Best recent poetry

Spectres of the past

A melancholy but uplifting collection delves into an abusive upbringing

by NICHOLAS REID

Slobojan Harvey’s GHOSTS (Otago University Press, $22.50) has much in common with one of her earlier collections, Lost Relatives. It is intensely concerned with families and their effect upon us for good or ill. Ghosts may be the sense we have of something left behind in houses that have been deserted, almost like a haunting. More urgently, Ghosts “are the memories we still keep, years later, of our first upbringings. These twin themes occasionally lead Harvey to topical social commentary on the housing crisis and the fate of immigrants. Her deepest concern, however, is a recall to the abusive and unloving English childhood she endured, emphasised in this collection’s appended essay. This is a deeply felt and carefully structured collection of poetry, conceived as a unity. The tone may often be melancholy, but Ghosts does not indulge in self pity. Harvey works through to a sane reconciliation with the past, and it has the uplift that real poetry can give.

This year is the 700th anniversary of the death of Italy’s greatest poet, Dante Alighieri. This is the occasion for MORE FAVOURABLE WATERS (Cuba Press, $25), edited by Marco Sonzogni and Timothy Smith, Thirty-three New Zealand poets each write a poem of 33 lines answering the 33 cantos that make up Dante’s Purgatorio, the middle part of his Divine Comedy. The climb up Mount Purgatory is sometimes reimagined as being in this country. Only a few poets, such as Sue Wootton, attempt Dante’s original terra firma – a three-line stanza using chain rhyme – but it’s 33 lines all the way. The pleasure lies in seeing how various the poets’ approaches are. Vincent O’Sullivan, Tim Upperton and Elizabeth Morton produce poems that encompass the whole concept of purgatory, whereas Majella Cullinan questions that whole concept. By contrast, Janis Freygard, Monganui and Irish descent. Meredith styles herself a “brown queer single educated professional creative woman”, always concerned to display the Auckalnd culture she lives in. Meredith likes to experiment with shape poems, list poems, poems set out as official documents and poems fragmented into short phrases. Often the confessional first- or second-person dominates, in poems such as Remember when you were with a woman? and Aroha Mai. And there is pointed comment on dominant media in The intern told me to go for a run and in the ambitious dialogue poem STOP SENDING POEMS. A collection with lots of 33.

Left, Dante Alighieri; below, Courtney Sina Meredith.

Airini Beauchais, Michael Pizzaotos and Kōkutu Tihitia Nuttall focus on specific sins: pride, anger, intemperate love and gluttony. And the styles are as various as the poets – prose poem for Helen Rickbery, rough colloquial for Jeffrey Paparoa Holman and joicyarity when David Eggleton goes flying with Dante’s Beatrice.

COURTESY OF SINA MERE

Artist: Janis Freygard. "Bulshit & Jellybeans" is her first collection, and she was this year’s recipient of the $5000 AUP Future Firsts Prize. Her next book, The Tiniest Morsel, is due for publication next year. Freygard’s poetry is often influenced by her interest in film studies and feminism. She’s one of several young poets who are challenging the traditional expectations of the poetic form.

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