

Independent author, New Zealand

Emma Neale

Poems

Biographical note:

Emma Neale is the author of five novels, including *Fosterling* (Random House 2011), which was shortlisted for the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Science Fiction and Fantasy. She is also the author of four collections of poetry, the latest of which, *The Truth Garden* (Otago University Press 2012), won the Kathleen Grattan Award for a poetry manuscript in 2011. Recipient of the Todd/Creative New Zealand New Writer's Bursary in 2000 and the Janet Frame/NZSA Memorial Prize for Literature in 2008, she was the Robert Burns Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Otago in 2012. She works as an editor and creative writing tutor, and lives in Dunedin with her husband and their two sons.

Keynotes:

Poetry – New Zealand, poetry

Heat-wave

February 2013: New Zealand's worst drought in 30 years.

It's a hot, find shade like a dog day,
let the child crawl, mewl and nip,
pant in my belly-shadow, back-shadow;
get up, pace, restless for coolness,
stalk the scent of water, hope,
openness, that icy air
that rides a river's meniscus
and carries the dark-flow of trees...

Along the scrappy riverbank,
its rough, ugly, unhewn rocks,
the hills rear up like something unclear
in an uneasy dream, while Himalayan fuchsia,
kowhai and beech gasp through
the chloroform rags of old man's beard,
passion-vine, woodbine.

It seems in this heat haze
as if some colourist, or abstract expressionist
has tried to paint out some difficult concept
in green and green and green
but can't unbind
from their own ouroborine obsession:

*loving too much, loss of self,
greed, lust, the choking, short-term view,
the slow contraction of our end of days
green eats green eats green.*

But a cry splashes on the air;
the child's seen red rata, wild plums,
their pinot-sweet light quivers, wells
bright as freshet-falls.

We scramble up the banks of parched grass,
use a peaked sun-cap for a pail,
climb, stretch and sweat
to pluck plump palmfuls;
find a cap's a jug that with one carefree tilt
spills fat ripes on the ground again,
and a hill path can be a beaker
that tips a small boy down
like a tumble of milk that weeps for itself.

The weeds snare, they clamber and drag:
do what they would do to the city's ruins;
say its fall has already begun

homo inhumanus, homo insapiens.

We push back up
through tinder-brittle undergrowth
when with a rush of noise as if to say
its name is Nightmare a giant bird
comes to stake its claim.

“But they’re our plums!”
the three-year-old cries;
“They’re wild,” I say, evenly;
“and we have to share, share the planet
with all the other animals,”
as if not complicit, ashamed, as if not riven
with *dear world, how long ...*
what if ... what have we forsaken?

Yet when the boy bravely holds a plum
balanced on his palm like an apple for a horse
and the bird’s wings laugh closer,
even the low river seems to misremember
its own name; in curved sheets of glass
that still spill and spill, it sings *Lethe, Lethe,*
and under my stubborn skin
wide-mouthed flowers
pistils sweet with survival’s honey
petals bright as poison
crane towards the drought-taut sky:
common-or-garden *now,*
common-or-garden *joy.*

Bolt

Family Sunday, wet weather dusk:
the wind panics, autumn leaves
rush the windows, their pale pink under-skins
press the glass like small hands held to warmth.

Along the museum's murmuring aisles
an intercom calls out closing time.
The children, hungry, fractious,
fret between us; I turn to ask
how you're bearing up
but see you've gone deep under
far down into the well of yourself,
eyes almond slits onto the atomic dark,
face a withdrawn, hieratic, ancestral mask.

I pull the mild words back;
dutiful, desultory, we all make to exit —
yet something burns like vision
at the vision's edge —

is it armour, a kite, a sail,
has some artist beaten metal thin as foil
to capture solar flares,
has science found how to distill satin
from South Pacific sunrise?

The sight seizes like the clutch of a fist
that hauls us back from some brink:
a gentle, endangered, high-stepping bird
to survive has slipped its feather-shimmer,
or a whispered cryptid lost its magic skin.

Go closer, carefully, in case it startles and shies.
Nearer, now, the light unfolds
as if language, too, should materialise:

kimono.

The single bolt of cloth it came from
must once have been heavy as a child
coiled deep in sleep;
now with arms akimbo like wings
it seems to invite the lost inside,
or is it to say any bearer would seek
the secret of human flight?

The long sleeves hang like festival banners,
full sweep sewn with slim white cranes,
gold comets, cartwheels, flowers, fountains,
as if its maker would have snared
an entire village of bright, lucky things.

Yet when I lean in close to see the label reads
late twentieth-century wedding kimono my throat grips
as if on scorched cherry flesh, unbidden lust,
nine sips of sake, mad tears, fever's early sting –

ah, has someone spun scarlet silk
from the sharp tangled glint,
the hidden heft of loss,
why else be so shaken to think
that somewhere, to some other woman,
so much unsought, unknown, still depends
on this red dress?

Huia

Have you heard of the huia?¹
 Yes, I have heard of the huia:
 passerine, black with a green sheen,
 or bluish, yes perhaps bluish,
 and the black itself metallic,
 or perhaps lake at midnight-ish,
 perhaps like a tui, a
 large tui with orange wattles,
 but precisely what wash,
 what quality of orange?

All comparisons we draw
 fall now more approximate
 than any historical simile;
 the female's beak long and curved
 like an upholstery needle
 (we still have upholstery needles)
 the male's short like a crow's
 (how long will we still have crows?)
 the tail feathers tipped with white
 like the moustache of a hunter-collector
 as he plunges in to the creamy head
 of a victory pint of lager, but the greenish,
 the greenish blackish feathers,
 perhaps the exact blackish greenish
 of a leaf of punga as it tilts
 beneath the beech that would have been
 on the deforested hillsides and gullies
 in a certain slant of mist and sun
 as time slides between seasons
 but *piccolo-piccolo, piano-piano*,
 strain for the melody,
 what was that song, how did it go,
Uia, uia, uia,
where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

Only lyric mimicry survives:
 a recording of Henare Haumana,
 a 1909 Huia Search Team member,
 as he whistles an elderly man's
 childhood memories —
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