

CHRIS

BESIDE



HERSELF

PRICE

'All of my best lines are accidents', Chris Price writes in this book, and proceeds to prove that she has the knack of putting herself in harm's way and the skill to build from there.

Beside Herself plays with character, and with language, and with the way the one works on the other. Pronouns and personae shift and dance in this book in the same way that meanings do – 'After the expected, the unexpected. / After the unexpected, the formal handrail / and the overflow.' Price has always been attentive to the unlooked-for delights of language – she is a master of the riddling word-play poem – and uses this play in the service of something larger, an exploration of character and persona and perspective: 'I am every character – every, every character'. These characters appear from a variety of times, places and fictions – Richard III, Hamlet, three readers (one a writer), Richard Nunns and Miss Bethell – from contemporary Wellington to medieval England. The longer sequence 'The Book of Churl' is the narrative of medieval everyman; another long poem, 'Beside Yourself', is both a battle against the relentless first-person pronoun and a celebration of it, in ramshackle poem-diary form.

A selection of beautifully crafted, riddling poems of persons and personae, truths and falsehoods, frank identities and masked selves, *Beside Herself* is a playful triumph.



Chris Price is based in Wellington, where she teaches the poetry MA at the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University. Her first collection of poems, *Husk*, won the NZSA Jessie Mackay Award for Best First Book of Poetry and her next book, the genre-busting *Brief Lives*, was shortlisted in the biography category in the 2007 Montana New Zealand Book Awards. Auckland University Press released her third book, *The Blind Singer*, in 2009. From 1992 to 2004, Price co-ordinated the New Zealand Post Writers and Readers Week and she was editor of *Landfall* from 1993 to 2000. Price was the 2008 CNZ / Auckland University Writer in residence at the Michael King Writers Centre.



ENTANGLED EPIGRAM

Light writes happiness.
We bury it in earth
then set it alight.

Earth turns black
and liquefies, black sinks
condensing centuries

dwelling on dark until
its obverse hazes into
sight, then rises

into light that burns
through bone — night light —
and out the other side

to draw a diagram
of white on black.
Light writes white.

And happiness? Is
colourless, retreating,
out of sight.

THE VIENNA CONCERT

You've pulled off the highway to have it out at last
in this small lay-by, improbably picturesque
in daylight, you both recall, but tonight the dark
makes a lit box of the ticking car,
the things that bound you — music, booze —
no longer big enough to exclude
your differences. After a difficult pause
it starts to rain, but the windscreen's

dry. You're listening to applause,
the work of many hands in a concert hall,
Vienna, 1991, showering
their praise on two who now fall
silent, their run of luck having found
its exit from felicity, its natural end.

WRECKER'S SONG

All of my best lines are accidents.

You cannot generate an accident.
You can only put yourself

in harm's way.
But harm has a way

of finding you when
all you want is predictable

not accidental.
Your bodywork,

yesterday so stylishly
smashed up, today

just random sobbing constellations
strewn across the blacktop

of State Highway 1.
The hawk hunts in the afternoon.

The car dislodges him
from connoisseurship of

an earlier collision —
a moment's inattention rewarded

with unsought metaphor, a broken wing.

SPELL FOR A CHILD TO REMEMBER

How the song will lift you
up with just the two
balloons of your lungs
the oxygen rush
and a flame the colour
of sky and sun.

How the song will send you
down, canary, into the pitch
and black of you with only your
vocabulary for a lamp and
a tone halo but you will see
the mineral glitter.

How the song will draw other
aspirants and suspirants
to the high valleys and
deep gulches where you
will circle wagons and post
a sentry with one eye open.

How the song may be a green
silk bag of laughter that spills
over all too easily, causing
the heart to murmur later
if you inhale too much
(just ain't enough) of it.

How the stealthy fingers of the song
will reach out and leave
their prints on the locked
gun cabinet or the ingots
buried where X
marks the long lost spot

in you. The grazed elbow,
the split lip, the spilt
milk, the little brown
jug of wit and woe, of
will in you the song
will mop the spill in you.

How the song will wait
no matter how long,
how high the moon
or tower, however dry
the seed or flower —
the song will raise you.

THE NEW CUISINE

But excellence had left the old recipes. It was no longer possible to French dress for an English audience, or con the locals with the pallid mash of home tricked out in fancy language. The chemical gastronomists had plied their expertise until none of us would set foot in the kitchen. Even the traditional dishes had turned sour: milk UHT, sometimes processed cheese, faint tang of plastic at the back of the palate. What all of us once knew was hoarded in the snowy alpine province of the few. Time to strike a blow for — what, exactly? We couldn't say until that crisp autumn morning when, after breakfast at the simple wooden table, Jane picked up a paring knife as we were thrashing through the dishes of another dead-end conversation and thoughtlessly began her cack-handed, unfamiliar, apt undressing of the familiar apple.

APPRECIATION

A poem is as hard to like as a person
says Emily Gould. Oh Emily,
how true! Sometimes the person,
sometimes the poem is harder.

What makes the frog suppose
you will appreciate him any better
on the hundredth hearing? And yet
he persists, with his three-note wonder.

But the poem you dislike
will not pursue you, which point
is in poetry's favour; and by the one you do
you will be happily pursued.

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