The last line might, out of context, appear as a neat surrealist happenstance, but here it arises as an organic, wakeful concentration of the associations—rain as active, penetrative force, the drowned sounds of dawn birdsong, the erotic proximity of another person, which are witnessed in the prose paragraph, and framed as a momentary perception-and-writing event, by the punctum of the asterisk. In opening out the poet's thought-processes this poem enacts the frisson of discovery that is (to my mind) the most exciting aspect of writing, but also the product of sustained concentration, of *work*.

This quality of concentration also has an ethical or even ecocritical dimension, given the rich particularity of Australian topographies, flora and fauna which populate Harrison's poetry. Part of the poems' ability to dwell in context entails not plundering the natural world's wealth of ready objective correlatives, the better to dramatise an already crystallised feeling, but rather allowing attention to its specificity to influence the speaker's habits of thought and imagination afresh. In 'Lizards', for example, a fascination with the creatures' behaviour gives rise to a fresh take on poetry; for a poem, "too / converts / verticals into horizontals, / taking a lizard's eye, / its brazen mind of cloud." The speaker's own bodiliness and locality is also richly realised. Reading in the depths of Welsh winter I especially relished these lines from 'An Elephant's Foot':

> … [the heat] now powering up
> its empty hot-plate—its main purpose being
> erasure of depth, to be a destroyer
>
> of whatever's peripheral and delicate…

When, elsewhere, Harrison casually describes a sandstone rock as "not too heavy to lift" ('A Patch of Grass'), one instantly senses its heft, texture,

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colour and temperature, despite this being the only detail given. There is something very engaging about a person's physical presence in a meditative poem, and it strikes me now that, with the exception of erotic writing, this is a strangely absent dimension of much contemporary poetry. Harrison thus strikes the rare note of being distinctively cerebral and warmly inclusive, and this generous collection should ensure that he reaches a wide and appreciative British readership.

Helen Dennis

Chris Orsman, *The Lakes of Mars* (Auckland University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-1-86940-408-6, 58 pp, NZ$24.99 (pb)

Sam Sampson, *everything talks* (Shearsman Books, 2008), ISBN 978-1-905700-48-6, 80 pp, £8.95 (pb)

Bob Orr, *Calypso* (Auckland University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-1-86940-405-5, 87 pp, NZ$24.99 (pb)

Sonja Yelich, *Get Some* (Auckland University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-1-86940-423-9, 56 pp, NZ$24.99 (pb)

Jack Ross and Jan Kemp (eds.), *New New Zealand Poets in Performance* (Auckland University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-1-86940-409-3, 146 pp, NZ$44.99 (pb)

Richard Reeve, *In Continents* (Auckland University Press, 2008), ISBN 978-1-86940-406-2, 72 pp, NZ$24.99 (pb)

Leonard Lambert, *Skywire* (Steele Roberts, 2008), ISBN 978-1-877448-50-8, 47 pp, NZ$19.99 (pb)

Both Chris Orsman and Sam Sampson write poetry that interrogates human presence in the geographical environment, that engages with New Zealand history, and that draws on extensive cultural backgrounds. Yet the reader needs to adopt entirely different reading strategies to appreciate their work. Orsman's poetry is precisely observed and lexically rich—to the point

that the reader reaches for the dictionary to remind herself exactly what a word such as "incunabulum" actually means—yet his poetry can be read like narrative. It's not that his discourse lacks figurative speech, but his strength is in observation, either directly by being there, or through the medium of the photographic or cinematic record, which is then recorded in a coherent, linear story-like manner. His preoccupation with what the camera lens can preserve and relate takes him a long way in his meditations on both history and the present moment of environmental crisis. And yet he acknowledges that in the end the poet's role is to convey what the camera by its very nature inevitably misses. Describing the experience of visiting Antarctica (a trip that is the subject of the second half of this volume), Orsman admits:

> You find, really, that it's all right
> to be inattentive, to wander off
>
> into your own space, because Mike
> and his assiduous camera
>
> are collecting most of it for you
> to scavenge later—bits and pieces

but then realizes

> The camera misses everything really.

Orsman's poetry balances and holds in creative tension this paradox informing the poet's craft in the twenty-first century.

One could say that Sam Sampson starts from the recognition that the duties and responsibilities of the poet are to allow another type of impression than that of light waves on celluloid film to make itself felt: as

poet he is the medium that the cosmos imprints upon. Sampson writes a type of projective verse that constantly verges on and occasionally morphs into concrete poetry. His poetry denotes and reflects a world of landscapes and environs, in which the habitat seems more important than the inhabitant. In a world within which "everything talks" language is no longer a vector of human civilization. Instead the human must observe and attend to what the world tells us. The balancing act of phenomenology is superseded by a new aesthetic in which that which is perceived carries more gravitas: the role of the poet is to accurately transcribe ecosystems, not to fancifully make them up. This lack of attention to the merely human leads to a poetry that is both full of "the divine concrete" (Whitman's phrase)—and Whitman does get a name check here, whereas Olson and Duncan don't despite their implicit presence—and suggestive of abstract art—if we take "abstract" to mean abstracted from the phenomenological world, but ultimately taking it as fundamental inspiration. Sampson is also preoccupied with the human place in the world and where we might aspire to dwell; but our dreams of a perfect human habitation are exquisitely sent up:

> Somewhere (half-decent) there is a place for us
> an open plan, of peace and quiet, and space
>
> for us; an anchorage of blue plague
> realism: to spare, to learn, to care
>
> for us; but what of time
> to spare, time to learn, time to care
>
> a new way of living?
> Oh, cut to the chorus:
> *somehow, someday, somewhere, somewhere...*

The parody on Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein's 1957 lyric also alludes to W. H. Davies' 'Leisure' (1911). By changing the source text's "there's" to "there is" in the first line of this poem, Sampson subtly alters the emotional tenor from schmaltzy tragic pathos to implicit post-modern scepticism. Sampson's poetry repeatedly makes such demands on the reader: to attend to the slightest difference in emphasis a vowel can imply; to attend carefully to each line, or to each couplet in a ghazal; to see the linguistic and phenomenological connections; to expand one's senses of where the boundary between self and other, plenitude and zero, beauty and bathos is situated; and to reconceptualize human identity in a universe that of necessity must be conceptualized mathematically and geographically as well as philosophically.

One senses that Sampson spends a lot of aesthetically productive time outdoors in the elements of water, sunlight, and air. Whereas we are told that Bob Orr does so in his job as a boatman on the Waitemata harbour in Auckland. Orr's poetry is reassuringly familiar to any baby-boomer that grew up surrounded by the influence of the American Beat poets. His verse is generous and reinforces a sense of the individual man; but it doesn't challenge our conception of our role as Sampson's does. I would save it for a bleak moment in a strange café, when I wanted to be reassured that everything was OK with the world as I inhabit it. The dust jacket flags the influence of Bob Dylan and Lord Byron. To that I would add: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neil Cassidy and Walt Whitman. In performance it would sound accessible; on the page it can feel somewhat dilute:

> It was a Greek café in Kings Cross
> where the coffee was best lukewarm
> where some sort of goulash redefined the term expressionist
> where a paper rose dreamt on about a side street in Athens
> where flies from the great outback crash-landed exhausted

> where a blue and white flag hung like a soiled tea-towel from the wall
> where George's dark-haired pallid arm lay glued to the counter
> where Achilles and Odysseus discussed the Caulfield Cup
> where a window display of feta sweated with the time of day
> where a poet of the Antipodes sat waiting for something GREAT to happen

And so the initial rhymed, sub-Whitmanian catalogue goes on. What is lacking from Orr's poetry, as far as I can see, is the antipodean equivalent of the American counter-culture's critique of entrenched establishment values. Orr's poetry is not so much a wake-up call to a nation to renew itself, as a pleasant but self-indulgent record of one man's journeying, both actual, emotional, and intellectual. The western world is represented through allusions to Odysseus, and lists of the literary influences that implicitly stare at him as well as askance at one another as he sits "so solitary at my desk"; but current atrocities are not central to his consciousness. Indeed when they do enter the realm of the poem they seem even whimsical, as in 'Sardines':

> Decapitated
> in your millions
> oh citizens of the seas
> tough little matelot
> gypsy with a silver body
> you must also surely know
> that in our time beheadings are very much in vogue.

By way of contrast, Sonia Yelich's *Get Some* marks a significant turn towards the painful subject of global politics. In it, Yelich weaves together a bricolage of internet, radio, print, and TV sources, and interweaves her own voice with that of her US protagonist, Edgar, and his immediate family. The collection loosely tells a story of the Iraqi war through progressing from Edgar's childhood, to his time in Iraq, to his coming home traumatized with

intrusive, violent and grotesque memories. Certain poems remind me of John Berryman's Henry poems, and convey a wry sense of the obscenity of the Iraq war and of the GIs such as Edgar, whose American suburban childhoods prepare inevitably for participation in the conflict. Edgar's story is told through the observations of his mother, his brother (who is younger but more literate and articulate than Edgar himself), his girlfriend, and through Edgar's thoughts and snatches of letters home. The poet also observes Edgar objectively in the third person, with the type of forensic eye for the detail of the interface between human beings and the familiar technologies that surround our lives that is already evident in her earlier work. She explores the continuities between an ordinary American upbringing with a well-meaning but ineffective Mom, and the appeal of enlisting, piling on telling detail after detail, and keeping up the suspense to the final poem in the volume. The poem is perfectly judged in it s matter of fact tone and avoidance of sensationalism; but once read it casts an even more sombre hue over the whole volume. *Get Some* is an important, well considered and well executed work that not only grips and entertains the reader but also offers a principled and coherent critique of American culture and politics.

Both Yelich and Richard Reeve are featured in the compendious collection of *New New Zealand Poets in Performance.* The debate continues in poetry circles as to the necessity and point of poets performing their own work, with some declaring that if the poem works properly upon the page, i.e. if the poet's craft is up to the job, then performance is totally unnecessary. On the other hand, others believes that the poetic text is somewhat like a musical score waiting to be interpreted and performed by the poet, who is thus both "composer" and "instrumentalist". I tend towards the latter view, depending on the type of poetry. Certainly *New New Zealand Poets in Performance* is a delightful introduction to a wide diversity of new New Zealand poetic voices, and given the differences between received English pronunciation in the UK and kiwi English it is

extremely useful to have the poets' own voices interpreting their works on two CDs here. Twenty-eight young and mid-career poets are represented, so it is impossible to give many name checks; but listen to the cumulative humour of the first poem 'I was a Feminist in the Eighties' by Anne Kennedy, and I swear you'll be hooked!

Richard Reeve's contribution highlights an intensity, gravity and seriousness in his work that simmers through his poetic craftsmanship. *In Continents* shows various aspects of his talent, including a scholarly use of sources that can at times leave the reader seesawing between poetic text and informative footnotes. Disconcertingly, the footnotes all too often appear essential if one is going to stand a chance of comprehending the complex nuances of his poetic texts. Reeve's sources are often based in Western European history, as in the 'Five Songs for Edward III' and 'The Occupation of Tiberius': and these two sequences are amongst the densest in the volume. Reeve is at his best when closest to home; the sequence 'Seven Songs for Islands' draws on local and colonial history and in these subject matter and lyricism meld together. Take for example the first in the sequence:

> If breaking through brine
> then breaking through time
> or culture, at any rate.
> Sunshine, salt and sleet
>
> mould lava into grime,
> suffusing into grey-green
> immensity the bed-rock.
> The racketeer, squawk
>
> of a chance mollymawk,
> faeces draped on a crag,

means little to the trawler
moored in the shallow water.

But the sea in the bird,
the breeze in the watcher
as he peers overboard,
paints this other picture.

The sentiment here is close to that of Orsman's in 'What the Camera Missed' (quoted above); a sense that human observation and perception has to be complemented by another kind of attention to the natural world and by poetic imagination. In Reeve the later must also be a type of moral imagining, that comprehends and bears witness to the value of the ecosphere. At his best, Reeve achieves this role of poetic eco-advocate; and in this lyric he is at his best. Elsewhere in the volume, his love affair with regular masculine end-line rhyme schemes can coarsen his message. Here his rhyming is more subtle, with half rhyme and pararhyme, and some internal rhyme and consonance. The irregularity of the rhyme scheme matches the poem's sense that it is easy to miss the importance of a seascape by focussing on the obvious; that we should be open to the gaps in perception, not rush to paint a coherent and finished picture. Is that why the poem is preceded by an initial asterisk?

I wonder if C. K. Stead influenced Reeve's decision to use part of Ezra Pound's 'Credo' as epigraph to 'Formalist MP Confesses'. Pound states: "It is certain that the present chaos will endure until the Art of poetry has been preached down the amateur gullet, until there is such general understanding of the fact that poetry is an art and not a pastime; such a knowledge of technique, of technique of surface and technique of content, that the amateurs will cease to try to drown out the masters". The epigraph precedes seventeen *ottava rima* stanzas, which avoid the sub pre-Raphaelite diction of Pound's early poetry, yet acknowledge that "the form

instructs its sense". Yet a tension remains between the attempt to address a contemporary world of global conflicts and a yearning for the aestheticism of Keats or Eliot. Reeve chooses a high-risk strategy in quoting Pound then reverting to traditional prosody, and in debating current global politics in what could be regarded by now as "worn-out forms". Initially my response was to reject Reeve's prosodic choices—after all who, post-Pound, dare place the adjective "Unheeding" at the very start of a volume of poetry? Yet Reeve does dare in his 'Proem':

Unheeding any language, past thought perhaps,
More powerful than any love, the land moves.

His prosody choices are the antithesis of Sam Sampson's, and yet both poets communicate a sensitivity to ecological concerns and a sense of the power of the land relative to the insignificance of human endeavour, so that it is hard to entirely dismiss Reeve for choosing to write in highly traditional English poetic forms. Ultimately this comes down to personal preference or "credo" about how poetry should conduct itself in the twenty-first century; and my personal preference is for the type of interface between landscape and inscape that Sampson nudges his reader towards appreciating in poems that need to be read in their entirety, not represented in fragmentary quotation. So here's a fragmentary quotation, the first part of 'Notes to Myself':

Go in on itself
against the not quite right

note whether to pause and rest
to speak means inspect every-

thing unsaid; essentially an odd pursuit

breath shifts a current space outward

the body stripped
tuned to turn on its articulate

pitch … of tense, of sentence, of serial

repeats:

In these 'Notes' Sampson sets out rules for a new aesthetic of poetic composition. "Beauty is truth" as Keats and Reeve remind us; but surely aesthetic principles need to be remade from within each generation, and certainly each century.

Not that I am advocating a contemporary poetry that is always conscious of its moral purpose in a context of global chaos; there is still a space for unashamedly personal love lyrics for example. Leonard Lambert "wobbled into love at the dingbat end of [his] sixth decade" and celebrated his joy at finding "someone who shared your own background & foreground as painter, hard-yards poet and self-created individual." A little searching on the internet reveals that according to the Macquarie slang dictionary "hard-yards" is an antipodean phrase introduced by Australia's prime minister in 2001 and is used to mean: "To go through with difficult and demanding work in order to achieve an end." Lambert's love lyrics contain but do not boast "a knowledge of technique, of technique of surface and technique of content," which permits him to achieve the aim of writing apparently effortless verse. Lambert values precision, he displays the artist's eye for telling detail and registers the presence of barely perceptible sympathies in this thoroughly endearing collection. While he eschews regular traditional poetic forms, his poetry draws on the lyric sensibilities of past poets, including to my ear the Elizabethans, especially Thomas Wyatt:

Her skin,
that separate thing,
listens
for the current of my touch.

Fields realign,
coalesce,
frequencies
ripple, fall
into phase.

The cloud-powder
of the pre-existent,
jubilant,
jumps
from its haze of potential

to this
precise
embrace.

The half rhymes "phase" and "embrace" combine surface sounds with subject rhyme in their content, moving through "haze" to the completion of the precision ending. Such subtle effects do not happen randomly, and to me are preferable to the self-conscious display of Reeve's 'Formalist MP'.

And Orsman's incunabulum? It refers both to the breeding-place of a bird species he observes in Antartica and to the early history of the printing press:

To read a book lying open to the wind,
its pages turning, leaf by leaf,

a fluttering incunabulum
of the here and now …

And look! here's a frail lie again,
fanning out over the mountainside,
or gathering against a boulder
tumbled from the heights above,
its spine exposed and saurian.

As Pound said: "Get a dictionary and learn the meaning of words!" New Zealand poets like Orsman, Lambert and Sampson create poetry that respects "the earliest stages or first traces in the development of anything" (*O.E.D.* 1989), that holds the delicate perception and precise observation of an infinitely fragile and infinitely beautiful world all the way through to the final version. And a poet like Yelich shows us with devastating wit and cultural critique the apparently "harmless" forces that jeopardize its future.

Chris Miller

Eli Tolaretxipi, *Still Life with Loops* translated from the Spanish by Philip Jenkins (Arc, 2008), ISBN 978-1904614-94-1, 126 pp, £12.99 (hb)
Víctor Rodríguez Nuñez, *The Infinite's Ash* translated from the Spanish by Katherine M. Hedeen (Arc, 2008), ISBN 978-1906570-06-4, 176 pp, £13.99 (hb)

An unfavourable review of parallel text translations from Spanish looks like rank ingratitude. Moreover, looking down the list of Arc 'Visible Poets' translations cited at the end of Tolaretxipi, eight out of twenty are on my shelves; of thirteen cited at the end of Nuñez, I own six. And there is no overlap. This is not to declare an interest in the legal sense. Some of these have been review copies in which I have found little to praise. But there is

no doubt that we should celebrate Arc's enterprise and at least admire its insistence on parallel texts printed in Basque, Slovakian, Slovenian, etc. In this respect, Arc exceeds the efforts of the late-lamented Forest Books International, which did not always insist on parallel texts of Chuvash or Sorbian poets.

The poets before us have little in common but their language, which in both cases might be described as the imperial language. Víctor Rodríguez Nuñez is Cuban "but" writes in Spanish; he was born in 1955 and has lived nearly twenty years outside Cuba in Nicaragua, Colombia and finally in the USA. Eli Tolaretxipi is Basque "but" writes in Spanish; she was born in 1962 and lives in San Sebastián. Both have translated modern Anglophone poets. Both have found competent translators into English.

Tolaretxipi is introduced by translator Philip Jenkins and poet and critic Robert Crawford. Crawford is sensitive but unconvincing. When he cites "Green insect / on a green apple" as worthy of note, we are suspicious of the intermediation of Marvell; when he says "Repeatedly, it was clear, loaded simple images that made an impact as I read", we are unconvinced because the image cited is: "I wring out the sponge. / I rub my eyes a lot." The selection here is made from two volumes: *amor muerto naturaleza muerta (past love still life)* was published in 1999 and *Los lazos del número (The Loops of the Figure)* in 2003. The very titles suggest the translator's hazards; the extraneous connotations of the English term "still life" imply more or less the contrary of the repetition *muerto/muerta*, while "loops" is not an obvious translation of "lazos" (in the context of love, it is more associated with bonds, ties, snares and knots) and "número" (number, numeral) is not usually "figure". In the first case, Jenkins has little alternative; in the second case his decision seems justified.

Tolaretxipi's first volume comprises two sequences. In the first, a narrative is very indirectly suggested; a woman is in the process of falling out of love with her female artist partner, for whom she models. The narrative—if it is one—focuses on the details of intimacy: paint-grimed