

Best recent poetry

Spectres of the past

A melancholy but uplifting collection delves into an abusive upbringing.

by NICHOLAS REID

Sibohan Harvey's **GHOSTS** (Otago University Press, \$27.50) 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 upbringing. 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,

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such as Sue Wootton, attempt Dante's original terza rima – 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 Cullinane questions that whole concept. By contrast, Janis Freegard,



Left, Dante Alighieri; below, Courtney Sina Meredith.

Airini Beauvais, Michael Fitzsimons and Kōtuku Titihuia Nuttall focus on specific sins: pride, anger, intemperate love and gluttony. And the styles are as various as the poets – prose poem for Helen Rick-erby, rough colloquial for Jeffrey Papanoa Holman and jocular when David Eggle-ton goes flying with Dante's Beatrice.

Courtney Sina Mer-edith's **BURST KISSES ON THE ACTUAL WINDS** (Beatnik Publish-ing, \$30) is from a poet who works by conciseness rather than profusion. Her poems are short, lean and cut to the bone. Of Samoan,

Mangaian and Irish descent, Meredith styles herself a "brown queer single edu-cated professional creative woman", always concerned to display the Auckland 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 internet told me to go for a run* and in the ambiguous dialogue poem *STOP SENDING POEMS*. A collection with lots of sass. ■



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