



***waha/mouth* by
Hinemoana Baker.
Wellington: VUP
(2014). RRP: \$25.
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Reviewed by Sue
Wootton.**

Waha/mouth is Hinemoana Baker's third poetry collection, following *matuhi/needle* (2004) and *koiwi koiwi/bone bone* (2010).¹ Baker is a magpie who swoops on words. She builds her poems from the best of them, words like: whiplash, awash, maps, airbase, hibiscus, isobars, full tilt, freakish, under-inflated and jaundiced. She knocks phrases into unexpected new patterns as she goes: 'a cetacean, a seesaw. An archipelago.' Her astute ear means the work is studded with acoustic chimes, some of which are laugh-out-loud funny, like end-rhyming masturbation with "concentration. The soundtrack which runs through *waha/mouth* includes a woman who 'lies beside me cooling like an engine', 'a recording of a monk striking a piece of hollow bamboo', 'Mum and her sister, teens with a reel-to-reel, their harmonies climbing', and 'the voice you sang in when you sang Johnny Cash'. There's also 'That place online where you can listen / to thousands of crickets slowed down and / they sound like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. / Yes, and a Lakota soprano sings with them in Italian.'

This ever-present acoustic background is astounding in its detail; Baker's ear can discern tick from tock (or Baker from Biker) in any language. Yet her other senses are wide open too. Boiled crabs smells 'like an overripe wedding bouquet'; 'the smell of wood smoke lifts from my pillow'. Her visual imagery is marked by its vivid, concrete clarity. In "Candle", for example, 'a silent film of a free diver / frogging down from the sparkling surface / to the place where the very water / becomes the sinking anchor tied to your feet.' In "school", Baker's left Tee-bar sandal has a 'perfect scuffed upper, / curling overstrap, buckle freckled with / rust...'. and her lunchbox is 'a red / cliptop box of luncheon sausage / sandwiches, a feijoa and a box / of raisins...'. In "cartwheel", walking by a river at dusk, 'I watch the oily purple and orange brighten as the water darkens.'

Baker writes that she'd 'like to think that opening this book to read is like standing at the mouth of a cave, or a river, or a grave, with a candle

in your hand.' When I approached *waha/mouth* with that in mind, I was overwhelmed by the subtle vitality of the experience. It's a little dark and confusing at first, but then things come into focus. The candle flickers and the images move; the river talks; the cave whispers. The longer you stand at the *waha/mouth*, the more you hear.

1 Hinemoana Baker has also released five CDs of her music and poetry. She was the 2009 Arts Queensland Poet in Residence, a 2010 writer in residence at the University of Iowa, and the 2014 writer in residence at Victoria University in Wellington.