



Dear Neil Roberts
by Airini Beautrais.
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Reviewed by Janet
Newman.

I had not heard of Neil Roberts. He's not in the "History books," the title of one of Beautrais' poems. Google search describes him as 'New

Zealand's only suicide bomber' and Wikipedia locates him in a list of 'Acts of terrorism' including the Rainbow Warrior bombing. Neil Roberts, aged 22, blew himself up with a homemade bomb outside the Police Computer Centre in Whanganui in 1982. Ironically, the system his death protested against – the digital sorting of disparate information about individuals into convenient topic headings – has filed him under a convenient topic heading. Pigeonholed by the mainstream as a lone, deranged and, with the connotations of 'terrorism,' sinister and dangerous looney, he was forgotten. Or was he?

To some people of Whanganui, Neil Roberts was someone else altogether: a friend, an activist, a political thinker, a young man who never grew old. They remember him in a film, an art show, a museum exhibition and now a collection of poetry.

Dear Neil Roberts projects a picture of the man through the voices of those who knew him, and those who did not – such as Senior Sergeant Rob Butler who explains in line 15 of "By way of explanation": 'young people / sometimes can't keep pace with the changes in society.' The poem reveals this is a well-intentioned but patronizing explanation. The ironically titled "A sad, flippant kind of nihilism" provides a roll call of international anarchists and revolutionaries, and line 28 of "A nice night" identifies Roberts' final spray-painted message: 'WE HAVE MAINTAINED A SILENCE CLOSELY RESEMBLING STUPIDITY,' as a quotation from the 1809 Bolivian independence movement, Junta Tuitiva.

Dear Neil Roberts is an ode – the title is a term of endearment. It comprises 27 narrative poems in mostly long-lined quatrains. Notes at the end state that four poems are composed of quotations from newspapers and magazines. Tone varies between the

conversational and reportage, dipping occasionally and pleasantly into imagery. For example, the final lines of "Finding the Dead" in which a boy researching his ancestry at the library 'walks out with a page of photos / his ancestors waving in the wind.'

Beautrais was born in 1982, the year of Roberts' death. This is her third book of poetry. She is the next generation of activist, represented by her autobiographical poet speaker who in lines 16-17 of "Out the Window" says: 'It has been a while since I did anything subversive/ with a can of spray paint, with a billboard, with a naked human body.' At the ANZAC Day service described in "Monuments," the pregnant protagonist considers the forgetting of the viewpoint articulated in its final line by one veteran: 'War is useless and achieves nothing.' She places a wreath containing three white feathers in memory of conscientious objectors on the International Peace Sculpture, not the cenotaph 'because I don't want to be tacked/ in my condition' (lines 27-8).

If, as Jack Ross says in the editorial to *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 1* (2014) 'the best way to react to injustice is to put it on record' (p 9, this collection is a record of the injustice of remembrance, and an interrogation of 'the brute discourses of power' (Ross, p 8). By describing Neil Roberts' life, his death and its aftermath, it investigates the amnesia of historical record. It describes the era of the Muldoon government in the months after the Springbok tour when suspicion surrounded how the information gathered on all New Zealanders and stored at the Whanganui Computer Centre would be used, particularly with regard to political activists. Moving forward to present-day Whanganui, it questions collective memory at an ANZAC service where subversive gestures might still meet the force of authority.

Who was Neil Roberts? According to Beautrais, he was an idealistic, young political thinker with anti-government and anti-authoritarian views who came to represent a counterculture that remains underground and generally unheard. Her empathetic, engaging and enlightening collection is a subversive follow-up to his subversive act.