grief, lust, illness, betrayal, family secrets, the body, the internet, the end of the world. But to say, plainly, *I tried for something and did not get it*, still feels too private.

This is sharpened by the fact that a writer's life is, in large part, a life of waiting to be told no. Between December and June of 2025, I submitted 41 pieces of poetry and prose to competitions, journals, websites, blogs, and portals. I pulled work from my backlog, polished

it, sent it off, sometimes paid a fee, and waited. By the time the responses came in, five pieces had been published.

That is 12.2%.

Student magazines should have a high acceptance rate. Their job is not only to publish polished work, but to let writers enter the process for the first time: the submission, the waiting, the edit, the thrill of seeing your name in print. A student magazine can still say: send us the poem. Let's see what it can become.

There is no universal acceptance rate for literary journals. A quick Google search will now produce an AI overview pretending there is, but, to my knowledge, there is no public database for contemporary Aotearoa journals that tells us exactly how often they say yes. Overseas databases are imperfect, too; they rely on writers reporting their own submissions. The numbers are useful, but incomplete. Still, they give a sense of scale. Some respected magazines sit around one percent. The most competitive magazines can sit below half a percent. Against that, my 12.2% begins to look like what it was: a successful year of trying.

The closest local comparison I can offer is *Salient*, the student magazine of Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. As editor-in-chief, as of June 2026, I can see that we have had 26 individual author submissions in our submission portal for poetry and prose, and that seven have been published: a 26.9% publication rate. But that number does not include authors who emailed submissions directly, writers who were shoulder-tapped, or work that became publishable after an editor sat with the writer and asked the right questions. Most importantly, it does not reflect the factor student journalism can make room for: generosity.

Student magazines *should* have a high acceptance rate. Their job is not only to publish polished work, but to let writers enter the process for the first time: the submission, the waiting, the edit, the thrill of seeing your name in print. A student magazine can still say: send us the poem. Let's see what it can become.

All of this is to say that no writer gets a 100% acceptance rate. The life of the writer is, continuously, a life of rejection. I could recite the template from memory. First paragraph: address the writer warmly. Second: acknowledge the calibre of submissions. Third: begin with ‘Unfortunately...’ Conclusion: wish them luck in their writing journey.

And what is a rejection, if not a failure?

Literary history is also a history of rejection. Ursula K. Le Guin posted one of her rejection letters to encourage other writers. The New Yorker returned poems by Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. William Golding’s Lord of the Flies was rejected before Faber & Faber took it on. The point is not that every rejected piece is brilliant. It is that rejection is not an aberration. It is part of the work.

There are ways to make this sound less blunt. We say ‘it wasn’t the right fit.’ We say ‘may the work find another home.’ We say ‘the editor’s taste is subjective,’ which is true, sometimes useful, and sometimes no comfort at all. Rejection is not always a verdict on quality. Sometimes there are too many good poems, too little space, or an issue already has three pieces about grief.

Literary history is also a history of rejection. Ursula K. Le Guin posted one of her rejection letters to encourage other writers. The New Yorker returned poems by Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* was rejected before Faber & Faber took it on. The point is not that every rejected piece is brilliant. It is that rejection is not an aberration. It is part of the work.

And yet, when it happens to us, it rarely feels ordinary. It feels intimate. It feels as if the email has addressed not the poem, but the person who wrote it. Not ‘this piece is not for us,’ but ‘you are not for us.’ Of course that is not what the email says. But writers are good at reading between the lines, even when the lines are not asking to be read that way.

In high school, I was lucky to have an English teacher, Lisa Sushames, who believed in my writing before I knew what it might become. In my final year, she made a point of bringing up the International Institute of Modern Letters Master's in Creative Writing. She may have been Bill Manhire's biggest fan in Katikati, and the rest of the class may have grown tired of hearing about it, but I never did.

At 16, I decided that was what I was going to do. I had been writing poetry for a couple of years and had some success. A few of my short stories had been picked up, too, so I had momentum, or at least the teenage feeling of its first sparks. The plan was simple: study at Te Herenga Waka, complete an undergraduate degree, apply for the Master's, write *the book*, get it published.

For a while, I seemed on track. In my first year, I was accepted into the IIML's poetry workshop, followed by others. I was progressing through my degree. I completed a minor in Creative Writing. I found mentors, peers, and books that changed the way I thought. Then it was time to apply for the Master's.

For four years, I had been so fixed on the goal that I had not seriously considered the possibility that my application might not be strong enough. The Master's is limited entry; selection is competitive. I knew that in the abstract, the way people know cliffs are dangerous from a safe distance. I had not imagined myself standing at the edge. Despite mentors telling me it was something I should pursue, despite journal acceptances, despite positive feedback in workshops, I applied and received the same kind of rejection email I had become used to getting from everywhere else.

And, in that moment, I felt like a failure. Not 'I had failed at something.' Not 'this application had not gone my way.' I felt like a failure, entirely. The distinction matters. One is an event. The other is an identity.

I did not want to talk about it. I did not want to post about it. I did not want to turn it into a lesson, an essay, or a funny anecdote about resilience. I did not want to be brave or gracious or publicly humbled. I wanted to disappear into the fact that I had built a future for myself that had not happened.

The next year, I applied again. I got in.

I entered the Master's programme I had been imagining since I was 16, and I wrote the book. More specifically, I wrote my novel – the thing that had existed for years as an ambition, then as a plan, then as a document, then as a manuscript. But all I have had from that novel since are rejections.

That is the part of failure we rarely admit to. Not just that we are sad, disappointed, or embarrassed. Failure can make us feel foolish for having wanted anything in the first place. It can make ambition feel like evidence against us. It can make hope seem naive in retrospect, as though the wanting was the mistake.

Getting into the course did not rescue me from failure. Writing the book did not lift me out of rejection. The thing I thought would confirm me as a writer returned me to the place most writers spend most of their lives: sending work out, waiting, hoping, reading ‘unfortunately,’ and trying not to let one person’s *no* become the whole meaning of the work.

Failure was not a single obstacle I overcame on the way to becoming a writer. It was part of the path itself. It was there before the Master's, and it was waiting after it. The difference, maybe, is that I could no longer pretend success would make me immune.

That is the part of failure we rarely admit to. Not just that we are sad, disappointed, or embarrassed. Failure can make us feel foolish for having wanted anything in the first place. It can make ambition feel like evidence against us. It can make hope seem naive in retrospect, as though the wanting was the mistake.

Publication has given me confidence, opportunity, community, and a reason to keep going when the process felt humiliatingly slow. I am not pretending it does not matter. Of course it matters. I would not have submitted 41 pieces in six months if I did not care. But publication is not the only measure of a piece of writing's value. A poem can fail to be accepted and still

name something accurately. A story can never be published and still teach its writer how to write the next one.

This is difficult to remember online, where everyone else's career appears as a neat sequence of announcements: acceptance posts, prize shortlists, book deals, residencies, launch photos, flowers beside contributor copies. These things are real and worth celebrating. But they are partial. They are the public part of a much larger record.

Nobody posts the spreadsheet of unanswered submissions. Nobody posts the folder of poems that almost worked. Nobody posts the application they were devastated not to get, unless enough time has passed for the failure to become a clean story. The internet makes comparison feel like research, when really we are measuring our private lives against other people's press releases.

Failure is not the opposite of being a writer. It is one of its conditions. Every rejection asks the same question: do you still want to do this, even without immediate proof that it is working? Sometimes the answer is no, at least for a while. Sometimes the kindest thing is to stop submitting, stop refreshing Submittable, stop pretending you are unbothered. But often, eventually, the answer returns as yes. Quietly. Annoyingly. Against your better judgement.

You open the document again. You move the line break. You cut the first paragraph. You send the poem somewhere else. You start the next thing.

I do not know if failure gets easier. I suspect we build a larger life around it. A rejection becomes one fact among many, alongside the friend who loved the poem, the student who sent in their first story, and the teacher who believed in you.

Maybe the universality of failure is not comforting because it makes failure painless. It does not. Maybe it is comforting because it tells us that failure is not proof of exclusion. It is proof that we are already participating. To submit is to risk rejection. To write is to risk being misunderstood. To want something is to risk not getting it.

Still, we write. And then, unfortunately, we try again.



The Praying Tree – Katy Soljak

Will Whiten

Untitled

All winter
I listen
for the crunch of your tyres
on the gravel drive,
porch light flickering,
damp pine smoke
dissolving into darkness.

Somewhere, somewhere
neither of us know,
the last stone
will loosen itself
from your tread
and here, at last,
I will change the faulty bulb.

Robert Rinehart

The long winter

Outside, bottles of green glass,
scattered like a Stonehenge clock.
Cloudless, Celsius twenty-seven, sure.
An iridescent deep-cupped
hummingbird, barbules like echoes,
chromatic dances made of light.
Mating feels sensible. More, imperative.

A mere tilt of her head, a toss
from cocked neck, bent this
& that way, waves of light
screened through. Others
barred, held back, waiting.

I watch
this rhumba, micro tail pulses,
pirouette of flash & spark,
memories of disco balls, limens drawn
together, nestlings, families.
But still: life endures.

For sunlight glancing, &
fractions of centimeters' small
charges, engaged couplings,
units of fractal waves sanction
this new generation's hatchlings,
we solemnly praise this morning.

chabba

you, you second-person pronoun
of indeterminate gender, a blend
of Mimi's mascara & Tammy Faye's
southern blush splashed like a fallen
robin egg. misunderstood shell, daft blue,
pretty in life, swept up, hosed down,
an unkempt forgotten life of halves
whose impact, infinitesimal as a germ
saving the planet, will never be known.

Tara Leckie

planets

oh my darling how big your eyes are in the night

 like dark planets wastewater grates voided stars

oh my darling how you like to chew on shadows

 & gum them down

oh my darling. trace your hands over the window.

 palm condensation to your pocket.

 watch the slip of traffic.

out on the roads men drift like unmoored ships. here on sleeping streets

soft animals

 undo light as they move. their shadows blot. then stream,

 they move. they do not doubt.

moths beat their bodies against our door.

inside, we stay busy sucking the skin off of the air.

make itself known

I noticed. my darling. how u like to chew on shadows. me? I am working on something.....
from the corner of the room. deciphering how to draw doves out of the walls..... but u act like
the trees were flayed. so. I ordered gloves online for the purpose, special fit. for the art of
steading for drawing so slow, the pigeons from your brow. for convincing the moon to
stand in a different spot tonight. can we rearrange the shadows to make a little gladness? yes I
too see the punishing streets and dark corners with their middens ready..... gaping ripe,
burial mounds of rubbish that spill, bursting.... like pearls from mouths.... I too am burdened by
unwashed shirts and Saturdays..... but here, look, follow my finger..... okay, ignore my
dirty nails. and the man with his hands down his pants, panting at the
moon..... also, the cats on roofs humping with the possums, to make
big-eyed children ready to peddle temu pottery at the school fair ignore ignore. & all the
words of the retired. (the old man who stopped to say a four year old was vaping on the bus) (he
was just lying for your attention) (attention is the new currency and old men have always known
it) come on my love...
look beyond my wet, vacant mouth, beyond my petalled, feminine kidneys..... Im trying
to cut the leaves out of the night for you..... asking the naked trees to pose for you like
amateur models..... Im trying to line up the pooling streetlight
trying to summon up the kererū to sigh for you..... for the kōwhai to please you
... and fall over your face..... for the sweet patter of the drains... for the water running ... for
cascades on concrete. to fall back to the sea. to all make itself known to you. & return like blood.

Michelle Elvy

Me and Charles Bukowski

were born on the same day, four and a half decades apart. This mid-August day, usually sweltering where I come from, is also the first day of life for Madonna, Steve Carrell and Taika Waititi, Leos all, hear them roar, and just recently, in the case of Taika, on a list defining cool, but I don't need somebody else's notes to tell me that. I share dates with other coolios, too – I was blowing out 11 candles atop a chocolate cake when they found Elvis with 14 drugs in his system, the King gone and forever linked to me, though I've never been to Graceland.

But back to Bukowski. I have nothing in common with him other than the German language and Baltimore, where he landed as an immigrant infant but he haunts me; he being 46 and in his prime when I was born and then dying in March one week to the day before my two brothers in 1994, him on the 9th – leukaemia – them on the 16th when a plane fell from the sky. When I heard of the plane crash, I thought it impossible. *Post Office* was the first thing I ever read by Bukowski. It opens: *It began as a mistake*. I don't really have much common with Bukowski, but there's that.

On my shelf next to *Post Office* is *Ham on Rye*. I recall the opening with the small child being under the table, maybe feeling safe there, while bigger people argued in loud voices. I remember the description of the highest keys of the piano sounding like ice chips clinking. I grew up

thinking that too except for me it was the sound of ice in my mother's mint juleps. *Tink tink*, the E- Eb trill. I lift the fallboard on my piano and try it just now, and yes, it's the way the ice sounds in her glass, and right about now it's her evening and she will have just filled her tumbler on this heatwave day with little shards from the miracle crushed ice maker on the front of her fridge. When she came to visit me in Dunedin, I went out and got ice trays and was amazed that they come in all shapes and sizes, not the aluminium ones we had as kids, the ones with the levered arm that was always hard to crack and the trick was to run just enough water to start the melt but not too much because ice was precious then.

But back to Bukowski. I went back to the book, *Ham on Rye*, because I was thinking of the sound of ice, and read what he wrote, those opening pages, and I noticed the word 'striking': 'like chips of ice striking against one another'. Far from my nostalgic *tink-tink*. That was a difference – that and their piano being out of tune, which would never have happened in our house.

My mother's piano was her livelihood, as important as the family car. We didn't peer out from under the kitchen table like young Karl, but we grew up under the mahogany Baldwin with a few toys and a teething ring, first in a strapped-in baby seat and then in a playpen, once we were mobile. All five of us. There was no mobile hanging from our little plastic baby containers. The underneath assemblage of the piano, its wooden frame and smooth edge of the curve following the strings from short to long, was as familiar to us as the sky. So were the shins of every student.

But back to Bukowski. The book, *Ham on Rye*, has been on my shelf for 31 years, since 1994 when it came to me along with so many other of my brothers' things. This copy feels crisp still. It has a neat inscription in the front:

1990

Kirk

Merry Christmas

Love, Steve

So my brother had it for four years before he died and it looks like he read it but also like he cared for it. I have thought for years to look for Steve again.

Sophie Rae-Jordan

Silver Thin

The place came with hooks: in every room
someone had seen reason
to hang possessions from the roof.

New rooms raised within each room,
the tenant's mirrors. Or, just decoration.

I've hung one thing: a small pothos
in a hand-tied cradle and a shaded corner.

The leaves cast a dappled shadow
on the wall, outline vague
and changing. At times, the pot seems

to swing at the edge of perception,
the living in it restless and squirming.
It turns slowly on its twine, weight coming

to a heavy but precise point: perhaps I am cruel.
I have wanted to slide
a needle into the pupil of myself
for a long time now
but my eye keeps shifting.

Isobelle Masters

The Forgotten Track

The blue book,
covered in protective glass,

its paper, thin and powdery,
sits unassuming.

There is a slouchy couch
facing the projector,

the hum a dull,
methodical melody.

You can sit
and watch the words go by.

As slow as
paint drying.

*Kaumatua Number,
Kaumatua Name,
Kaumatua Number,
Kaumatua Name.*

In the 1920s,
when the whenua was smoke-pungent
and war-struck still,

Dangy's father trudged along
the muddy trails of Waihopai

with his five tamariki
to build a whare.

A land not yet sown,

a track not yet taken.

But,

there is only so much
you can build in a year,

only so much time to plant,
to harvest the kūmara.

So,

he goes.
He does not build his whare

He does not plant
his kūmara.

In the 2020s,
I uncover a huia beak on my forearm

and it calls out in languages
lost on my tongue.

In this bright room of screens
Grandma clicks on a land map

and writes to her cousin,
some 50 years since she last spoke to her.

The undergrowth of the track is heavy
but it can still be walked upon.

Hei te tau tītoki

Can you taste the sweetness
of the kūmara now?

Alastair Clarke

Funnelling

...of world's noise. Of silence/silences.
A leaf's fall (silent) is freedom of a kind.

Seeing the ducks, silken on the pond.
Seeing the dog, its leg raised

eager on its leash – while the cabbage trees
erupt above the wall.

Are we free on these silent streets?
Might a death betray? Unlock?

Small skinks scatter as I sweep the path
of wind's leavings. Dead leaves. Are they free?

Or the breeze – sneaking like a voyeur.
Or (unseen-seen) atoms in light's diffraction, lensing,

(settling?).

Rachel Faleatua

Tatau

i tattooed words across the lagi till the words stumbled over themselves and fell from the sky

rolling they gained momentum throwing themselves down fitfully till the 'ele'ele turned and
stars mourned

words were damming the river but i took my chisel and i broke the letters until the vai flew
across the lagi and the visceral response among the stars was one of rhapsody

i stopped holding my breath for all was as it once was

bar the markings etched across my hands – those were there for good

Jasmine O M Taylor

ONLY THE HIGHLIGHTS

Strong wind is yanking at the neighbourhood
 In my smoky cave of the front door alcove
 I hear suspicious clattering
I bet one of the rotting fence palings blew off
I keep twisting backward to things I said
It doesn't matter and nobody but me is thinking about it.

Yesterday was a magnolia tree
Today was kelp in a rockpool
Fusilli salad with kale at ADJØ
The urge to piss and loud music and the sounds of espresso
Yesterday was also a sliver moon
Slight and translucent seeming against a very clear sky
Pīwakawaka danced in the magnolia
Heavenly despite the cool breeze
Oh it was Tuesday

The picture of the kelp made me miss the ocean
Having waves push and pull me at once
It can be scary in there
It can be exactly what you need to keep going
I remembered licking my arms
I remembered sunbleached arm hairs
 My attention flits wildly
It is a moth

I watched a video of a man drop his phone between the slats of a jetty.

I watched a video of a ute towing a broken-down transporter up a steep Australian switchback.

I watched a video of a macaque gagging at the scent of a century egg.

The moon always returns.

Kathryn Grant

Driving home later than usual

The moon has blown
a huge delicate bubble
onto the hill edge, a cage
of yellow breath.
I'm driving towards it
holding mine in case
it topples or pops.
Shouldn't glance either
over my shoulder
at the extravagant scratch
flourished on the sky
in disinfectant pink.
Around us
the unfamiliar furniture of fog
is levitating over the paddocks
in tables and slabs:
a morgue,
a mushroom feast.
Easy to run
off the road with this
performance art distracting me.
When we get to it
our house is so cold
it is like we died.

Reviews



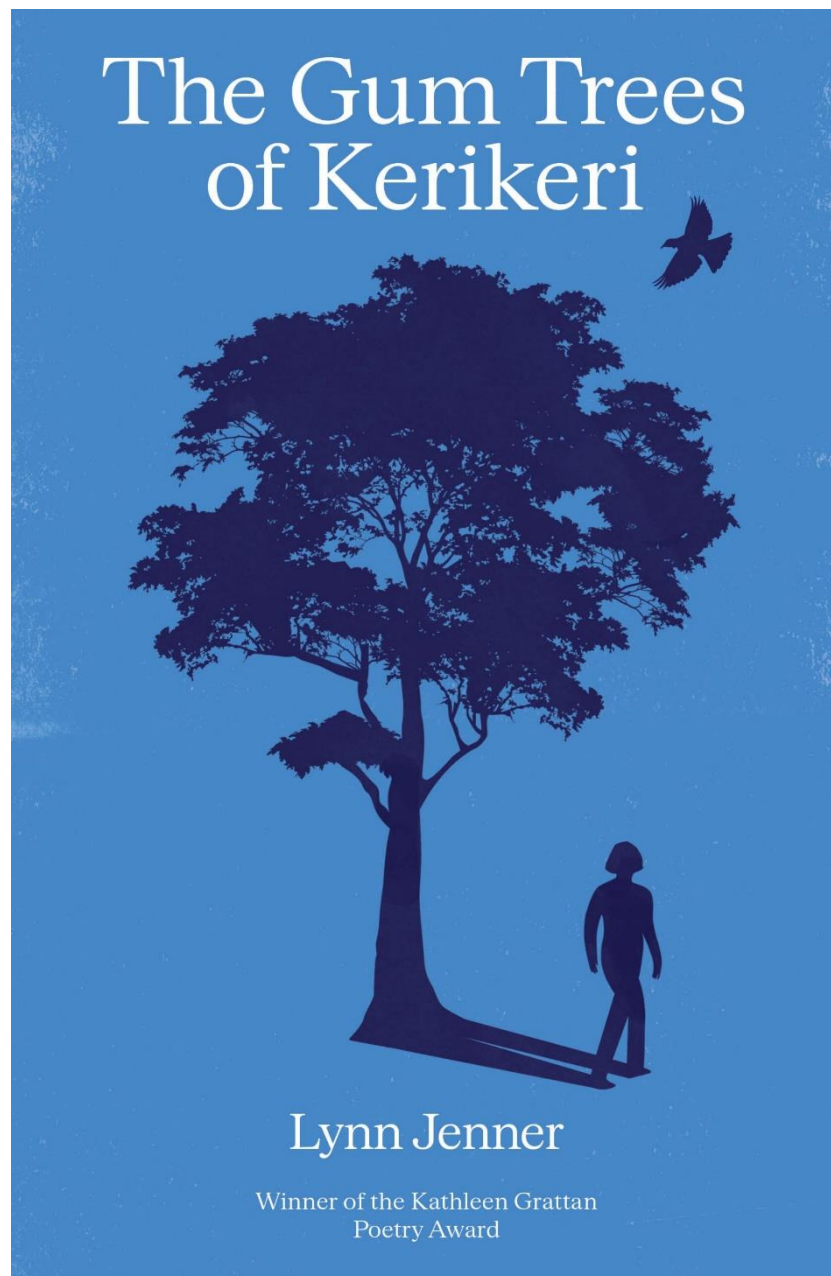
– Nasta Martyn

Janet Newman

The Gum Trees of Kerikeri – Lynn Jenner

Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2026

ISBN: 9781991348180. RRP: \$30. 64 pp.



I was shocked by news footage from Ukraine and Gaza a few years ago. Recurring scenes of rubble and destruction reminded me of Peter McIntyre's monochrome paintings of the 1944 Battle of Cassino. I have been to Cassino where my father fought. I have walked amongst the graves of men and boys buried three deep; I have pushed ceramic poppies into the earth beside rows of white headstones. I recall that jarring sense of shock but now feel a constant gloom, so routine have the horrors become. I look to my garden where fat caterpillars wait patiently for the miracle of metamorphosis, quince glow golden in equinoctial sun, persimmon slowly ripen. The people of the Far North are less partial to persimmon than to the other fruits they grow and share, Lynn Jenner tells us. Not a gardener herself, although at times wishing she was, in order, I suspect, to have the distraction at her disposal, Jenner accepts the gifts of fruit she sometimes thinks she has done nothing to deserve. With this, she gives to us, her readers, the gift of human kindness.

The Gum Trees of Kerikeri is not a doomsday book but it asks the hard questions. Is this the age of the death of the planet? Do you see deliverance and redemption anywhere? Is this the Promised Land?

The Gum Trees of Kerikeri is not a doomsday book but it asks the hard questions. Is this the age of the death of the planet? Do you see deliverance and redemption anywhere? Is this the Promised Land? And most chillingly, given that it was written before the current war in the Middle East, are we there yet? These questions are framed in reflections around the artist and writer who posed them: Colin McCahon and Anne Tyler, and around the philosophy of Zhou Zuoren. Jenner tells us Ursula Le Guin searched near the end of her life 'for a way to resist the unfolding political and environmental catastrophes of these days.' This quotation perhaps summarises the book's raison d'être. Jenner responds by relaying Le Guin's suggestion to follow 'Lao Tzu's "way of water" in order to counter aggression without being subsumed in war' then walks the aptly named Fair Weather Loop Track. After crossing a stream, the river's position confounds her sense of direction. It has proved a worthy resistance. The river's twists and turns, pools and wildlife focused attention on the natural world's beauty and mystery. So you see, this is not a pessimistic book. It is a gentle journey of enquiry in a life filled with everyday joy and confusion. Each poem feels satisfying yet curious: a small offering of humanity with a grounding effect at a time of crisis.

There are 56 prose poems, the longest of which is a page in length, so it is a physically slight book. There are no sections, chapters or titles. The poems are simply numbered. This lack of headings to guide the reader works to focus attention. Reading each poem is like walking a new bush track with a sense of impending surprise. I found myself asking, how is this going to end?

The poems begin by portraying life in a small, northern town. They celebrate the small things that unite a community, such as a friendly wave to a passing motorist. The tone is unemotional and matter-of-fact, yet the prosaic language contains metaphor and playfulness. A tour group from a cruise ship is compared to a line of SpaceX satellites, gum leaves are fabric and feather. Recurring motifs and images create an organic whole linking poems about disparate things: for instance, white space in Colin McCahon's art and in a TV crime series.

We learn that the gum trees of the title were planted to provide shelter for livestock by a farmer who laments not being patient enough to have planted slow-growing natives. The poet has 'mixed feelings' about the exotic trees. She mourns the loss of other gum trees felled for firewood, which she buys. She describes a farmer on *Country Calendar* who venerates a single remaining kahikatea on a sheep farm he has planted in pine trees. Such portrayals showing the complexity of ecological change are modulated by references from art and literature that reflect on the value of trees across time and place, leaving the reader to ponder these associations. Other poems offer a similarly slant take on colonisation by reflecting on plaques and statues that are seen but which serve to reveal what is hidden.

Political but practical. [The poet] likes to 'walk up hills and watch what the birds are doing.' But even looking to nature has its fishhooks.

The poems' speaker, who I have every reason to believe is a true and faithful rendition of the poet herself and not a persona, spends her days walking the many rivers and bush tracks of her local area, going to yoga classes, protesting for Palestine, watching detective shows. The focus of these poems which make up nearly half of the collection is connection to place, people and the natural world that surrounds her. The poet is thoughtful, unsure about how to deal with the world's political and climatic problems but trying to live a good life with 'dark knowledge.'

There is a shift just before the half-way mark at poem 25 when talk of ‘a big war coming and capitalism in chaos’ (such prescience) disrupts the quotidian narratives. Jenner reflects on this possibility with matter-of-factness and empathy, saying she ‘always thought it would be a good thing but it’s costing people their jobs and makes our savings shrink.’ Political but practical. She likes to ‘walk up hills and watch what the birds are doing.’ But even looking to nature has its fishhooks. The so-called natural world is filled with violence and catastrophe: paint marks trees ready for harvest, traps catch introduced predators, and: ‘A hawk flies her usual beat from east to west looking for anything small and soft and undefended.’

Jenner is... stuck, she says, between ‘optimism and insouciance,’ unsure whether to look to science, love or to escape into a television series marathon.

Poem 26 continues the shift away from the everyday to concern about the health of the planet. Here, ‘you,’ an unnamed person who lives with the poet, hopes for the best, replying yes to the question: would you have a baby now? Jenner is not convinced, stuck, she says, between ‘optimism and insouciance,’ unsure whether to look to science, love or to escape into a television series marathon. ‘Kitch now has a certain high-brow appeal and offers its own form of comfort,’ she writes. In poem 29, she compares her relationship with the way they keep a good but old vacuum cleaner ‘despite certain inconveniences’, which I found very funny.

Along with humour hand-in-hand with weighty questions about the future of humanity, there are poems that tend to a belief in the whimsical or at least to the prospect of knowledge outside Western science: the power of St Francis, comfort in a star falling on the right rather than the left, bathing in moonlight. These possibilities perhaps reveal how we create optimism when there is little else that will surely work against the world’s cruelties. Here is poem 51 in full:

After 10 days of rain the sun is out; light and warmth feel
like a great power for good. I see six doves pecking in the
grass. I think of Noah and the dove with the twig in its
beak. And now, with the sun on my face, I think these
six doves on the lawn in Kerikeri might be an omen of
peace somewhere peace is needed. Sun and doves against
monsters and tanks.

The Gum Trees of Kerikeri is Jenner's second book of poetry and winner of the 2025 Kathleen Grattan Poetry Award. It is a book for our times, not because it offers hope but because it validates uncertainty. It asks the big questions without finding answers. It celebrates enjoyment of the things which give us comfort and which we can control at a time when there seems little we can be reassured by from those who are in control.

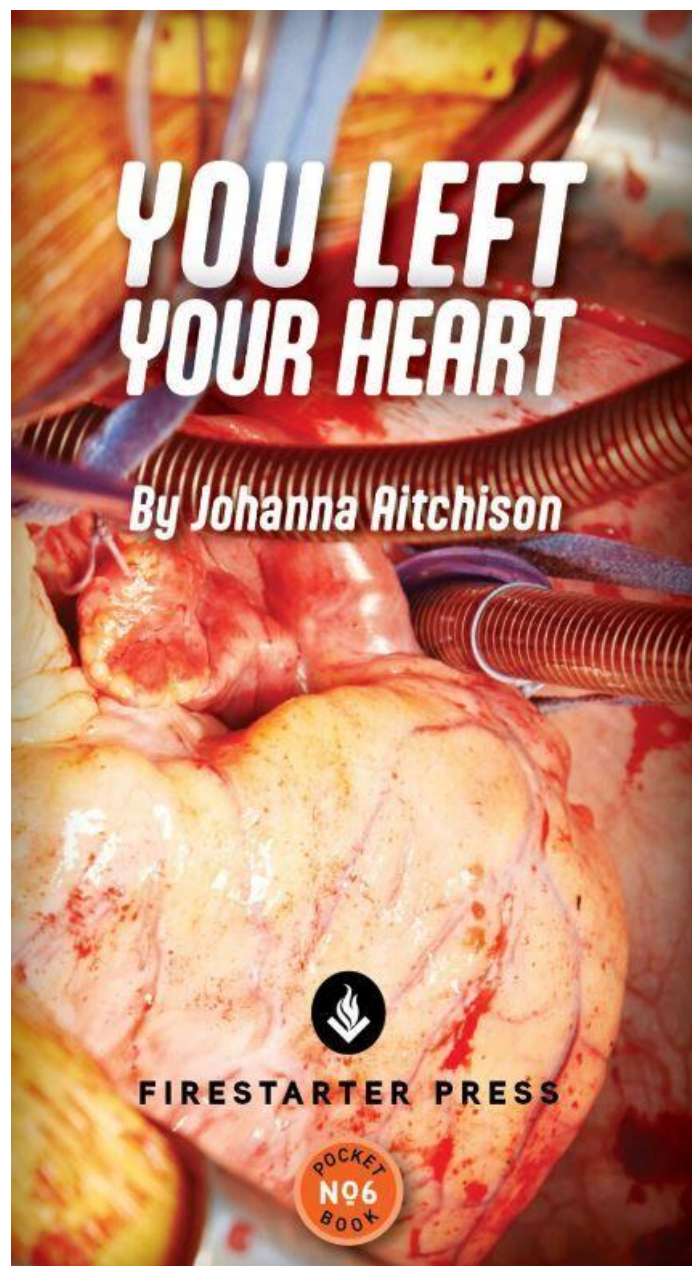
And how does it end? With the sweet taste of fruit of course!

To review books for *a fine line*,
please contact Sarah Scott,
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Tim Upperton

YOU LEFT YOUR HEART – Johanna Aitchison

Firestarter Press, 2025.
ISBN 9780473737382. RRP \$12.99. 35pp.



The seventeen prose poems that comprise this collection are located in a world made familiar and strange, and are various in their geography (ranging from the Desert Road volcanic plateau to the American Midwest to Pakistan), their subject matter, and their personae. The ‘I’ moves from one poem to the next, will not stay still, will not even stay the same speaker. But throughout the collection runs a narrative elusiveness coupled with surreal imagery – something we don’t see much of in Aotearoa New Zealand poetry but will be familiar to readers of, say, James Tate or Charles Simic, and the poets grouped by American poet and critic Stephanie Burt under the label of ‘elliptical poetry’.

...throughout the collection runs a narrative elusiveness coupled with surreal imagery

The stand-out poem in this vein is “Buffalo”, which begins with a casual conversation between the speaker and her friend ‘outside the Cook Street Dairy’ about milk, and then shifts to the responsibilities of owning a buffalo in Pakistan. Soon the speaker is imagining caring for a buffalo of her own, and then a herd, and what such a life would offer her:

Your nights will ripen into village parties. “These people,” you cry, as you twirl and twirl, “Where were you all before?” You can see the gathered backs of the herd tearing up the lawn, they are sharing out the winds of the savannah. With their milk you toast the moon; to the sky whose rhythm you thought you’d lost forever. To the drum, which has taken on new hooves and got to beating. To the buffaloes: you appoint them Chief Shredders of the torn grass; you appoint them High Forest Eaters. Let us stand, let us stomp, let us split open the skull’s house and roam again.

(“Buffalo”)

It’s a freewheeling poem that surprises at every turn, and the language evolves from the poem’s homely beginning to the elevated diction of an ode, a spell, even a prayer (with a nod, in that concluding phrase, to that classic American folk song, “Home on the Range”).

The poems also hark back to the so-called Confessional poets of the 1950s and '60s, and their experiments with the 'I' (these experiments make 'Confessional' a misleading term). In another poem, "I am Living in a Hole with John Berryman", an Aitchison persona participates in a dialogue with a famous Berryman persona – 'Henry' from Berryman's *Dream Songs*: "Are you really Henry?" I ask Berryman. "You know the answer to that," he says, "not the poet, not me." ("I am Living in a Hole with John Berryman").

The status of the 'I' is uncertain, provisional, in ways that serve the poems but that also suggest questions about our own identities – the stability of those identities, whether they are singular or plural, immutable and essential or flimsy, make-do constructions.

The status of the 'I' is uncertain, provisional, in ways that serve the poems but that also suggest questions about our own identities – the stability of those identities, whether they are singular or plural, immutable and essential or flimsy, make-do constructions. In the first poem of the collection, "Miss Dust at the Scanner", the speaker is standing at the airport scanner when officials demand that she remove her shoes. But that is not enough: 'Scan Officers ask her to remove her belt.' Still not enough: 'The officers are afraid they'll have to examine her peepers as well. Miss Dust scrapes out her eyes and drops them onto the tray. The Scan Officers are really sorry, but they'll also need to see her teeth.' ("Miss Dust at the Scanner"). At a surface level this poem concerns the dehumanising, invasive demands at immigration checkpoints; at a deeper level it asks where the self resides. Such checkpoints exist to confirm identity status – but what would confirm that? How many layers does a self have?

The poems tackle these philosophically and psychologically fraught questions with a lightness of touch that is engaging and funny. I admire the way they evoke the everyday negotiations a restless intelligence must make with a world inimical to it. This small book, which fits easily in the palm of your hand, expands upon reading.

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*.



WAR, WAT is it Good For – Katy Soljak

Thomas Smith

pō kore whetu
he karāhe waina
he whakanui i te mokemoke

starless night
a glass of wine
toasts loneliness

Adele Robins

amber to ice white
icing sugar slopes take shape
clear cut crystal views

Nola Borrell

ploughed field
a clamour of seagulls
fills the furrows

(Kokako 39, 2023)

John Zhang

a quiet night
my apple tree
blossoms in the yard

ancient drum
for a giggling baby
a road sign

Jordan Yee

cherry season gone—
one shrivelled fruit
still hanging

Contributors

Nola Borrell's haiku have been published In Aotearoa and overseas since the mid-1990s and have won various awards.

Alastair Clarke's work has appeared in *Mayhem Literary Journal*, *Landfall*, *Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook*, *Orbis* (UK), *Antipodes* (US), *a fine line*, *Live Encounters* (Indonesia) *Ezine*, *Fresh Ink*, and in the poetry collections *Seeing* and *Green Rain*.

Sofia Drew is originally from Tāmaki Makaurau and currently based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, where she studies English Literature. Her art and writing have appeared in *Starling*, *Symposia*, *Salient*, and previous issues of *a fine line*. In 2026, she was the recipient of the Elizabeth Brooke-Carr Emerging Writers Residency. The artwork in this issue is dedicated to the tarapirohe (black-fronted terns), who nest in Oriental Parade.

Michelle Elvy is an editor and writer in in Ōtepoti Dunedin. She edits at *Flash Frontier* and *At the Bay | I te Kokoru*. Her books include *the everrumble* and *the other side of better* and the forthcoming collection *Motion sickness*.

Dr Rachel Faleatua is a lecturer in media and communication at Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington. Her poetry has been published in *Landfall* and *takahē*.

Kathryn Grant is a gardener and poet who lives by a river in Wairewa / Little River.

Tara Leckie is a writer and librarian in living in Te Whanganui-a-Tara. She sometimes feels that she has turned into a boiled egg.

Isobelle Masters (Ngāi Tahu/Kāi Tahu, Scottish) is a poet, creative, and recent graduate of Te Herenga Waka. When she is not writing, she enjoys trying different iced drinks, installing art exhibitions, and providing policy advice within government.

Nasta Martyn is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, poet, and writer. She graduated from the Academy of Slavic Cultures and has a Bachelor's degree in Design. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Art History.

Ox Matiu (Ngāpuhi) is a tipua of the Far North, vacationing in Te Whanganui-a-Tara while they continue their postgraduate studies in translation and Māori art history at Te Herenga Waka.

Janet Newman lives in Horowhenua. She is an editor of *Koe: An Aotearoa ecopoetry anthology* (OUP, 2024). Her collection, *Unseasoned Campaigner* (OUP, 2021), won the 2022 NZSA Heritage Book Award for Poetry.

Ella Quarmby is a student at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. You can find her poems in *Symposia*, *Mayhem*, *bad apple*, and the *Poetry Aotearoa Yearbook*. You can also find her paintings in previous issues of *a fine line*.

Sophie Rae-Jordan writes poetry. She lives in Pōneke and has been published by *Turbine* | *Kapohau*, *Sweet Mammalian*, *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*, *Symposia*, and others.

Robert Rinehart lives in Whaingaroa Raglan. Poetry and short stories have appeared in *Swamp Ape Review*, *Mayhem*, *Backchannels*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *Cottonwood Journal*, and *Syncopation*. robert-rinehart.com

Adele Robins is a self-taught poet, without any formal training, who writes from the heart. She expresses how she interprets visual and emotional cues across a variety of forms either via her Instagram page @your_words_worth or via submissions to share her love of words.

Phoebe Robertson is a Pākehā author who has completed her MA in Creative Writing at the IIML in 2024. She has previously been commended in the Charles Brasch Young Writers Essay Competition and holds further awards from *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*, Young NZ Writers, and National Flash Fiction Day. Her work has appeared in the last four editions of *Mayhem Literary Journal* and various other online platforms.

Thomas Smith is a physician and former university professor. He has published Japanese short form poems as well as free verse and rhymed poems in a number of literary journals. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his family.

Katy Soljak is a New Zealand creative whose work offers a rich, layered exploration of identity, heritage and storytelling, making her a distinctive voice in New Zealand's contemporary art scene.

Jasmine O M Taylor (she/her) is a tangata Tiriti, pākehā, bisexual poet. She lives in Ōtepoti and is part of the current Octagon Poetry Collective team.

Freya Turnbull is a poet, student, and aspiring spectre based in Pōneke. Her work has been featured in a number of publications, most recently *Bloodbath*, *The Spinoff*, *a fine line*, *takahē*, and others. She enjoys putting corpse paint on Barbie dolls.

Tim Upperton's most recent poetry collection is *A Riderless Horse* (Auckland University Press).

Ella Van Stipriaan is a Year 9 student who loves to read and is 'mum' to two rescue cats, Taco and Neon. She wrote her colour poem "Pink" when she was 12 years old.

Will Whiten is a NZ writer based in Hanmer Springs. His work has appeared in the Award Winning Australian Writing anthology and several journals. He is currently working on a poetry collection – *a million ways home*.

Jordan Yee is a student at the University of Auckland studying Computer Science and Business, writing poetry for fun and to practice creative expression.

John Zhang is a poet who likes writing about daily life experience.