**John McKenzie Writing Competition 2013**



**Organised by HBETA**

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# Posit - *First Place – Aimey Tahu*

She has a knitting needle

behind the blue of her eye.

Unconscious whispers cast on,

humming like a sharpened fingernail.

The selvage increases,

as she purls foreign memories.

He’s a different colour now:

faded by the sun.

Five button holes,

three buttons.

The other two imagined

at the bottom of the jar.

There are holes now.

The Moon walks a day

then two upon her roof.

Wool draped patella to knee,

she finds new buttons

when he’s home late again.

She finishes the jumper:

wrong size and colour,

half the length.

Forced into wearing,

his unfastened stomach

hangs.

Cast-off thought, operating the cable stitch.

[A twisted rope.]

He pulls a thread in the binding,

a frayed end.

She is the sun.

# Blisters - *Second Place - Madeleine Ross*

He stands beside the pond, his head bowed, throwing chunks of bread into the water. They float, bobbing on the wakes and ripples of other pieces until the ducks swim over and pluck them from the surface. His eyes are red-rimmed and the sky is bruised with dark blues and purples. The streetlights switch on while there is still a hint of light left in the day, but it is quickly swallowed and the park turns sinister and leering.

He leaves, dragging his feet, not caring if he scuffs his leather shoes. He’s wearing a suit but he’s lost his tie and there are creases in his trousers. A young man and his dog are sheltering under the shop awnings as rain begins to patter above. The boy sits with one arm around his dog and the other resting on a rucksack, a sleeping bag tied to the top. The older man reaches into his pocket to look for loose change and finds $3; the last money he has on him. He hands the coins to the boy. The dog bares its teeth then sniffs his hand before settling back on its haunches.

The boy looks up at him, “Thanks, man. You didn’t have to.”

The older man nods and walks quickly away. He rubs his hand across his face, the rough, sandpapery skin scratching against his palm.

His walk takes him past nightclubs and bars where there is vomit in the gutters and broken bottles across the pavement. He steadies a girl as she stumbles into him and she pulls out a handkerchief from her handbag and pushes it into his hands. Another girl takes her arm and they make their way to the next bar. After wiping his face he reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a flask. The rain has dampened his shoulders and now it starts to soak through. His unkempt hair gently drips water down inside the collar of his shirt. He drinks. The liquid warms him from the inside, heat blossoming in his chest, and he feels numb again.

There’s an unopened packet of cigarettes in his pocket, and he opens it now. His fingers greet the cigarette like an old friend and he inhales the smoke, trapping it in his lungs for as long as he can before releasing it. It billows about his face, obscuring him, turning his features as hazy as the footpath looks to his drunken eyes.

He keeps walking until the people thin out; when he looks up again he’s in the suburbs. Directly in front of him is a large colonial house, white with blue shutters and a picket fence. The lights in one of the front rooms are on, spilling a soft gold out onto the rose garden beneath. There’s a woman standing near the window; she’s holding a glass of white wine and laughing. Her eyes crinkle as she smiles. She’s beautiful. A man walks into view. He reaches to tuck a stray strand of caramel hair behind her ear. She puts down her glass and places her hands around his neck. As they lean into one another the man outside turns away. He flicks his cigarette butt into her garden.

Taking another long swig from his flask he starts walking again. His feet take him through Chinatown with its paper lanterns and men smoking on their doorsteps. They smile at him, their fingernails long and yellowed. He stops, wanting to stay and sit and smoke with them, but he doesn’t. Up ahead of him a woman stands on her own, shivering in garish dress and fishnet stockings. Pulling the flask and cigarettes from his pockets, he takes his jacket off and offers it to the girl. Her face crumples as she takes it. The man smiles weakly and walks on.

His feet have blisters. He sits on the curb and pulls off his shoes. When he peels off his socks his feet are bloodied and he decides to rest a while, washing his feet as best he can in the water that trickles past in the gutter. A couple passes and coins drop beside him. Looking up he sees them and realizes.

“No, I’m not –” but they’re already too far past to hear.

He stares at the coins before picking them up, counting out $2.50. He picks up his shoes, leaving his bloodied socks, and makes his way to the McDonalds he can see in the next block. When he enters he leaves bloody marks on the white tiles.

He has enough for a cheeseburger and he wolfs it down. When he finishes he looks around. A couple occupy the booth across from him; they snuggle together, sleepy smiles on their young faces. He sits alone, his shoes beside him on the seat and his flask in his hand. He drains it, but it’s not enough. He can feel his life sliding back into perspective, focusing back to a clear, crisp picture. He limps to the bathroom and stares at himself in the mirror. He sees his unshaven face, his skin like parchment, his shadowed eyes glassy from the whiskey and red from the tears. He sees his hair, greasy and lank. He sees his shirt, greyed, and red from where he wiped his hands.

Heading out of the city he walks to where the buildings have chipped paint and triple locks. There’s a car alarm and the sound of raised voices, and an apricot light is seeping into the sky. He fumbles with his keys, making sure to lock and latch and safety lock once he’s on the other side of the door. The hallway he walks into is narrow, the kitchen to his left aqua and decorated with unwashed dishes and half-eaten food. He turns to the sitting room, collapsing onto the couch, letting his body sink downwards. The tears he cries now make his whole body shake. He turns on his side, his knees close to his chest, and sobs into the pillow. He pulls a photo from underneath. It’s of a woman. She has caramel hair and she’s laughing.

# Poems - *Third Place – Amy Beard*

Man making maps with his feet

I always look at strangers the same way I look at the camera. I always feel the urge to count the small players in the crowd the silent ones with artificial faces. They smile but I can see beyond their simple construction. I was always the stone cold child with a construed face. Why have our blueprints become full proof, our levels become height less?

The sky builds without talking birds

We sit with the sky beneath our feet, no crows to make us screech. We are all balanced here but I can feel myself falling into the dark smog sky. I open my lunch box, such small things pull me back to child hood. I never believed in flying, but look now- I’m in the sky. Aren’t I?

Teddy bear talks to the lost boy

I pull the old toy sled that my grandfather built from wood and stolen hinges. The trees fall tussled together in knots. My favourite toy frozen in my bag. How does he know where to hide in the warmth? The snow sits like slugs slowly slipping. I’m glad I wore my new gumboots. At least they can save me from drowning.

Fly without wings but arms above the washing line

Pretending was the only way I could pull the sheets above my head. Fantasies were the only way I could put the pieces of missing teeth together. I used to think that the clouds would be my future, high above the acceptable best. Then the loneliness would leave me and fill the sorrow sky.

Woman pausing for impact

The scream pulled the filling from my teeth squeezing at my pupils. Lost neighbourhood, weak neighbourhood. There’s no map to lead to where I live. The endless suffering of the church bells. Police sirens have become the anthem I live by. Lost, these people are created for no choir no safe stone home, only their own imaginary wars.

The soil sticks to her soul like gum

The person in front of me is walking so slow, the soles of their feet clench the soil that hides the roots of withered trees. I try to nudge my way past the wall but get cut off by some old lady with a walking stick. I’m already late for my exam. Fog descends. My breath pauses. I regain my steps and push my way towards the hollow train station.

He makes his bed of bees

The photo albums from when I was young illustrate my life. There is a wrinkled picture from when I was five, blowing out that bright red candle, that was the most meaningful thing to me. Spider webs and coiled leaves become my summer cushion. Pushing daisies off their bed of bees just to get a hold of nature. The stings don’t last long as long as you forgive them.

Man stops himself from telling the truth

I can see the puzzle that you’ve failed a million times before. The skeleton drawers are open now for you to pose your darkest most needle sharp thoughts and worries away. Don’t fake the thunder cast beneath your feet, I can see the horizon in your florescent cheeks, burning. Tied tongues and butterfly ears stop you from ever spouting what’s hidden.

# Finds out things are not what they seem - Highly Commended – Wolfgang Hendry

I am in a forest. There are trees and grass and innumerable plants, uncountable birds that fill the air with song, whilst insects and beasts add their voices to the perpetual din. With my every intake of breath electricity courses through my body, giving life to my limbs and filling my head with beautiful thoughts. My wonder augments the world, giving a second layer to the incredible canvas of colours and sounds that surround and now possess me.

I laugh and exclaim as flowers taller and brighter than those around me before bloom in a moment. The wondrous trees, at which I had marvelled, expand and all the animals gain fantastic colours and rejoice with me in the bright new world I have discovered. Around me, moths and birds gather to accompany the new inhabitant of this forested realm.

Alongside my guides I travel through this world, each breath sustaining my beautiful, euphoric state of being. My guides take me to forests of orange and yellow, pink and blue, fluorescent beings that bloom and reach in joy to the open sky. To a river I am led by my guides, and I exclaim with delight as I drink of the beautiful, clear water, my guides joining me before imploring me to follow, to witness all of the wonders their world offers us all. I am entirely unable to refuse, and I would not be willing, were I able.

Onwards my guides take me, revealing new beauty with every step I follow. Never have I witnessed such dreamlike perfection, unintentionally elaborate, exquisitely ornate, green and blue and ivory and red, every colour one can imagine in union, contrasting and merging in ways scarcely imaginable.

My body is afire with joy, my mind clouded and crystallised both, a most beautiful dichotomy.

I walk, not led, but followed by my joyful and exuberant guides to an oak, a huge and magnificent being reaching forever into the sky and forever into the welcoming earth below. The tree is the largest of its kind, and my outstretched arms cannot cover a tenth of the ancient being’s breadth. Upwards, the tree’s branches cover the sky, and its siblings and sons reach with loving awe to touch the beautiful majesty of their greatest exemplar.

The great tree feels my hands upon its bark, and a pulse of all-encompassing Life leaps from the tree to my fingers. I am frozen in crystallised delight, unable to move, unwilling to relinquish the experience I share with the oldest and greatest of Creation’s progeny. Brimming with Life and happiness, I release my hold of the tree to leap and dance, spinning around while my guides and friends circle me dizzyingly, building us to a whirlwind of delirious joy. We dance and rejoice for what seems like an eternity, inebriated and celebratory and unimaginably happy. Only with the warm embrace of sleep brings cessation to our activity, each of us settling where we stand, allowing the warm comfort of the forest and our friends to cradle us into slumber.

\* \* \*

As I groggily wake, I search for my faithful and sonorous guides, but all I see is the brown and green of the forest that I had entered, silent if not for the insects, the distant sound of water, and the fleeting birdsong above. Before me stands a great oak tree, though neither as tall nor as wide as I had believed. No ancient consciousness turns my way, no pulse of Life surges through me. Though there is no incessant song, no delirious joy, no dreamlike euphoria, the beauty of the tree and all around it is not diminished.

# Papaveri Sconosciuto Rossi - Highly Commended – Abby Davison

Upright, rigid

I stare as the sea attacks

the unassailable hills,

turn to face the wind and the wall

of stones

covered in marks, words, names,

reach to trace one

graze by graze -

U N K N O W N

My finger fills the trenches, the dugouts,

scraped out of the wall

I see the plan,

each graze deliberately carved,

like the maps in the War Museum,

planned, marked out with pins,

I kneel at a pin hole on the map,

Unknown

The plans have been filed away,

the maps folded,

new blueprints,

designs,

for city development.

Not even a dog-tag remains.

Only,

small crimson poppies,

the black centres,

watch,

as tourists saunter past, untouched.

Tiny red flecks,

call out with the wind,

asking,

to be seen,

known.

Turning to the sea,

I watch its futile attempt

to scale the hills.

Walking away

red

specks

step by step

(This writing was inspired by and has allusions to Janet Frame’s poem, ‘Yet Another Poem About a Dying Child.’)

# Boris the Bear - Highly Commended – Thomas McArdle

The room is very simple. It is painted white; a framed picture hangs on a tiny tilt above a cot and a duchess, on which sits a single rose with a single petal deftly sitting beside it. There is a chair in the corner with a chest, toys tumble out of it. The room is typical. It is almost a cliché.

She is a sentry standing over him, silent in her duty. Her eyes mirror an internal determination, desperation. He lay, wasted and worried. His eyes are glassed over, like a stuffed bears, tinted with infant’s milk. Stale air hangs stagnant; it is a broken mobile above him. It smells of air freshener with an undertone of urine. The woman moves from her post to open a window, moving with soft tread. She stops. Inhales... then exhales.

Sometimes it is nice to come in here and think: the silence is calming. Sometimes it is too depressing to come in here: the silence is haunting. But, it is real when I am in here: the silence is always honest. I talk to him, selfishly, about things he doesn’t care for. I talk about work, the broken coffee machine in the staff room, the students who ask about him.

”How’s Joe, Miss?”

“Good...”

Her body shivers as it forgets the summer season. The trees and stars are tickled by the breath of the breeze, they twinkle and sway instinctively, so full of life and hope. The moon too is youthful, shy and hazed by the humidity. She turns away from the window. She stops. Inhales...then exhales. It is lavender and urine.

“I want to help you,” she cried. “Let me help you!” Her knuckles are a wrench around the timber railing of the cot. They twist around it, mechanically, fuelled by apprehension and worry about what...it is so near....

But Joe is not allowed to die. So much potential cannot disappear in these cotton sheets that are tucked around him, cradling him, clinging to his sweat soaked skin. The baby blue contrasts against the pale skin of his face, capped by thin wisps of hair. He looks blankly at the ceiling, mouth half open catching the moving air, minimizing the effort to live and breathe. So soft, and precious, and dear.

A pirate ship is anchored, hovering on the wall behind a sea of glass, stuck between wooden horizons.

She stands over a crib, as a darkness in the room. Her spidery arms are reluctant to leave the bars of the jail to which Joe is confined. The wood is grey with age, dulled by comings and goings. It is tired, robbed of its youth, too. A solid crack lines the duchess top; it makes a cradle for the dry rose and its lost petal. They are both crumpled and stiffly twisted in on themselves. Like a changing landscape, the shadowy crevices made in the sheets adjust slightly as he shifts. Eyes pinched together, giving the impression of a crow gouging and pulling him from his cradle. He babbles and mumbles.

My head hurts...my hands, my feet, my whole body is heavy, pinned to this bed by an invisible mass. I want to sleep, long and deep...long and deep. I don’t want the spangling sun to come with its rays, stinging. I don’t want to hear words of childish compassion. I don’t want your time. I don’t want mine. The black bear sits in the wicker chair. He waits.

Joe inhales...then exhales.

# Sarah Jane Parton – 2013 Judge

Sarah Jane Parton is an artist, writer, and director of Pakeha and Cook Island Maori descent.

She holds a Masters in Creative Writing from Victoria University’s International Institute of Modern Letters, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons) from Massey University’s College of Creative Arts. She teaches art and critical studies at the College of Creative Arts, as well as English literature and media studies at Victoria University.

Sarah Jane makes art: When she was 23 and fresh out of art school her single channel video work, *she's so usual*, was included in Telecom Prospect 2004: New Art, New Zealand - a national survey of contemporary art at Wellington's City Gallery. Since then she has had her work included in multiple group shows both nationally and internationally, and has held six solo exhibitions in New Zealand and Australia. These include *Guidance* at The Physics Room, Christchurch and *The Way* at City Gallery, Wellington, both in 2007.  She has directed music videos, curated art shows, and created large-scale public performances around the country.

She also directs music videos, curates the art component of a boutique art and music festival called Camp A Low Hum, plays in a fem-rock-art band called Fantasing, and writes. He writing has been published in Turbine, the IIML’s online literary journal, and on Scoop. She is currently completing the novel she began during her MA, and working on an art work that investigates love and hope for the lightboxes situated on Wellington’s Courtney Place, a project funded by the Wellington City Council.

Parton lives in Wellington with her partner, musician Luke Buda (The Phoenix Foundation), and their two sons.

# Judge’s Comments

**#106 – Posit - Aimey Tahu – Karamu High School**

 This is an incredibly mature piece, and stood out as the clear winner. In this poem the writer dealt with a universal theme – the gradual demise of an intimate relationship – with a beguiling mix of sensitivity and sharp wit. She/he effectively conveyed a Freudian sense of the uncanny, with the "heimlich und unheimlich" (homely and unhomely) existing simultaneously. Reading 'Posit' I found myself both comforted by familiar references (the knitting terminology, the use of 'the sun' and 'The Moon') and disconcerted by the misery of the subjects' situation. Brilliant.

**#103 – Blisters  - Madeleine Ross – Karamu High School**

 'Blisters' stayed with me for a while after I read it. Although I am not always a fan of writing too far out of one's experience (i.e. A high school kid from the Hawkes Bay imagining the emotional journey of a broken old man walking through a city complete with a Chinatown!), I think this writer managed to describe a rich and interesting world that is both believable and evocative. There are many sentimental moments in this story, yet somehow he/she has avoided excessive sentimentality. This is a really good piece, and I'd love to see what this writer comes up with next.

**#100 – Poems – Amy Beard – Karamu High School**

 These are just so clever, and out of all the entries I feel like this writer is the one who speaks the most of and to his/her generation. These are most definitely *millennial* prose poems, and read as an astute critique of/response to the contemporary in a way that is both exciting and intriguing. I love the arresting and amusing juxtapositions this writer has created (i.e. "The endless suffering of the church bells. Police sirens have become the anthem I live by."), and the beautiful imagery he/she evokes.

**#104 – Finds out things are not what they seem – Wolfgang Hendry – Napier Boys’ High School**

I have a bit of a soft spot for writing that deals with utopian and/or dystopian clichés. This writer has written an almost sickly sweet tale of some alternate beautiful future/parallel universe, yet managed to avoid creating a piece that is entirely saccharine and without depth through a clever twist at the end. Further to this he/she then avoided this twist being a *predictable* twist (i.e. 'It was all just a dream'), by playing with the concept of a 'plot twist' as a literary device in the final sentence… so the twist isn't so much a twist at all. Nice work.

**#105 – Papaveri Sconosciuto Rossi  - Abby Davison – Karamu High School**

A very strong, evocative, and beautifully crafted poem that will have a definite audience come ANZAC day – the writer ought to consider contacting the RNZRSA or the National War Memorial Advisory Council (who look after the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior) to see if they might wish to use it in some capacity.

**#111 – Boris the Bear – Thomas McArdle – St John’s College**

There is a lovely sensibility to this work, although the prose could do with further crafting. This writer manages to successfully capture the state of despair and uselessness that anyone feels when faced with a gravely ill child. I strongly recommend he/she reads Lorrie Moore's 1998 collection of short stories 'Birds of Paradise'. Here's one of her stories, "People Like That Are the Only People Here"