



*The Best of Best New Zealand Poems* edited by Bill Manhire and Damien Wilkins. Wellington: VUP (2011). RRP \$35.00 Pb, 223pp. ISBN: 9780864736512. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

*The Best of Best New Zealand Poems* is a selection of poems from the online anthology *Best New Zealand Poems*. The book is edited by founder publisher Bill Manhire, and writer Damien Wilkins. The collection allows the editors considerable freedom with regard to the selection process and the number of poems chosen for inclusion. They have done a splendid job and manage to include sixty poets, together with the poets' comments about their poems. The anthology is large and generous, structured in alphabetical order, with the poet's poems in the first section and notes biographies in the second. The impact is stupendous within the covers of one publication.

Wilkins tells us in his Introduction that "our selections reflect where the action is, rather than where any progressive ideals might position it. This anthology takes in many of the key figures to emerge in the last ten to twenty years, many of whom are women . . ."

What I appreciate about this anthology is being able to catch up with the work of so many of our excellent poets; poets who are well-known to most New Zealanders. Fleur Adcock, Jenny Bornholdt, Allen Curnow, Bernadette Hall, Sam Hunt, Cilla McQueen, Vincent O'Sullivan, C. K. Stead and Brian Turner, and so many more who have poetry included.

In Stu Bagby's "The boys" the poet delivers charming observations on his "boys" – "they're Aberdeen Angus after all. / I call them boys / but strictly speaking they're steers . . ." Jenny Bornholdt's lengthy poem "Fitter Turner" offers:

It was a year when our bodies  
surrendered – knees, backs, lungs – listen

to your shoulder, instructed my physiotherapist,  
who was also studying English Literature

at university. *Wild nights / Wild nights* she'd quote  
from Emily Dickinson as she massaged my neck

It's not so hard to be taken somewhere stranger than home reading both these poems, yet they resonate with something familiar and known.

Not everything is comforting. Rachel Bush's "The Strong Mothers" is a gutsy poem: she asks, "Where are the mothers who held power / and children, preserved peaches / in season, understood about / greens and two classes of protein, who drove cars or did not have a licence / who laughed, raged and were there?" Glenn Colquhoun's prose poem "To a woman who fainted recently at a poetry reading" draws on his background as a doctor and the poem is a welcome surprise that has earned its place in this collection. Lynn Davidson's "Before we all hung out in cafes" is slight in length, but contains a sharp enough message: "Nowhere to go but the classroom or home / from the patch of rubbed out grass // where the rhythm failed us."

The detached yet slightly cynical approach of Cliff Fell's sequence "Ophelia", which is divided into thirteen sections, was written in response to an exercise set by Bill Manhire on the topic of "My pet". Fell's notes at the back of the book give a lengthy explanation of how the poem evolved.

I was more than happy to find several poems included here which are among some of my favourites: Andrew Johnston's "The Sunflower", Cilla McQueen's "Ripples", Vincent O'Sullivan's "The Child in the Gardens: Winter," C. K. Stead's "Without" and many more.

One of the best of the best, as far as I'm concerned is Richard von Sturmer's "After Arp", which is divided into eleven sections. Von Sturmer comments in his notes: "Although Arp is better known for his sculpture and painting, he produced wonderfully imaginative poetry all his life. His surrealistic poems have a very pure quality, and when I happened to read through them once again last year, they triggered atavistic surrealist tendencies in my own writing." Here is the first section "Mushrooms":

The flat, black mushrooms  
grow luxurious green hair.  
Green hair edged  
with a band of white.  
Green hair as luminous  
as underwater plants.  
Green hair than can be fashioned  
into horsehair whisks.

The flat, black mushrooms  
exhale clusters of stars.  
They live in a section of the forest  
where no flies can settle.

Many more poems deserve mention: Brian Turner's "Fear", Ian Wedde's "To Death" and the last poem in the collection "Ashleigh Young's "Certain Trees":

One tree pretends to throw things  
and the wind goes sprinting, then skids, turns –  
ha! Sucked in again, old wind!

One tree chooses to be apart,  
like a door halfway up a wall.  
My window groans with the weight

of trees  
staking their territory.

Space doesn't allow for sufficient of poems from this large collection to be considered in a review. The book is a great way for readers, students and teachers to read contemporary New Zealand poetry, finding gems along the way and plenty to think about.