



Bullet hole riddle
by Miriam Barr.
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Roberts Aotearoa
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Reviewed by Mary
Cresswell.

Page poetry and
performance poetry
don't always transfer
comfortably, and

sounding on the page like a performance poet is a
special talent. Auckland poet **Miriam Barr**¹ has
this talent in plenty.

It's tough out there
to keep the blood in our veins
we are wired to feel
each other's pains
yet still we gather
form these groups
these functional little tribes
try to warm ourselves
to be warmed ("The gist of it")

and further

Corduroy desire life
has secrets
some night star
joy poison
living here
dying here

remembering
make do
universe cat and
delicious could
almost girl
broken laughing

if I or I ("Normal")

Words tumble across pages, syntax piles up on
itself because everything is so interesting – so
significant – and there's simply not enough time
to say it all nor space enough to hear it in.

We're all part of the story when we hear:

The first time I was shot...
there was no mark
left on my navel ...

The fourth time I was shot
I knew it was coming
being familiar
with guns
and bullets
and things in the dark
knowing intimately the nature
of marks that do not leave marks ...
but my mouth had forgotten
the shape that 'no' makes ... ("Bullet hole riddle")

Holes are mentioned throughout the poems, like
the gaps left by destruction or loss or misfortune.
"Observer effect" ends with "my _____ dark _____
gaps in ___ light/ there must be something there,
right". In "Reaching", the poet says about one level
of her thoughts,

I am
seeing
a needle
a cloth
a covering
the air
heating
the space
between
skin
beside

In one of the final poems, "Standing", the poet
describes herself as the sum of her parts, "I am that I
am an ecosystem".

Quite a few poems talk about the poet by using
lists, of her separate items of clothing, parts of her
body – lots of fragmentation. Looking at the book
as a whole, I see the work as a fishing net: perhaps
a net of holes held together by fabric; perhaps the
net is fabric with holes cut in it. The poet's life
may be a strong and resilient structure (with messy
gaps), or it may be a web of messy gaps barely held
together with words. Barr has convinced me that it's
the first, with perhaps a few echoes of the second to
be indulged in at 2 a.m. (but only rarely, I hope and
trust).

The cover photo, a wall-hanging, reinforces this
opposition: it appears at first glance to be garden-
variety crochet but is actually a very elegant drape of
cut-out suede. As well, the interior art shows various
arrays of fragments which together have a definite
shape and definite message.

The poems are all performance poems, and the
www.miriambarr.com website has a tag for the book
and live performances of several of these. They are
definitely worth listening to. I was surprised to find
that some of the poems seemed slower to listen to



than they did to read; I had imagined a more rat-a-tat delivery: but then, I read the printed poems first, as it were, and listened to them only after being familiar with the text. The book makes a point of listing all the artists' websites together. It's an effective way of combining text, performance and visual art, and makes reading *Bullet hole riddle* a rewarding experience.

1 See author's website www.miriambarr.com. Cover art is by Elke Finkenauer, www.ElkeFinkenauer.wix.com, and interior art by Andrew Blythe, www.toiora.org.nz.
