

## Featured Poet: Andy Jackson



photo: Rachael Guy

Transnational Literature takes great pleasure in featuring Andy Jackson, a poet whose work sits comfortably between the twin poles of confrontation and charm. Andy has appeared at literary and arts festivals across the globe and his poems have been selected for five of the last six annual editions of *The Best Australian Poems*. His poetry collection *Among the regulars* (papertiger 2010) was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize and he also won the 2013 Whitmore Press Manuscript Prize with the *thin bridge*. His latest collection *Music our bodies can't hold* (2017), consists of portrait poems of other people with Marfan Syndrome. It was featured on ABC's Radio National and the programme can be accessed [here](#).

Andy's poetic explorations of the ways we live within our bodies have had a significant impact on the Australian poetry scene. He is at the forefront of the recent explosion of writing and performance that examines bodily difference. In the poems presented here he questions our perception of 'otherness'; our ability to distance ourselves from difference and, by contrast, our insistence on an understanding that can never be fully achieved. Most significantly, his poems emphasise the importance of listening. In a world obsessed with shouting, this is a skill we desperately need to re-learn.

### POROUS, RECOGNISABLE AND FOREIGN

For the last three years, I've been pursuing a PhD in poetry and bodily otherness, creating a suite of new poems and an exegesis. This kind of work, which requires you to research and create something original, might seem by definition isolated, tending towards the solipsistic. Will anyone apart from my

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supervisors and assessors read my thoughts on Emmanuel Levinas, disability theory, staring and caesurae?

Even alone, though, I am not alone. Writing the poems, in particular, has been an exercise in attending to other people, and to the spaces between us. In some way, each poem emerges out of some feeling of affinity or solidarity, a sense of bodily connection. And, at the same time, more often than I might realise, out of ignorance.

As I see it, poetry, though it is often composed in solitude, is the antithesis of solipsism. Paul Celan once wrote, 'poems are porous constructs: here life flows and seeps in and out, incalculably strong-headed, recognisable and in the most foreign shape.' The thing is, different poems handle this life in different ways.

These three poems enter unfamiliar places and attempt to speak from there. What is here that is 'recognisable'? What is this 'most foreign shape'?

'The Hunchback in the Park Watching Dylan Thomas' is a response to Thomas's poem 'The Hunchback in the Park'. As someone with severe scoliosis, that particular epithet has always stung. I wanted to turn the tables, for this person – who in Thomas's poem is not given a name or a depth of personality – to observe the poet. The tone, rhythms, sounds and narrative arc of my poem come directly from the original, its world, but (of course) translated, deformed, through my own fictional inhabiting.

'Out of Focus' responds to the experiences of people with albinism in south-east Africa – Mozambique and Malawi in particular. The poem is concerned with their persecution due to their appearance, and with their perseverance. Early drafts of the poem, though, made me realise my empathy was too quick, and the poem needed to be transparent about its failures, in the hope that 'mistakes / might be more beautiful and true.'

'Disperse' comes from personal experience on Dja Dja Wurung country, where I was born and where I now live. The central Victorian goldfields indeed feels like home, and yet its deep history is that of another nation. Certain places resonate strongly with a significance I can't put my finger on. Somewhere in the background of the poem is the hope that by listening to local Indigenous elders, and acknowledging the colonial histories of 'dispersal', we might somehow relearn these meanings.

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