



AUP
new
poets
6

Ben Kemp
Vanessa Crofskey
Chris Stewart

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Edited and with a foreword
by Anna Jackson

AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
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Anna Jackson

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Foreword

AUP New Poets 6 presents three very different poets, Ben Kemp, Vanessa Crofskey and Chris Stewart, who each offer a distinctive approach in terms of both form and content. We move from Ben Kemp's slow-paced attentive readings of place and people, in a selection moving between Japan and New Zealand, to the velocity of Vanessa Crofskey's fierce, funny, intimate and political poetry, which takes the form of shopping lists, Post-it notes, graphs, erasures, a passenger arrival card and even *poetry*, and finally to Chris Stewart's visceral take on the domestic, the nights cut to pieces by teething, the gravity of love and the churn of time. Yet there are common strands too, as these poets all perform their own acts of archaeology, unearthing bones, uncovering secrets, finding solace and significance in food, testing cultural change and difference, drawing connections between people and finding in other people everything that is needed: as Vanessa Crofskey writes, 'if I don't have wifi then I do have a cell phone to ask my mother how cold it is in another city'.

Walking to work,
a stone wall shoulders my path ...
it was built 700 years ago
by monks who tended the gardens with
tiny scissors & a clear mind

These beautifully paced lines from Ben Kemp's 'Juni-Gatsu' introduce an aesthetic that runs through all his poetry, a way of moving through the world attentive to detail and to the constant, the still and the historical, valuing clarity and the neatly tended. This aesthetic shapes the look of his poetry on the page, the beautiful stanza shapes and spacious unfolding of lines and sentences, and can be seen too in the careful choice of words, the stone wall that 'shoulders' the poet's path and, later in the poem, a 'fragile' frost, people 'the temperament of porcelain'.

Born in Gisborne in 1972 and brought up in Manutuke and Matawhero, of Rongowhakaata roots, Kemp first travelled to Japan at the age of twenty-three, and returned to Tokyo in 2002. A musician and songwriter, Kemp played on the street in Shimo Kitazawa, one of the more Bohemian areas of Tokyo well known for its vibrant music scene and, with musician Koyu Suzuki, was soon performing at some of Tokyo's most prestigious live venues. Throughout the poems in Kemp's selection for this volume, we find him with 'ears attuned to performers entranced within tunnels, / their folded legs, / affront music aficionados baptised in coffee and single malt whisky', but with ears attuned too to quieter sounds, hearing wind through the grass as 'the song of a 10,000-piece orchestra with no sheet music or conductor' or 'listening with ears to the thin walls of the sky, / like *shōji* doors that pierce when the planes scatter like needles through silk'.

Setting *kūmara* alongside white rice, wood pigeon alongside green tea, Kemp writes as a New Zealander even in poems located in Japan. In 'The Japanese Moko', the bone chisel is 'at rest beside an earthen teapot', and 'the wrinkled shadow of this warrior, with one *wabi-sabi* eye' is found 'in *kūmara* garden / and under night's sky'. In 'Ranginui's Tomb', Ranginui can be found 'wandering through the / narrow streets of Gōtoku-ji', holding 'the wounded sky in his hand'. These poems move between Japan and New Zealand, observation and memory, the contemporary and the historical, the personal and the imaginary, a cuckoo singing in 1584 and beings flaunting LCD eyes 'with hardwired electricity cables to their temples'. The precision of the details in these poems is matched by the scope of the empathy and imagination Kemp shows as he looks through the eyes of a stranded whale, seeing the world for the first time 'without the lens of seawater', and presents his own Whitman-like self as made up of all those people he has passed by in his travels, along with the landscapes he has loved on his journey to the sea.

Vanessa Crofskey begins her selection with a poem about her dislike of talking: 'I would public protest with black tape, bound wrists and a righteous vow of silence just to avoid it'. Swimming

offers a brilliant way to avoid smalltalk, and the uncanny observation she makes that a scream screamed underwater is converted into ‘laughter bubbled into / pearled pops and gargled sound bites’ offers an unnerving way of understanding the humour that makes her poetry so much fun to read and share. Just as the poems themselves take many different forms, they also chronicle the many forms communication can take – postcards, screenshots, the comments section of a recipe site, a ‘civil conversation’ in a cafe when things are pretty much over, ‘fights like filmic mosquito bites’, phone calls, emojis, ‘curt emails about when an appropriate time to Skype would be’.

A graduate of Auckland University of Technology with a BVA in sculpture, Basement Theatre producer in residence in 2018, currently working as a staff writer for *The Pantograph Punch* and as a curator at the University of Auckland Window Gallery, Crofskey brings a multidisciplinary approach to poetry. While the visual and design elements are immediately striking on the page, she comes to poetry through spoken word, and the power of her work in performance has seen her receive a number of slam poetry awards including the Best Spoken Word award at the Auckland Fringe festival in 2017 and the 2017 Auckland Regional Slam Championship. Amanda Robinson’s description of the effect of a Vanessa Crofskey performance is true to my experience too: ‘Between poems she’s sarcastic and self-deprecating, but when she begins a poem she silences the room, save for a synchronised sharp exhale when she drops a line like “Weren’t you an open casket for the reckless?” She is in total control of her intonation; even her breaths feel calculated.’

That self-deprecation of course is present in many of the poems too, but it is a complex self-deprecation, at once funny, poignant, vulnerable, controlled and aware of the social and political context which both accounts for this need to put herself down, and in which she uses self-deprecation to make subtle and powerful points. Body image, romantic entanglements, pop culture, anxiety, disassociation, ideas of beauty and ethnic stereotyping all come into play as competing tensions and colliding possibilities.

Of Hokkien Chinese and Pākehā descent, Crofskey writes of being ‘so authentic i use chopsticks to eat macaroni’. Identity is complicated, and some of the ways in which it is constructed in contemporary society are really funny. But thinking about identity can be serious emotional work too, as a powerful poem like ‘The Capital of My Mother’ demonstrates, exploring the complex mixture of heredity, kinship ties, cultural difference, displacement and time that extended family involves. ‘I cannot find home except the sense / of somewhere I can’t reach’, she writes, ‘I am a migrant’s remembrance / I am a welcome party’.

‘Time’s handle locks from the inside’, reads the title of one of Chris Stewart’s poems – he has a talent for titles. For all the visionary imagination that takes these poems into such strange territory, as facts and observations take off into metaphor and simile, and into dream and the surreal, there is a hard-won realism to these poems. A secondary school English teacher, Stewart took a year of part-time teaching to look after his two pre-school daughters, and writes powerfully about the demands of parenting small children. Parenthood opens up vast reservoirs of love – in ‘inflammation’ the father taking up his desperate vigil over the child in the hospital’s respiration room, wishes he could tunnel into the child’s lungs to defeat the enemy he hears as bees – but it also involves sacrifice, incarceration and a transformation of the self that can never be undone. After bathing a small daughter by firelight, he wonders ‘perhaps my forehead stretch-marked / as my frontal lobe grew / a new fold’. As parenthood stretches into the future, time takes on a new urgency and depth, transforming, too, memories of the poet’s own childhood and his relation to his own parents.

Parenthood is physical, instinctive and natural – but nature has all kinds of patterns for parenthood, from the penguin father who sits on the egg while the mother hunts fish, to the scorpion wary of his daughter’s sting. Nature can’t always be turned to for answers – ‘I went to the panda she told me / to leave one daughter behind / I went to the mouse he told me / to eat both my daughters / I went to the worm it told me / to let my daughters eat me’ – yet

the animal imagery that runs all through this collection does offer surprising moments of recognition, as does the imagery of space travel, alchemy, archaeology, mining and the Gothic (the father as Egyptian mummy). Several of these poems draw on the particular derangement that comes with the sleep deprivation of early parenthood, and it is not only in the poems directly about teething that we find tooth imagery working its way in. One poem ends with the bleak statement ‘in a year of sleep you never complete / a dream’. Yet perhaps these poems are a form of dream completion, as the wild inventiveness, strange resonance and desperate emotions usually confined to dreaming find their way, through these poems, into the light.

The image from Ben Kemp’s ‘Juni-Gatsu’ of the carp rising to the light resonates for me with the work poetry does:

the carp bask under muddy glass ...
sometimes twelve or thirteen at a time,
trading their safety for the sun ...

All three of these poets write beyond safety, writing about difficult and painful subjects as well as things they value both big and small. *AUP New Poets 6* includes poems about whale strandings, teething, dispossession, loss, the pain of physical exercise, the embarrassment of swimwear, the gravity of responsibility; as well as poems about clean sheets, rice, bathing a child, white-washed pages, red ink, the love you feel with the shiver of your skin, friends to watch *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* with, parents to the rescue, cherry blossom and the chatter of 10,000 seagulls.

Anna Jackson

**Ben
Kemp**

**The
Monks
Who Tend
the
Garden
with Tiny
Scissors**

Juni-Gatsu
(December)

Japan is delicate,
& in December when snow settles upon the branches,
it feels like a Buddhist prayer ...

Walking to work,
a stone wall shoulders my path ...
it was built 700 years ago
by monks who tended the gardens with
tiny scissors & a clear mind

Walking to work,
my fingertips hang out from under the sleeves of my jacket ...
tickled by a morning sun & a frost, fragile,
like the ribs of a leaf ...

Walking to work,
the peddlers in steaming noodle carts have faces like nourished hide ...

if you get close,
their foreheads are old photos,
with grandfathers, mothers,
brothers & uncles, resting over their brow

walking to work from Yoyogi-Uehara, where I live ...
it's saintly ...

when the sun hits the orange tile roofs
knelt down through the night ...
they rise to their feet.

& in Shinjuku, where I work, the people the temperament of porcelain,
with cheekbones
like Zen ...
& Kurosawa

& in the canal,
the carp bask under muddy glass ...
sometimes twelve or thirteen at a time,
trading their safety for the sun,

& over the bridge with wide hips & feet resting in a puddle . . .

I enter the arteries of Tokyo ...
with ears open ...

listening for you
for Manutuke
the Te Arai ...
& the sound of oranges growing.

Food to Song

1. ご飯 *Rice*

Rice,

White moonlight,
with an undershirt of calcium,
held aloft in two wooden fingertips
the trail of seeds to Jōmon.

Old people,
koshihikari, the taste of the *shakuhachi*,
a singular stream of air,
with toes in white waterways of phosphorus.

Dusty bones,
draped in a cloth of translucent starch,
a pearl in soma,
swell the iron rich children of grass.

Copper pot,
under the pirouette of watery ghosts,
in a cot over white ash,
the lively chatter of 10,000 seagulls.

A shed husk,
scented of one grain,
this white cloak was a shelter
to one universe that withheld the map to god.

2. Kūmara

Sweet potato,

Taputini,
a voyage to Polynesia east,
an offering of kūmara
brings tears to the eyes of Toroa.

Matariki,
behold the eyes of god,
clear and bright this constellation of stars,
a pathway of light to harvest.

Hutihuti,
the blessings of Rongo-mā-Tāne
rest at the toes of spring,
tapu mounds of soil scatter the hillsides.

Rekamaroa,
a bed of hot riverstones,
under the earthen blanket,
steam rises, the buttery smell of pork belly.

Houhere,
creamy fingers to open mouth,
mīere, mīere, oh mīere
upon a honeyed tongue, spirited tīpuna sing.

**Vanessa
Crofskey**

**Shopping
List
of
Small
Violences**

Postcard from Rainbow's End

I wish I was heartbroken at the top of Mt Fuji
or in deep plunging overdraft in the rouged canyons of Germany
or so depressed I can't speak but in Disneyland, California
or maybe just sad on a nice black-sand beach

I don't believe in pathetic fallacy as a metaphor for anything
It can't Tiger Balm my heart for proven pain relief
My blisters still peel like mandarins and I still
graze my hands on gravelled conversations

I thought if we only communicated in postcards

I thought if we only communicated via boring methods
like curt emails about when an appropriate time to Skype would be

I'm emotionally
attracted to unavailable men in damp hotels
whose unsent texts never lose their lustre

I'd rather feel like shit in luxury
than pick a fight with Alison Bechdel, or
the next guy on Tinder wearing a stupid band shirt I've never fucking listened to

Even if he has a dad bod
Even if his mum's house has central heating

Anyhow, if you want me,

I'll be nursing margaritas at a day spa in Bali
picking at my French harp which sounds excruciatingly lovely

I used to play the silent game even during lunch breaks

The consequences of silence is that
once you learn to hold your breath underwater
you'll realise it feels natural

Lungs should burn like an unholy corrosion
Like a negroni you buy just to relax your mouth a little

At least no one makes small talk when they're swimming

or treads a conversation around and around and around
the kitchen of your friend's friend's house party

Pity that if you yell at the sky it sounds like disturbance
but scream under currents and it's laughter bubbled into
pearled pops and gargled sound bites

Without any of the

- What do you mean by that
- Lol IDGI
- So how do you know the host?

texts afterwards

Talking is like swallowing iron pills
I would public protest with black tape, bound wrists and
a righteous
vow of silence just to avoid it

A peak hour Kmart line of salmon dancing
A panting fish jogging up the street, clutching its pedometer
A huge blue squid redirecting its oceanic migration route
to avoid bumping into someone they knew

(Ariel knew)

I can hold my breath for about 30 seconds
which bizarrely is the same amount of time
I can keep up a phone conversation

Remuera

we knew it was over when we saw the borders of our fingers blur rapid against creased thighs when our faces ran out of boundaries borders marred by endless meetings artifice and orifice double death eaters sucking the light out of each other forgetting to draw healthy curtains once the switch became a friction licking earwax from erogenous caverns we let you enter us in public space are broken to stronghold you love us with gentler arms brown doors and wet fingers sex is a skin graft but a whimpered finality becomes a repeat ending split ends as common as archived inconsequence in the arched back of morning we break we line dash we promise we get better we will stop fingering our absences we will not fail our learners we will get a car like an adult and sunset our issues to implosion fast enough to put our woes straight on DVD release we want you to fuck us separate instead of whole again we sit miles apart and make civil conversation meet in a cafe and play out fights like filmic mosquito bites we exchange the names of lovers like worn business cards our snakes for hands inch up a ladder of common sense we are a dog in competition a bitch in heat and in order to necromance fidelity we say the obvious thing like please give us back our inability we are an island of scrutiny a swing bridge of colonies and *no thanks I'll pay for my own coffee*

**Chris
Stewart**

Gravity

navigator

I remember the first bearing of love
our backs on the midnight grass
the summer air stopped warm
as fingers charted skin

we lay inside the moon's road
saw directions to the future
I pulled a star down
from the map of the sky
drew a plot of it in my voice for you
I crawled inside that message
nestled through the calm of your hair
and waited to be opened

now your thoughts lie in the earth's still latitude
dissipated like the archaeology of stardust
I return from the sky
to navigate the cartography of us

gravity

before I clamp
and cut a length of time grown
from the black hole of your belly
the midwife interprets placenta
the way astronomers read constellations
a loop in the cord the myth of your departure
I hear nostalgia for the womb
the way light misses the hearts of stars
we glove the light in our skin
find sleep in solar wind
wrap ourselves in the gravity
of your arrival

everyone wants to know how heavy they are

you bear them to the scales
not because they're heavy; it's the weight
of the thought you might lose
balance and trip
they look cold on that weighing dish
after that you try not to measure them
there are proper ways to lift them when
they grow into dumbbells
one day you notice new muscles in your back
then you can hardly pick them up
when everyone wants to know how heavy they are
what weighs on you isn't knowing the kilograms
but the force
with which you are pulled towards them

embers

the first time we bathed
our daughter in the lounge
it was dark except for the fireplace
she lay between us and flickered
the chiaroscuro was so solid
in the water it etched
still frames in our memory
some say humans evolved staring
into waves of fire
sheltered precious embers from rain
settled the arctic with flame
and old religions of the sun
we painted shadows when we dried her
modelled light around her curves
you said you saw the stroke of another
crease on my face
perhaps my forehead stretch-marked
as my frontal lobe grew
a new fold

‘It is said that we are in the middle of a poetry revolution in New Zealand: there is certainly a lot of production, an eager climate of reception and a sense that new cultural confidences and anxieties are finding new expression.

It is a pleasure, then, to find a carefully chosen selection of new poets and new poems that show the rich diversity of the contemporary scene: from Ben Kemp entering “the arteries of Tokyo . . . / with ears open . . .”, to Vanessa Crofskey’s barbed attention to the deceptions and oddities of our try-hard but not really multicultural society, to Chris Stewart’s patient observations of family and childbirth.

AUP New Poets 6 offers us three genuinely new poets who carry us into the varied energies of a reflective, flamboyant, at times impatient and caustic writing scene.’

— Mark Williams



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