

AUP  
new  
pools  
11

Xiaole Zhan  
Margo Montes de Oca  
J. A. Vili

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poets  
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Edited and with a foreword  
by Anne Kennedy

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## *Foreword*

The three poets whose work appears in this issue of *AUP New Poets* write in strikingly different styles – differences in structure, form, voice – and yet each calls out to us with equally compelling insistence. In Xiaole Zhan’s essay-poem, layers of memory and discovery circle and build, creating deeply felt personal and political connectedness. Margo Montes de Oca collages fragments, narratives and the found poetic motifs of her literary inheritance to explore nature and being. J. A. Vili distills the legacies of loss into a lyric beauty; by mihi-ing to friends and whānau, he places poetry at the very centre of community. So although these poets could not be further apart in how they approach their craft, each is performing that remarkable literary purpose – making connections. They connect their various ideas; they connect with us, the readers. At a time when the assertion of poetry is more important than ever, the three new voices here invite us to enrich our experience of life and thought.

In ‘Arcadiana’, Xiaole Zhan (詹小乐) weaves memoir, myth and critical theory to tell a story of growing up in a Pākehā-Chinese family. With this work, Zhan joins a movement of mostly women writers who have taken poetry to a new place, where the personal essay and cultural theory are pieced together to form a bricolage. One of the hallmarks of this form – and arguably what makes it ‘poetry’ here – is its highly refined language and structure, its patterned analysis of the self in the world. Zhan’s voice and vision are as powerful as any writer working in this form.

The seemingly disparate threads of Zhan’s narrative are deftly connected by various means. Symbols like *water* bubble through the text: the Noah’s Ark parable which pops up strangely in the young speaker’s life; the ‘stench of guts and stormwater’

at the Chinese fish market ('3'); the '[f]loating worlds' of British composer Thomas Adès' string quartet, the eponymous *Arcadiana* ('7').

Zhan's modal mix of imagery and storytelling also acts to unify. Packed into the crotts – the small chunks of prose – are vivid descriptions: 'The blood falls into the snow' ('12'). Yet Zhan pulls no punches about *what happens*: 'My Pākehā grandfather, like my Pākehā stepfather, had an unforgiving temper. When he stabbed me with his walking stick, I would run to my grandmother in tears. She would hold me in her arms and tell me he once served in a war where he used to have to kill people who looked like me' ('17').

Finally, Zhan's intricate, layered, genre-bending 'Arcadiana' tells a common world story of place and movement in a profoundly transcendent way.

Margo Montes de Oca tells of fractured journeys through constantly surprising locations in her quixotic 'intertidal'. Like Zhan, Montes de Oca's primary concern is disruption of place and its effect or fall-out. But these poems have a partly Romantic style at their heart. Montes de Oca's often-haunting montages combine rich, elemental imagery – water, light, colour – with a world of feeling: 'to step on grass and know only its greenness' ('only'). And, 'the rocks look up at you through the surface / they move too much to be asleep' ('metamorphic'). Again and again, Montes de Oca invites the reader to experience the sea, the land, and experience itself, anew.

One of Montes de Oca's hallmarks is her homage to other poets; by finding, adapting, continuing, she highlights the importance of the reader-writer transaction. Footsteps of Sappho, H.D. and others inform the poems here in fresh ways. Examples abound. The metaphysical stance of Alice Oswald pops up in Aotearoa, as, 'dream-lines the roots of the ngutu kākā / coil up against the walls / push on the ears of the earth / with their long persuasions' ('lift / up / over / sounding'). In 'migración',

Montes de Oca employs the poetic form devised by Natalie Linh Bolderston where each stanza can be read from different directions, to luminous and meaningful effect: 'flies / from méxico / like orange butterflies'. Montes de Oca's poetics and family roots combine in rhythmic, musical, visual elegances.

While Montes de Oca embraces a romantic vein and a tensile imagism, she simultaneously (like Zhan) tells it how it is: 'my grandma is sad because / her friend wants to die: she tells me this / and her eyes are the colour of the stones' ('at the bay'). The surges and returns of 'intertidal' uncover multiple revelations, sometimes deceptively so. Beneath Montes de Oca's romantic surface, experimentation and newness seethe like a powerful undercurrent.

J.A. Vili writes, in particular, about the untimely death of his wife a few years ago. These aching yet exquisite poems go beyond grief to create a sense of solace and hope for those left behind. Core to Vili's purpose are tributes to family and friends – deep gestures that reach out. Some poems tell stories of those passed: 'Her head carved by surgeons / scars the ridge of her crown' ('At the Feet of a Mountain'). Others speak directly to the subject with a sense of devotion: 'Our boy doesn't remember you / only from old photographs' ('Carnival at the Point').

In the end, these poems are not just for Vili's circle but for all of us. What makes 'Poems Lost During the Void' reach out is the close-up lyricism, the sounds, rhythms, happenings of a life. Vili writes with an intimate fusion of the specificity of his world (including the Māoritanga of his late wife) and a universality: 'Jazz Thornton's on the news this morning // is there another girl / on another bridge? // contemplating gods & flying lessons // with fractured wings / & broken wairua' ('Funding Cuts Deep').

Vili's lyric is carefully wrought. Polished elegance combines with casual-seeming tossed-off-ness. Stories are big and

small: ‘the broken letterbox talks to me in tongues / I try to read the broken lips of the bottles / scuffing the edges of my blue bin’ (‘Passage Southside’). And, ‘It’s a long way to go for a rugby league game / car radio can’t tune into Hēnare’s frequency’ (‘Road Trip to Kaipara’). There is memory: ‘my father’s taro patch, camouflaged an army of street kids / our shed, my concrete bunker surrounded by an onion mine’ (‘Tobruk Road’).

In the construction of a life, ‘Poems Lost During the Void’ moves outwards from grief to show with beautiful intensity a life observed, remembered, reawakened.

These new poets, it is clear, write with skillful awareness of the various – and very distinct – literary inheritances. Yet each poet does so much more. In *Actions & Travels* (Auckland University Press, 2022), Anna Jackson asks, ‘If we think of readers and writers of poetry as wholly gone up to the housetops, is revelry all the work to be done, or can the work of poetry be directed outwards, not only serving poetry as an art or a tradition, but also taking part in politics, ethics and community building?’ (p. 143). The three poets here write with purpose into our everyday world.

*Anne Kennedy*

**Xiaole  
Zhan**

**Arcadiana**

1.

When I was fourteen or so, my mother wanted me to volunteer in the community because she thought it would help me build character. She talked to the directors of the church where I took piano lessons, and I soon found myself teaching Sunday school without having ever attended Sunday school myself. When I brought this up as a possible issue, my mother simply told me, 宝贝, *Darling, it doesn't matter*. I bought an illustrated children's Bible. I woke up early every Sunday morning. I buckled myself in the back seat while my mother drove me to church. My fate was sealed.

2.

When? Perhaps millennia ago. A childhood in retrospect takes on some element of the myth, or perhaps the folktale. Years ago, a long time ago, when my mother had back pain she would call to me, 小乐过来给我吸背, and I would burrow my knees beside the hill of her spine. *Too much moisture in the body*, Māmā told me when the suction cups on her back bruised in blue and purple circles, oozing with yellow pus along the rim of each cup. I imagined the body as a dark cave, bones dripping stalactites, corroding canals. In childhood, pain and healing were always closely intertwined. My mother boiled bitter gooseberry leaves for me whenever I began to wheeze. The medicinal herbs at the zhōng yī throttled the air like hearsay. 太热气, my mother would say, too much heat in the body from eating dry food. Her mother, my pópo, always said, 良药苦口利于病, the more bitter the medicine, the stronger the healing.



# Margo Montes de Oca

## intertidal

The dreams were not confined to her indeed, but went from one brain to another. They all dreamt of each other that night, as was natural, considering how thin the partitions were between them, and how strangely they had been lifted off the earth to sit next each other in mid-ocean.

Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*

## trace fossils

in the intertidal zone / anemones sleep / kelp lies in golden tongues /  
under black pools / in the intertidal zone / i cling to a rock / the barnacles  
press into my palms / imprint themselves on me / like disappearing stars /  
in texas this year drought scorched up a river / they found footprints in  
its bed that were one hundred million years old / vanished bodies shored  
up and shining / yesterday i saw a woman hurrying across the street /  
the wind swept her hair into question marks / she carried a white placard /  
THE CLOCK IS TICKING / i burrow into the crevices / i cluster with the  
snails / they write important messages on my skin / we are waiting for the  
water / to sluice away the drying sun / in the intertidal zone / it is always  
a matter of time.

**J. A. Vili**

**Poems  
Lost  
During  
the  
Void**

## Funding Cuts Deep

for Tui

Jazz Thornton's on the news this morning

is there another girl  
on another bridge?

contemplating gods & flying lessons

with fractured wings  
& broken wairua

catching rays & stinging barbs – carving

poems into wrists – kōrero  
smoke into ambiguous eyes

of the vulnerable – the queenless beehive

cuts funding to govern –  
mental states

disregard the contagion & torrent times

tāngata dissent – climbing  
the branches of the kōwhai

the tūi – sing in protest.