



***Close to the bone* by  
Charlotte Trevella.  
Wellington: Steele  
Roberts Aotearoa Ltd.  
www.SteeleRobertsco.  
nz (2013). RRP:  
\$19.99. Sb, 68pp.  
ISBN: 9781927242032.  
Reviewed by Sue  
Wootton.**

**Charlotte Trevella's**  
first collection of poetry,  
*Because Paradise*, was  
published in 2009 when

she was seventeen, and widely praised as containing remarkable work for one so young. Her follow-up collection, *Close to the Bone*, is (as the title and cover image imply) interested in dissection and examination – a process familiar to Trevella from her medical studies. “It’s like x-rays, this poetry”, she writes (“To be perfectly honest”).

This collection begins in characteristic Trevella territory, in the liminal space where imagination is washed by fact, and fact by imagination, where “fragments of photon and fairy dust” make up the stars (“Alice’s adventures”). It’s a sweet, innocent start, and it is instantly ditched. In Trevella’s close-to-the-bone account, “the sweetest / perfume is decay” (“Ephemera”) and sweet also is “that sweet, sadistic reek of the / oozing and spasms of the body” (“A defence of poetry”). The poems focus relentlessly on pathology, death and cruelty, until the collection concludes with an image of “moonshine on a murdered girl, / naked in the snow” (“The kiss”).

Trevella’s analytical lens is unremittingly reductive, and unremittingly dark. Decay eats everything. The natural world is sick, infected, injured or dead. Water is “necrotic”; the ocean is composed of “glistening intestines”, or “glitters like diseased meninges”. Soil is “septic”; hills are “curled like cadavers by a / formaldehyde sea”. You will probably want to look up, but there is no relief from the heavens. “The sky, it’s an abattoir” in which hangs a “pale, raped moon”, a moon with which “we are finished”, although when it shines, it shines “like a sadistic smiling mouth”. The stars are snipers. Maggots, blowflies and rodents crawl across the “pus and plasma” of the poems.

A dark energy pervades the individual poems, and they revel in it, displaying virtuoso runs of

rhythm and word. Trevella restrains excess with close attention to line break, applying just enough pressure to both contain and intensify the writhing quality of the poems. There is much to admire about the poems: this is questing work strongly made. Yet, a cold tone overlays the collection, and was for me the most affecting feature of the work.

Initially, the word “unflinching” came to mind. But I am not so sure about this. A heart still beats behind the poems, albeit nervously, albeit relegated to childish concerns as in the image of a child’s drawing of a red crayon heart (“Sergeant Pepper’s ECG”). Despite the insistence on reductive reasoning and clinical distance, despite the “I’m not shocked by any of this” stance, I detect a persistent yearning for warmth and emotional meaning in a dissected, explained world, a world where, as in the poem “Generation Z”, (a re-working of Shelley’s *Ozymandias*), “nothing besides remains”.

*Close to the Bone* describes a world with “no room in the lifeboats / for any of us” (“Nearer, my God, to Thee”), lives where we are made queasy by the “personal”, where perception is so detached that “we sneer” at signs of emotion or attachment (“To be perfectly honest”). Trevella’s poems report from this chilling reality and have much to tell us, much of it disturbing. A very good reason, I venture, not to pour more medicine into that red crayon heart, but to pour more heart into that medicine.