

“I knew that women artists’ voices had to be heard”:

Heather Avis McPherson (1942 – 2017)

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Poetry Publications

A figurehead: a face (1982)

The Third Myth (1986)

Other World Relations (1991)

Travel and other compulsions (2004)

This Joyous, Chaotic Place (2018)

I first met Heather more than twenty years ago when she asked me as a fellow lesbian and as an academic to launch her collection of poems *Other World Relations*. She was then living in Hamilton with her partner. Later she moved to Auckland and, when that relationship broke up, she moved into the garden flat at the back of my and my artist partner Fran’s house, where she spent her last fifteen years. She was living on a benefit, writing and rewriting, occasionally going to read at venues like the Dog’s Bollix or poetry slams, seeing herself as supporting young poets.

Unable to afford presents Heather wrote us birthday poems, and poems about the garden we shared. She’d bring us a poem, then a day or a week later produce another version of it – the “right” one.

What can I dream up for your birthday?

...more than you have around you

when you disappear in the presences of your
garden and are gone till I surprise you in a shaggy
wilderness where I almost make you a plant

Which one? I prowl calendulas and silverbeet trees.

Stalks dip & shake their quivery blooms, pinkly
purplish-headed, breast-high – frail elderly

tutors half-drowned in thunderstorms & ferocious
late spring hail but nodding graciously keep
resilient. Small dogs potter and dash down

tangled paths. Bumblebees fossick, bums up,
in nasturtium throats. Artichokes are dramatic. Tall,
spikily pale, troll-slashed, in Ice Queen caverns

or Greenland underworlds they're plant-ghosts,
blanched fright with stickle-back blades, at eye-height
under a pale fleshy bulb, fist-sized, steamed

& dipped in garlic butter, a tender Kali scythe that
drinks moon-milk & nibbles shivery grass, buttercups,
& scarlet pimpernel threading the box hedge

with tiny orange-red star-flowers like scene-painted
fingernails, embroiderer- designed. All whiskery
sprouts bring a habitat, each year new – birds,

butterflies, poets, painters, gardeners, cicadas,
food, family, predators, epics – common themes split
by odd goddesses & long deviance; how to live,

love, trust, provide – who to surprise, lifting green
& red-leafed cover to pick & savour small red suns,
warm strawberries, a trug of blueberries, asparagus,

coriander – mind the pomegranate! spikes lethal as
darning-needles. Tenderly cup a crimson breast-globe-
its complex hint of ancient garden riches...

November 2012

Revised March 2016

The title of the book of these poems, collected by fellow poet Janet Charman after Heather's death – *This Joyous, Chaotic Place: Garden Poems* reflects the tone and subject of the poems. They are happy poems. Oddly enough they echo the last lines of an early poem from *A figurehead: a face*, 'Dedicated to women who work in oils, acrylic, blood and obscurity'

You ease an aching
back, and talk of gardens, plants. And growing old. And dying, maybe, satisfied.

I say, oddly, because her early poems are very different. Heather, solo mother of a young son, in her early thirties, living on a benefit, was a founding member of the Christchurch women's artist and writers group in 1975, absorbing the new feminist ideas and theory coming from the States. In *A Women's Picture Book: 25 women artists of Aotearoa* (1988), she said "In 1973, the Christchurch festival...they had this poets' evening as part of the festival and there were these twenty young men getting up on the stage and they were so interchangeable...I suppose that was when I knew that women artists' voices had to be heard." And she added "Most of us by 1975 were living in lesbian relationships and mixing only with lesbians." In 1980 she was a contributor and co-ordinator at the Women's Gallery in Wellington. She helped found the women's literary and arts journal *Spiral* which published Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Jackie Sturm's *The House of the Talking Cat* and Heather's first collection of poetry *A figurehead: a face*. In the introduction to that 1982 collection Heather wrote:

Seven years ago when as a writer with a fairly traditional style I changed my political commitment and lifestyle I felt initially stranded in a kind of "poetic homelessness". On the one hand I wanted to make a new start, to clear out the "patriarchy in the head"; on the other hand I wanted to redefine such emotionally charged concepts as "woman" and "lesbian" with their pejorative accretions.

Lydia Wevers, in her introduction to *Yellow Pencils. Contemporary Poetry by New Zealand Women* (1988), quotes the opening lines of Heather's 'Theology and a Patchwork Absolute' from *A figurehead: a face* as marking a change in New Zealand women's poetry

Time and again,
time and again I tried to write a goddess song.
now that I have fleshed the lyric tongue a poem
stirs. It breaks from its inhabitants. Red shapes
blaze in the patchwork quilt. Here are two women
naked on a bed.

The poem continues:

Such proximity is heretical and a sin
to theologians and borough councillors. Their voices
shake the boardrooms. Bearded ones look stonily
from blazoned coats of arms. Thick carpet corridors
choke between the walls.

And we strip absolution. We have become
our own theologians and counsellors. Our skins are
moon washed. Our laughter escalates. ---

A figurehead: a face were the first overtly lesbian poems published in New Zealand. They are vibrant powerful feminist poems. In poems like 'Have you heard of Artemisia?' Heather claims forgotten women leaders and goddesses --- Hypatia, Boadicea, Sappho, St Bridget and many more,

vivid-
women who lived as the Celts did, with audacia,
and loved their sisters...

These are energetic poems, often angry poems, such as the lengthy 'For her thirtysixth year, a breakout'

This is the rage of a burning woman
This is the year of her rising

This is the rage of a woman
who did thirtysix years time

in a coffin-brake

This is the rage of a woman woken out of a box
broken out of nails, bars, tight forms
breaking into a new improbable image
tossing off that hunched apologetic loiterer on the edge
crumpling that skin, a torn singlet
for hotwater cupboard rags
filling her lungs with air

This is the rage of a woman spun in long night voices, long
night cells

who finds as she blinks in the sun
that the manhole and its grating cut off shoots
and she, old clothespeg, came to life outside

*what should I do with this rage
swelling in my belly, a red fist?*

This is the rage of a woman with a millennium to disturb

This woman finds a lineage of survivors
who boiled coppers in the washhouse once a week,
who chopped sticks and spread their long unplaited hair to dry
who read by candlelight, and rode for miles to dance

Who sometimes imagined glories more vast than could be seen

standing on country roads late at night
urging visions from the dark hills
whose bulk is more mysterious than sky
whose outline nudges a solid memory of one
immoveable time

those women startling at a white shape on the fence
a morepork that flies off
one legend says to death

those women turning back to a flaked verandah
to face the photographer unsmiling
from the folds of gathered gown

This is only a section of a longer poem. I love reading this poem aloud – it has an amazing strength that doesn't want the reader to stop, that comes from the excitement and debate of the shared emergent feminism of those years. In 1988, Heather said "It seems to me now that my most innovative work was done between 1975 and 1979". I'd agree. But when she was living with us she went several times to Christchurch, not only to see surviving women from her collective years, but to visit the grave of Ursula Bethell, seeing herself less as an innovator, as part of a lesbian women's poetic tradition.

Ursula Bethell

A poet of lyric and spiritual persuasion who
built Rise Cottage on Cashmere Hill, Miss
Bethell looked out on the Canterbury Plains;

her live-in companion was Effie Pollen. Miss
Bethell planted dwarf mandarins, roses, exotics,
veges, bulbs; she carted rocks for a small rock

garden and wrote and taught and entertained.
Outside one day, while earnestly digging,
she lifted her head and gazed at the Alps –

and suddenly saw an utterly new magnificence...
and wrote the mountains, rivers, plains, their
fluctuant beauty and longevity, as one who,

after Effie died, fully knowing grief and loss,
with a lover's tender breath, divined an artist's
love of land we squabble to be guardians of...

2010

One of the poems Heather wrote to us brings together her love of the garden, her love of art and, in this one, her sense of humour.

A birthday re/arrangement

Triptych for Fran

You are not in the orchard

Not under the grapevine

Not picking herbs

Are you hiding in your images

are you hiding in your words

You are not on the balcony

not in the studio

not in front of your easel

What flesh are you seeding or bleeding

What are you skewering with a pencil

Maybe you're happily snapping

tongues of hibiscus or kisses or lips

you will render with a brush

In a cosmic visions rush

I miss you