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47

featuring the poetry of
Harry Ricketts

comment by Jack Ross & Bill Sutton

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Poetry NZ 47

Alistair Paterson

Editor

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Editorial

Avant garde poetry has been around for a long time, and since the mid-1970s semiotics could perhaps be considered its most recent variant. Neither semiotics nor avant garde's earlier varieties show any sign of going away. Their most recent forms lean towards the idea that the words and the symbols they consist of don't carry 'meaning' in the usually accepted sense. Meaning exists in our minds rather than on paper or in phonemes. The signifieds ascribed to them by writers and their readers are influenced by the knowledge and experience they bring to them, while the text is experienced as an accompanying referent through deference. Signifiers are arbitrary. They don't carry any signification other than what their writers and readers give them or bring to them through their personal experience. And even if as Charles Bernstein once said, 'It's impossible to separate prosody from the structure (the form and content . . .)', what's experienced as the sound, colour and form of the language creates the poem and its aesthetic.

This demonstrates that the language of poetry has no meaning unless we ascribe meaning to it, as when we meet a word like the Russian *slovo*. If we've not learned the language we have difficulty in assigning a signified to it—but nevertheless we'll probably assign one anyway. As Lisa Samuels might say, and if we take it further, language imposes limitations, creates a dichotomy between what we experience and what its forms and structures allow us to experience.

Trying to escape the limitations imposed by formal linguistic structures such as sentence, clause and phrase, subject, object, verb and even words themselves, can pose a threat to the personal, social and community exchange of understandings that have made us what we are. There's a limit—a limit worth thinking about—as to how far such an escape can be pursued.

But there could be benefits from pursuing it, from recognising the limitations of formal language and reconnecting with the irrational that has always been a major part of our lives, and in recognising the apparent randomness of the ways in which we experience language and the world around us. Poetry can benefit from this and should present an aesthetic which isn't held together solely by the conventions and formalities of reason and language but by the shape and feel of the total experience that arises from it. If we allow this to happen then we 'make it new', enrich and enlarge ourselves through the ways in which we experience poetry as people like Lisa Samuels, Jack Ross and many others who discuss and write on literary theory, encourage us to.

Alistair Paterson

Harry Ricketts

PNZ 47's featured poet is not only widely recognised for his poetry, but also for his work as an academic and his contribution to literature at large. Holding a professorial appointment in Victoria University of Wellington's English Department, he is an editor, anthologist and a critic—with a serious interest in cricket. Well known academically for his biographies of Rudyard Kipling and British First World War poets, his poems have appeared in a number of collections and in numerous local and overseas anthologies. His essays and short fiction have appeared both locally and internationally.

He says:

When I was twenty years old my poetic heroes were predictably T S Eliot and Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, and I earnestly believed that poems should be very clever or very anguished, preferably both. It took me many years to grasp (and accept) that poems can also be simple and/or funny, and that a funny poem can also be serious. Now I enjoy and admire a wider range of poets: from Horace to Marvell, Martial to Gray, Byron to Cavafy, Edward Thomas to Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Curnow to Derek Mahon, John Tranter to James Fenton, as well as Wendy Cope and many others. I don't know what these poets have in common except that I carry poems and lines of theirs around in my head, and they deeply matter to me. I don't have a poetic creed or poetics as such, except that in my experience poems are improvisations which usually grow out of some involuntary impulse (a Romantic idea). Here though are a few precepts that I think mostly hold true:

- in principle there's nothing you can't write about but in practice there's less than you thought, and Baxter was right that there are certain wells to which you keep returning with your bucket;
- usually you find out something in the course of writing a poem which you didn't know before, and that's part of why you keep writing;
- it's now much easier to pull off a passable free verse or 'open form' poem than a rhymed one;
- syllabics can be helpful (similarly, emptied-out forms like unrhymed sonnets and villanelles etc) because they maintain the ghost of form without predetermining meaning, and odd-numbered syllabics work best because they avoid the English language's tendency to fall into iambics;
- line-endings matter because, reading out loud or in the head, we inevitably half-pause at the end of a line, so you should avoid ending a line with words like 'a', 'the' or 'of' unless you have a specific reason to.

1970

(with Cath Vidler)

i

A month ago I should have said:
'White roses touched with snow.'
The flakes that hurry past me now
touch roses turned to red.

ii

The roses that said:

flakes
touch
me.

*

Roses,
touched

a month ago
with snow

have turned
past white

to red.

*

I should hurry now.

iii

'Hurry with me,'
said the white roses.

Roses that I should have touched
turned to snow a month ago.

Now past flakes.
Touch that red.

Flat

You stand in the doorway, looking
out at the garden you won't see
blossom into summer.

The flat behind you encloses
only air. Everything's turned off
except the soft sunlight

patterning the path, the onion
weed, the twisted ngaio. Nearby
a grey warbler pours out its brief flurry of notes.

The dentist

It's a morning in July 1974. Hugh and I stand side by side, splitting apples on the trestle table, shouting above the factory din while the blackcurrants hop and jostle on the conveyor-belt, and the forklifts come and go. Hugh was born in Inverness, orphaned at five months, he says. He's big, has bad teeth, wears a 200 lira piece on a chain round his neck. The heart tattooed on his left forearm carries the legend Mother, Father and a pair of dice. He brings the axe down accurately with a great crash that makes the table jump. He spent nine years in the army, four in Northern Ireland, in the end bought himself out rather than go back. Leaning on his axe, he shows me bullet wounds on his chest and leg. He shouts the story of the dentist. The dentist got his nickname because he'd say to his victims, 'We're going to take a ride to see the dentist,' then put a black bag over their heads and shoot them through the mouth. Hugh was part of the detail assigned to capture him. One of them was disguised as a UDA bigwig on a much-publicised visit to Belfast. At the Belfast docks, the dentist, as expected, hi-jacked the taxi but they followed in two jeeps with wireless contact, rammed the taxi, drove out to the country and shot the dentist in the leg when he tried to run off. In the jeep on the way back, the dentist began to boast of his exploits, claiming he'd only get a few years and would then start all over again. The sergeant stopped the jeep and ordered Hugh to give the dentist his rifle. Hugh didn't get it, but did as he was told. The dentist told them to drop their weapons and get out of the jeep. He said he'd let them go, because it would be another coup for the dentist but the sergeant had a pistol hidden in his tunic, drew it and shot the dentist three times at point-blank range. The report said he was killed, resisting arrest. Several points in Hugh's story bother me but what with the factory din, the blackcurrants hopping and jostling on the conveyor-belt, the forklifts coming and going, that axe in his hand, I decide not to bring them up, and Hugh and I go on, side by side, splitting apples on the trestle table.

10 to 3

your breath slow and full
stars frosting the window

your face on the pillow
a still dark pool

your hands bunched like spiders
on the purple eiderdown

with you and me, it was always
10 to 3 in the morning

Pewsey

Trees shaggy with apples,
air warm as Keats.
Dock leaves, nettles,
glints of last night's rain.
On a bare branch a bullfinch;
high up in the blue a heron passes.

Othona

Last night I heard the centurion
who patrols the camp, a limp in his walk,
and doesn't see the nissen-huts,

parked cars, sleeping ducks, the bare chapel
still almost a barn, sees only the spear-
point of the fixed stars, shudders

at shadows, sounds, shapes beyond the pale
of mind. The neck-hairs rise, his heart grows small.
The man with heron feathers

in his hair, who kneels where the wardrobe
stands, notches arrow to bow, slips outside.
The centurion whistles softly,

blows on his hands, stamps his feet, staring
out in the half-dark over the mudflats.
The dawn wind quickens.

Prussia Cove

All day a smuggler's fog
has wrapped hedgerow and headland
in damp fur.

All day you've burrowed down
inside yourself. Tonight it'll be time
to send in search parties.

The encounter

'Ah, a Byron with scruples,'
murmurs the not-so-young don
on the London-to-Oxford train.

His eyes explore you. Later,
in his rooms, he serves you port
to *Enigma Variations*.

Others

Bullmore C had a large mole on the top of his wrist.
Pound rubbed a bald spot on the top of his head.

Luscombe ran away, but came back when he found
Kuala Lumpur wasn't at the end of the road.

Alder D one night after Lights Out whispered:
'What's it got in its pocketsets, my precious?'

Tompsett, batty about bikes. Poltock. Gourlay.
What do they make of all that now?

Gap

‘When I grow up, I want to be
the man who says “Mind the gap”.’

Down the years how your voice,
that phrase, have haunted me.

Siegfried Act 3

Passed through the fire without a blister,
removed her armour, then kissed her.
It was love at first sight,
but that was all right:
she was only my aunt, not my sister.

The game

It’s 1966. You’re alone in the railway carriage; there’s no connecting corridor. The train stops at Moreton-in-Marsh. You look up casually as the thin figure—dark glasses, black leather jacket, curly hair—climbs into the compartment. He’s carrying a kidney-shaped case, which bangs against the door. He pulls the door shut, swings the case up onto the luggage-rack. The train moves off. The thin man sits down opposite you, pats his pockets, pulls out a cigarette, lights it, blows smoke, stares out of the window. Twenty minutes to Evesham. Your move.

Mediobogdum

Only these stone outlines
and the name MEDIOBOGDUM
remain to show where

the 4th Cohort of the Dalmatians
controlled the pass high up
to the east and stared, like us,

down the valley to Ravenglass
and the sea. Now bracken and brown
Hardwick sheep hold the fort.

A large, black dung-beetle pauses
to inspect my shoe, before continuing
its recce of the commandant's quarters.

Blanks

Some nights, jolted awake,
they float back: blurred, shag spots,
bad haircuts, blue ties.

Tish who wrote that witty dialogue
about a father and son sex-talk
and one holiday topped himself.

Butt, thick, nippy, good-natured,
smashed up on a motorbike.
TC had a crush on him.

Shaw, all through school
so toily and quiet, before
that accident on a grouse moor.

They never got to hear *Beggar's Banquet*,
read *Portnoy's Complaint*,
see the end of the Vietnam War.

Abel Tasman triolets

1

First we go up, then we go down;
then we go down, then we go up.
Rain-slicked bush, creeks mud-brown:
first we go up, then we go down.
Maryann's worried we might drown;
Teresa gazes deep into her cup.
First we go up, then we go down;
then we go down, then we go up.

2

The road winds uphill all the way;
all day it rains cats and dogs.
The estuary's impassable; we retrace our pain;
the road winds uphill all the way.
The American sips whisky, reading 'mind-wash';
a cormorant makes an M with its wings.
The road winds uphill all the way;
all day it rains cats and dogs.

3

Walk into Onetahuti Bay in the sun:
ribbed sand, greenstone sea.
On a branch a single black robin;
picnic near Tonga Quarry in the sun.
'Inflames' scores Katy eighty-nine.
Tony's ship with bottles of wine
backs into Bark Bay in the sun:
ribbed sand, greenstone sea.

4

Today, there's a spring in everyone's step;
the sun tilts mirrors off the waves;
bumblebees bunch on Belinda's shirt;
today, there's a spring in everyone's step.
What you bring is what you get.
Crunching shells, ford Torrent Bay.
Today, there's a spring in everyone's step;
the sun tilts mirrors off the waves.

For Casey on his naming day

Little buddha, on this day
you won't remember,
but will see in photos,
may be told about—
who didn't show up, who
badly misbehaved—
we wish you great gladness
(knowing, as you can't,
there will be sadness too);
we wish you good luck—much,
you will find, depends
on that—and the good health
to ride your train as
far as it can take you.

A modern creed

I believe in God the mother, sharer of crystals and echinacea, and in all things organic and gluten-free.

And I believe Jesus was awesome and a very special person, a legend who thought outside the box and wore hemp trousers, and that his life was a journey in which at the death he came to embrace his inner child.

And I believe in blue sky thinking, de-hiring and moving on. And I believe the reality is and that everything before me is history and old school. And I believe if you avoid sugar, lactose, nicotine and red meat, you will find closure. Have a nice day.

The wishbone

This is not the saddest story
in the world. But it is sad.
It happened a long time ago.

The six of us were living
in that house on Woodstock Road.
Our friend Sam had dropped out, and he

and Jay were in the room Kael
had had. (Kael claimed he'd once played
with the Tornados but no one

believed him). That evening
we were all in the kitchen,
watching one of the Bogart films

that ran that spring. *Petrified*
Forest? Not *Maltese Falcon*.
Someone had roasted a chicken,

and Jay got the wishbone.
She was beautiful, blond, direct,
worked in Boots, had a way of flick-

ing her straight hair off her face.
She hooked the wishbone round her
little finger, offered it to Sam,

who hooked it round his little
finger. They pulled. The wishbone
snapped. Sam shut his eyes. You could see

he was wishing really hard.
Opened his eyes, looked at Jay.
'Oh,' he said dully, 'you're still here.'

It's not the saddest story I know,
but it is sad
though it happened a long time ago.

For D

'That's weaker than dog shit,' you'd say with your smoker's chuckle.
You were the only one of us whose 'Far out!' and 'Outta sight!'

sounded remotely plausible. In your darkened room, you'd play
In-a-Gadda-da-Vida, *Surrealistic Pillow*,

Astral Weeks, spinning a lighted candle in a suspended
coconut shell, throwing shadow bars on walls and ceiling.

You'd been at Woodstock; we took the milk train, caught
the premiere in Leicester Square; couldn't see you anywhere.

You were Petey in *The Birthday Party*, Aufidias in *Coriolanus*,
couldn't be broken in that new cell mate theatre game.

You had a car, were good at extravaganzas (that lake
at dawn), always up for burning the moment to the wick.

Taking your bow as Theseus/Oberon on Keble College lawn, forty
years back, it was, it seemed, all magnificently about to begin.

Folly House

5.45pm. Guy knocks. He has something very important to say. He is now 'a ball of pure consciousness', and we must all 'derelativise' ourselves to become 'pure consciousness'. He has de-Freudened himself and understands all his blocks and complexes. He no longer feels any sexual desire. He has also de-Marxised himself and burns a pound note by way of demonstration. He has recognised many 'happy coincidences and omens', such as his 21st birthday falling on Ascension Day. Outside it's getting dark, spring-chilly, the grey river moves under Folly Bridge and past Folly House where Guy walks about, chain smoking Gauloises, completely assured, hands shaking. He has realised that he has 'impeccable taste' and that Gauloises are the only cigarettes, Bach the only composer, Conran's the only dinner sets. He has a reading list of the Books: Shakespeare, Keats, Isherwood. Everything has led to this moment in time and to him being who he is. When the dons read his philosophy papers in Finals, they will at once see the truth, and the good news will break very soon afterwards.

Hume's paradox

Our discussion on nature seems to go in circles,
I think. My meeting with Hume, David Hume, that is,
begins with the most obvious,
for me, of course:

the sun rises each day.
leaves rustle in the wind. I can see and hear,
these events are real and true.

Mr Hume is not convinced for I really cannot
be certain
that the sun will rise in the morning,
or the leaves rustle in the wind:

*associations you make, and by these patterns
you live.
they demonstrate nothing,
except the human need
to believe.
our reason is slave to passions:
Love and Hate.
life becomes livable,
the world manageable.*

His assertions intrigue me . . . I ponder,
but if I cannot be certain of anything,
why be sure of Mr Hume:

*Sir, for, if I question truth,
then, all truth must be questioned:
a skeptic I become, but of skepticism, too.
I am left with
no certainty, no knowledge and no truth.*

The empiricist continues:

*we must live according to beliefs, as though
what we believe is truly, true,
life goes on and people can live.*

Me: *This sounds like self-deception.*

Mr H: *I don't think it's intentional, but, yes, necessary.*

Me: *Is there any way out?*

Mr H: *No. We need to live according to our beliefs,
whatever they may be, does not really matter.*

Me: *It almost sounds like a world of myth.*

Mr H: Which one, yours or mine?

Central American brew

Why do I remember coffee
in Nicaragua? Banana palms like
hands stretching, shade the second
floor:

- an order for coffee
- an order for milk
- an order for sugar
- an unrushed waiter
- my *amiga* calls him *señor*
- sends the waitress
- repeats our order
- discusses the request

I sipped the coffee from a straw,
milk, and sugar, the *doña* lent me
her wings, the blue ones.

Her red head and thin body became
smaller and tiny and distant.

The morning clients drive after the
bright sunrise for the fresh brew.
Far from the old coffee plantation,

under banana palms they taste,
from the white clouds I watch
I hear her noble Castillan,
gracias señor.
I signalled for
doña to join me, but she drinks
the decaffeinated, and I am in
her dream.

Green experiment

Where are you, green?

Along a river . . . dot banks.

I see you—road touching the sky.

Branches sway hitting: fence.

Your smooth leaves stroke—my arms,
scented pine needles,
soft velvet moss stretches below.

Yellow-green fields layer,
sheep graze . . . shearing the grass.

Green apples laugh.

Waiting

From my matted hair,
all the way down
to my black socks,
alligators stitched into the ankles
I'm drenched

Waiting—
some of us wait
all our lives
for answers
that don't come.

So many times I tried
to forget it all
lying in bed
waiting on my heart
to stop.

I write down everything
there is to live for
on a pink napkin in the bathroom
of a go-go bar in Bangkok.

In the morning I amble
to the beach, and sit
eating banana pancakes
drinking from a coconut
as if I were some kind of king,

and my heart, like morning, embers
from a beach fire, glowing,
and building up until
it's the only sound anywhere.

suite of

1. 'got the future wrong'
—all quotes from Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

it's fluid
the knotted pen
puts back a state
that's threatening
to be translucent
that's trash
controlled, labelled
demonic, in another age

but that's not the future
this is

this is
and from here we go
to all avenues, tree-lined, bin-lined
car-lined

nothing is out of time
or in time
the pen
makes approximate shapes
on a page
you wake again
when you hear an alarm

you read something
that surprises
a dolphin uses a sponge to protect its snout
in the sand

2. 'being of its own'

the thrush
opens its beak
its chest vibrates

on the beach
a seal pup
lies dead, its glass
eye open
head undirected
the greased fur

the small nails
in its hind flipper

you measure it with your eye
about 600 mil
its chest doesn't rise

no doubt, in these storms
the sea will take back

3. 'the initial colour'

I'm cerise
a beggar
in a borrowed robe

I'm blue
a cube of ice
forgotten by the rich man

I'm emerald
a lie
coveted

I'm orange
a complication
too great to solve
left to dangle
over inattention

I'm red
brocaded, never fading
to the white contrast you expect

I'm purple
excess of desire
that would leave aside
a continuous note
in the shabby satchel

I'm gold
the promise
of the promise of the promise
everyone believes
no one believes

I'm grey
the realisation
of a kind of truth
as you shower a client
he asks
have you ever
gone surfing

4. 'flows into mirrors' (paraphrased)

the mirror keeps moving
poleaxed
by gravity
or released
by ashes, dancing, singing, crying
playing in the rain

it follows you to work
looks into your eyes
as you clean the sink
it rinses you
as you turn around to answer another question
winks in mockery as you face the door
blinks in disbelief as you pass
a cabinet
an ornament reflects you
distorted, perhaps
but you
in all you love and hate

5. 'planes of the animal'

first
offal and excreta
second
skin and tactile pleasure
hair, fur, the softness protecting
third
avarice—the mind sees, the groin wants
fourth
a voice sings its agony

to the empty rock
fifth
a suspicion that the rock
has a rudimentary consciousness
endless

the planes play with you
consciousness doesn't stop
despite its archaic
the feet don't smile
there's too much
to evolve

6. conjunctions

I'm taken back
to the cupboard
under the stairs
a long inversion
the kit bag stuffed with rags
spiders, pure darkness
which, even as you
open the door
conceives of light

Adam Clay

27/12/1984

You enter a surf beaten beach
sound surrounds slowly
you come onto the sand in your shoes
but sole prints become footprints,
inevitably, as you shake it all off
and finish the day barefoot.
Will you keep them off after the beach?

—But words become scarce
the party soon stops talking
begins to listen
times merge with waves
and lives become the crashing waves
and nothing else than the
trees, sand, grass and sea
ever existed.
As the three of you
are lulled into life
you part
one collects seashells,
another sits atop a dune,
the third one walks to the other end of the bay.

Ultimately you will all gather
once all have taken in the evidence
repeatedly sung by the sea.
Unsure what to do with it
you will go back to times past

those of individual lives
and leave the shore of time,
that of the future of millions ahead
but somewhere that murmur will linger
because if you listen
hearts and waves beat and pound
together.

'They cut the tree down!'

Ścięli drzewo!

Ścięli drzewo!

Swallows flown home
find it hard to understand
the walnut tree's living
stump oozing out
that flowing life that
should have trickled its way
up into the veins of leaves
tickling newborn sun
rays in the windy air

but here it pours itself out instead
smothering the earth in a sad ink-black goo.

Ścięli drzewo!

Ścięli drzewo!

I Mama też zginęła.

1910 in Paris

I Apollinaire

verse flowed, spilling syllables
from his garret
in Montmartre

his stomach was a collection
of complete works

his legs
gesticulated like arms

they ate at La Ruche
salad, sauce, salt
everything beginning with 's'

II Chagall

at the Louvre
Manet, Delacroix and Courbet
put an end
to his uncertainties

alone with
an oil lamp at La Ruche
he used as canvas
a tablecloth, bed sheets
even the back
of his night shirt

the painting pierced him
from the other side

Sound reels

Two excerpts from Claude Gally's 'The Breakers'

1.

*In that stretch of sea the female sharks give birth,
A dark stretch beyond the bar of foam, they keep
their young with them and then one day they abandon them . . .*

In that stretch . . .

birth, pain, independence,
water invoking an emotional response when
the mothers swim in the same ocean
it's obvious there was no abandonment.

The time to leave has come and gone and still not happened.

2

*The wind only whistles if it meets something in its path.
An obstacle. It never whistles over the sea.
The space leaves it silent.*

The longing to be silent, filled up like an inland sea
offering no impediment to air or water currents
a space that goes on and on to the far edges of forgetting
before it joins back to the solid shoreline.

This longing continues on . . .

Ships' logs record the quiet typhoon.

In sound reels all the winds howling, dubbed.

Should we turn to science to verify?

Accept when told it only applies to everyday breezes
taking the path of least resistance through your washing?

There are no limits to the strength of the wind's silence.

Professor Kröte's death

Dietrich chose cremation, not
a funeral without guests, chose
to rise from wood like notes escaping
their mortal boundary, chose to fly
beyond the piano's last ivory.

A former pupil in an orange summer
dress receives the urn by morning,
her house clean as an IKEA display,
missing the chocolate smudged hands
on the long beige walls, the shrieks
and red-faced hatred that accompanies
the melody of everyday life.

*'Ruhe in Frieden mein Lehrer'*¹
You are no longer a foreigner,
you are no longer, and no longer need
the heavy slosh of red wine
to dull and drown the discordant bruise
of "an ignorant town." You've entered the eighth
octave, leaving the rubbish behind.
Sitting in the warm light of the window
she places Kröte's urn on her piano.

1 German: Rest in peace my teacher.

A few remembrances from last year's fashion show

The renowned, of high profile, sat in the front row, pondering the first gaggles of grand euphoria, while hopeful underlings endured on the hard forms.

The second exhibitors appeared carefree as they meandered and zig zagged, externalising the outdoorsy look.

The third grabs had the perfection of Saville Row, were bespoke looking.

Then, unfamiliar innovations erased former boundaries, depicting new classical and revolutionary styles.

While new chatting and gasps caused muffled sounds with the audience looking at the latest chic items and accessories, extracting thoughts of va-va-voom.

Male models moved and stood in simultaneous silhouette. Their swish frivolity shrieked glamour and entranced mystique.

But eponymous hats, and silken scarves, echoed haute couture as ladylike kitten heels reflected a new splendour.

A financier dressed in a docile pink looked distracted, as he gazed into a fastidious crowd, while some discreet smalls struggled to look relevant, appearing as fanciful mishmash.

Then, a boiled cashmere exhibited a moody aversion, causing frenzied scenes that seemed ironic.

Jan FitzGerald

Letter to Tome Torihama (1902–1992)

*Owner of Tomiya Restaurant, near Chiran Air Base, who
cared for kamikaze (tokkotai) pilots hours before their last flight
(and later, for American GIs).*

How grateful
mothers must have been to you, Tome-san,
your tears hidden by clouds of steam,
stirring your special rice
stained red by azuki beans,
for their sons' last meal.
Nothing too good for your boys,
your fireflies.

What were your thoughts
as you watched these young men in flight suits
drink miso soup, and stroke the family cat?
How did a mother's heart cope with this,
knowing that out on the airfield
their flying coffins awaited?

It must have been painful
to hear Hiroshi play his bamboo flute
under your soft paper lanterns,
and Katsuo say,
I'm going to the next world at twenty,
but of the years I should have had,
I leave them to you.

How did it feel to watch them
walk off into the night towards the airfield,
white scarves bright in the moonlight,
their final letters to their mothers
in your hand?

In the morning
it was you, Tome-san, at the runway,
waving a tattered Rising Sun, calling
Goodbye Nobutaka, Chuji, Yukitoshi! Saburo!
as they roared into a sky
that finished at Okinawa.

Ant poison

The poison
has caught an innocent spider
and now a fever of ants
darkens its torso.
It's like watching the tiny berets
of a band of excited artists,
hauling the prize exhibit
across the floor of a gallery.

Or are these the eyes of the Nile?
Slaves, perhaps, carrying
a delicacy to their queen?
Down through stones
lit by the sheen of their bodies,
these servants bring an indulgence
to her majesty, a morsel
to her mausoleum.

Whale

Whale, if you were a hat
you'd be a Homburg.
If you were an actor,
you'd be Gerard Depardieu.

If you were a ship
you'd be a sunken galleon,
blowing beluga bubbles
five hundred years ago.

If you were furniture,
you'd be a chest freezer
with a bellyful of mayhem.
If a house, an old villa,
with a ribcage of rafters.

But what you are is Whale,
Arlluk and Cetus,
heart and heartbeat of Ocean.

The poetry workshop

for Robert McLean

I was late, didn't bring a pad of paper or a pen
to a workshop—hadn't registered that
I might have to work. My subconscious thought
at work, perhaps I didn't want to be there.
Not when I sat down anyway, at the front,
where the only empty chair was, within reach
of the teacher, a problem child, who with a sigh
had to be given a pen and paper to work on.

'What matters to you about poetry?'

I muttered a few things about line breaks,
brevity, emotion, Pablo Neruda and humour.
Then it was into the warm-up: quick flash
lines, responding to prompts, which lightened
my 'denim blue mood.' Fun with alliteration
'rumbling down the rudimentary road.'
'An aubergine and a bicycle at one in a line.'

Next, childhood memories after Bill Manhire
using the music of rhyme and near-rhyme:
'Marmite sandwiches, all I ate, playing
with battleships, short shorts and T-shirts,
bedroom curtains with lions, zebras,
elephants and giraffes, unable to sleep
in summer, everything brown and ochre,
walking barefoot, burnt-off grass with prickles,
Star Wars, wondering who John Lennon was.'

That was OK, decided I wouldn't leave
in the break. One poem done, onto the second.
Your direction: 'No feelings but in things.'
My thing a moldy mandarin. Only ten words
at first, a forced economy, then twelve lines.
The mandarin went off, like a bomb.
I read the poem out: my phrasing was praised.

I felt like a pupil, receiving the approval
of the teacher. You finished with a reading
of your own poems, where you bobbed about
to the rhythm of your words. I was pleased
to get your reference to Sweet Virginia
off *Exile on Main St*. I liked your story
about hearing a wild, hairy James K Baxter
on stage in the Kamo High School hall
six days before he died, when you decided
you were going to be a poet.

And I wish after seeing Sam Hunt at Whangarei Boys
I'd decided to be a poet—but I'm trying now
to arrange, as best I can, the lines I wrote
in a poetry workshop, which I had to rescue
from the wind that blew them from my hands
outside, all around the carpark. I had to chase
each page, as you watched, surely amused
at the antics of your pupil who arrived late.

On the loss of the *Holmglen*

(24 November 1959)

Two ships beside Town Wharf, bow
to stern—easy—as seamen often are.

We spoke of heading south—and they
to Oamaru for pollard, flour and bran.

A hail, a shout, ‘See you next time round!’
Then we sailed and later the storm—

a gale driving eastward, our stern
lifting to the sea, shipmates snug below

with Tiwai close to port and Rakiura
to starboard—distant in the rain.

Silent on the bridge’s wing I think of them
listen to a black gull’s midnight scream:

far off their cries still drift towards
the limestone town
asleep beneath their lee.

Fibonacci sequence

Eyes
in stars
run down tears
on my face, starlings
flutter home. Here it is; the sky
infused in bird clouds, snow flurries, in-and-out satin

gown
swivel
on tiptoe,
skin bumps I hug for
frozen swirls and seed arrangement
on a sunflower head. Starling's got one in his beak.

Daughter

Seed child bathed in my blood,
my cotyledon heart opening and
close like the worm that only just fits
sliding perpendicular to the light

and squeeze we did you and I
for your head has bloomed, the world now
your cradling hand.

Blake's angel

Date: 1782

William Blake

worn and heavy

head bent to see the rich floorboards
carved an angel into his kitchen table

A long walk around the river-bank
showed the river eating the land
and up in the knotted tree
sat many angels

With shining hair
their muscled arms reaching to the sky
touching god

Blake peeled back the wood
to sculpt their legs
and large foreign feet
swinging in the air

The rain smashed at the roof
always trying to get in

to touch the hewn angel
that lived in Blake's table

Barbara Kamler

Let's leave it at that— a short play in four acts

The scene

A hospital room filled with flowers, cards, sunlight. The woman, 58, coughs incessantly, her breathing laboured. Her arms are purple from too many shots of morphine, the tumour in her lungs now bulges out her back. The daughter visits from a distant place, sits on the bed, rubs her mother's back. The father comes each evening alone, lies beside his wife on the bed, holding her. Father and daughter are never in the room at the same time.

Act 1. The father decrees

He says, she may only visit when he is not there.
He says, she will never mention the word in Ma's presence.
He says, she is not to stay at his house this visit.

The daughter agrees
now that Ma is doing that thing
they cannot say aloud.

Act 2. The friend intervenes

She says, your Ma loves you
but she can't take it. Caught between you and him.
Go away for a while, but stay close.

The daughter agrees
now that Ma is doing that thing
they cannot say aloud.

Act 3. The mother begs

She says, speak to her now.
It's time to forgive, she's your daughter.
I'm begging you, it's enough.

The father refuses
even though Ma is doing that thing
they cannot say aloud.

Act 4. The daughter departs

She says, I'm leaving for a few days Ma.
You know how much I love you.
Yes darling, Ma says, but let's leave it at that.

So they leave it at that
until Ma finally does that thing
they have to say aloud.

Sarah Katherina Kay

Cultural damages: quadrilogy

Cultural damage: SMOG

first open up the discourse
we don't do transparency
everything is (value-) neutral, comprehensible
conforming to the constitution, impossible
Opposed to equality of course
flirt with red planets and nuclear bombs
defeats kept secret, eliminated
internet communities, everything is persiflage

Cultural damage: FEAR

apocalypse Expected, forgotten
Constructive analyses in (shift-) work
sporadic, worthy of discussion: but ignored
newly furnished, all colours kept
eighty years without tax deduction
elise dieu or secularisation
ashes to ashes and dust to dust
modernity permitted: dying also
fear made dogma, love thy neighbour

Cultural damage: WORLD

at home, furnished with: cold
found a diving board, careful: the pool's full of sharks
everyone with one another & against each other: I knew it
uncertainty, everything is lost—Given away
forensics is useless, overwritten by emotions
ruptured thoughts stuck, welded together
photos taken and deleted, unobserved
expecting to die any second, even the last
rigidity made a priority, leaked out, Revealed
through the whole body: from top to bottom

Cultural damage: DEATH

everything carried outside: even secrets
paralysing agents flowing in, slowly withering away
contexts created, recognised, enjoyed to the full
happiness booked, upgraded to spirituality
mistrust made into a weapon: against myself
spontaneity converted to devious calculation
macabre characteristic: detached from the world
manifestation of excess: a wealth of thoughts
small-mindedness crushed, smothered, Just: murdered
gold poured over everything and sold

Contrast in one

Eleven o' clock in the evening
not quite—
but is with the moon's night sky-high
Is that appearance
as of where I sit,
a self-accepted area
—a sustenance terrain
Waitemata Harbour—its water,
its air, its space expanse.

Man-made hour's time subconsciously with
one's doings/schedules,
still is close to it
as it stands in the vicinity
of ten-thirty

A non-issue to this brilliance,
bright in its full phase—and
the time for it to coincide
with the ever once a year remembrance
a Cross on the bun
eggs in festival colours
from the hands, lands of Europe—'mouths'
—a never to cease

global-wise
here—there—everywhere

Voyagers

Something familiar about this coast, remembered, half-known,
and I'm wondering if maybe all my life
I've just been sailing home . . .

The last leg's been a strange one, so many sea-miles gone,
sails aloft and full in light airs and calm,
as if a wind from some fifth quarter had driven us on . . .

On the beach, by a driftwood fire, is one who'd made landing
not long before. She's the Penelope, I learn, who didn't wait around
but put together a craft of her own out of what there was to hand.

I'm shown over a raft, low-rigged, of reeds, a marvel
of clips and corks and cast-off planks, all twined and bound.
How did this survive, I wonder, and see an answer in her look.

We walk and talk—our tales are much the same—
and somewhere beyond the dunes maybe, on inland tides,
another journey now begins

Lagoon

1. Fish

from Blackrock to the Vaima'anga Passage

You go so often, soften to the lull
and the pull, the distilled slick and swoon
of the blue lagoon gets deep inside you
such that you are right at home, alone
underwater. Blue world wader,
reef invader, wallower, follower
of the Picasso fish, Convicts, fins like fingers,
your pink *papa'a* flesh lingers,
magnified, undignified, the way you float

you bare bellied big breasted boat

And in the shallows, minnows
the gummy lipped goatfish, luminous ghost fish
—bobble and buckle and nibble and suckle
your thighs—a rise, the new high

Marae's index finger is missing
at the first joint, one careless point
into a coral cave on the reef
believing there was a cray, a clam. Slam! Moray eel
She feels little pain, explains
the scars below were another blow—

The harder you thread, the bigger the toxic dose
close to death—the sting, some unseen thing
she thought was a mottled rock, knocked her out
no doubt about it. Stone fish—ugly bastard!
She blistered, she festered, she fainted, she rested
and now at the lagoon she floats

another bare bellied big breasted boat

2. Octopus

from Wolfgang Losacker's beach house in Arorangi

Papatua says, there is a very short season
when the lagoon waters are just right
they come in from the ocean
to mate

Here we are at dusk
sitting outside on green plastic chairs
drinking Australian riesling, sometimes beer
Bali is eating peanuts
Moko are clicking their tongues in the eaves
The reef is an invisible line between ocean and lagoon
The raw sky bleeds as it falls over Blackrock
It is warm.
It is still

The shadow play

And he's there, the silhouette of a man, the silhouette
of his long stick, baggage on his back—wading just inside the reef
slow no ripple
The lagoon turns pink, then blue . . . silver
He stops bends, and with his stick prods the coral
Stands moves on, slow as the sun
Stops prods again
This time a ruffle—a splash the size of one small fish jumping
He stands a long legged creature on the end of his stick, dances
we watch
the shadow of a man
thread the shadow of an octopus
from stick to string, and heave it up
an umbrella, closed, over his shoulder
moves on
slow no ripple.

Leaving the small island

Popongi manea, the beautiful morning

The scream is waiting

The land is leaving

The flight is banking

The heart is heaving

The movie screen is looking, hooking
some box office hit, fit for action, reaction
some multiple distraction

You look back, behind, rewind

Over the headrest, seat 24A, the last golden bay

The silver wing, a thing of early morning

flight, the light catching the slow roads

glows bright. Gone, the morning song

Rangi Tokoā's pigs appealing, squealing for coconut

His machete cracks, snaps the dawn's back

Puretu under the mango tree at six,

sticks and spade in hand, defends a band of hens

Coral gravel unravels your suspension, tension

grows along the *ara metua*, the old road

slows. The pot holes, the old souls of *Tinomana ariki*

chief, thunder reef—rising grief

The scream is waiting

The land is leaving

The flight is banking

The heart is heaving

The airline man is talking, hawking
some pineapple drink, pink mango
some Pilipino fandango

You look back behind, rewind
Over the headrest, seat 24A. It's there you say, blinking!
Shrinking, clear and blue, the last hue of lagoon
Neptune—Nikau, Tereora, the windmill palms,
the cyclone alarms, the old arms waving
A rooster at Blackrock, the sunrise cock

At the airport, *kia orana kia orana* mama
miss you miss you, kiss you, singing kiss kiss kiss you

Papa sings gaily on his eight-string ukulele
Popongi manea, beautiful morning dawning

Ten thousand feet and climbing, life-timing,
west world priming. Ocean is sky, fly is dreaming

The island is a green disk, serene gold shining,
Small rock revolving. Disappearing, dissolving

The scream is waiting
The land is leaving
The flight is banking
The heart is heaving.

Diary of an ex-online junkie

As a teenager I dropped out of school
because I was too busy playing online games
to study, or to graduate.

It was an escape; a jail break
from a complicated life, where I was
growing up, and growing older.

In the virtual world I didn't have to do that,
I could just be 'me', and enjoy myself.

The thrill of the quest, the rush of reward,
the easy control of a life, a destiny.

It was easier; there was an instruction manual
to go with it, and people to help.

The 'real' world lacks these things,
most of the time.

The online gaming world was swallowing
me whole and taking my life with it,

and like a diver I let myself go,
enjoying the dark, quiet descent to the bottom.

But I didn't quite touch the bottom,
when a little and distant voice spoke up.

*Didn't you want this for your real life, once? It asked.
Magic? Adventure? Fun? Purpose?*

Yes, I thought dreamily, *but those
don't exist up there.*

Just wait, said the voice.
One day, it will get better.

Months later, I would look in the mirror
and not like what I would see.

The dark circles beneath my eyes,
the roll of a double chin.

My hair was greasy, and my skin
had lost its earlier tan.

So I turned off the computer, closed the accounts,
and stepped outside of that vivid and unreal place.

Maybe, I thought, *I can find
magic and freedom out here, somewhere.*

Boeing Boeing

Paris–Christchurch

The blip creeps round the world, out from bleak
grey-branched solstice and Common Market snow.
The liner flies by night, no hiding in the view.

Asia sleeps in the cabin and below, but threshes
on the mind's in-flight screen: the four-
facing Bayon seen in peace before the Angkar

slew: gore on the kampong paths, the Rusk
& Johnson flying circus (containing scenes
that might shock), swamps of skulls and bones.

This is not a baptism. The globe has turned,
turned, and I've flown over more wars than one.
Babies squall against the jet's dull thunder.

The pillar of air bears our Ark above the rains,
old stories flicker on the wings, as ahead the past
strains to a point between the flarepath lights.

Christchurch–Paris

Pain gleams off the snow, then the land
falls astern. My mother, goodbye,
stay in summer while it lasts but do not cry

for me; we have Australia and a brother
as a sop, and thawing Paris to finish.
The notes bulge in memory: bush,

weatherboards, men in shorts, the hangi
in the Sheraton Hotel. *I didn't understand
the speech!* Has age (heredity) untuned

my ear, or something else—a scream of turbines,
habit of distance, too many miles
from voice to aerial, too long? The con-trails

stream now over deserts, dead hearts, jungle
like the killing Maori forest, on schedule
to the boulevards of stone, slush, and dark.

Charleston, Charleston

Nothing, but nothing
who could tell
to dig here?
Imagine the trove:
wow, ninety-four pubs!
grubbers, cuff-links,
corset whalebones,
my grandad's kind of town.
The ballads, hymns
burred from last night's
gin. Sails
crammed in port.
Eighteen thousand souls
lusting gold.
The mallets stamp.
It's quiet, though,
just grass,
post and wire.
More zip under earth
than up this whole
sad coast.

The language of self defence

The girls are learning to break the feet
of men, to stamp their size-three shoes
into bones that snap like chicken
bones, to smash the balls of their heels
into kneecaps, to twist their fingers
around testicles,

to hold their hands at their sides,
thumbs curled across ring and middle fingers,
knuckles flat and facing forward,
to spin their fists as they punch
hard and straight at noses and throats.

They laugh because they're allowed
to say *fuck* this morning because *fuck*
off sounds a lot better than go away
please.

They are learning not to scream
because screaming makes you sound
scared, to pull your arm in quick
before he twists it up your back

and if he touches you in those places
to call them by their proper names
—not fanny, boobs, tits or jugs.

The boys climb the fort, swing
down the green rope with the frayed
tassel that drags along the ground
and wait for the girls to come out to play.

There is a gully between us where we once walked skin on skin

Today I brought
the washing in early,
hung it over the clothes horse—
your school polo still damp
at the collar,
picked the last of the silverbeet
before the rain
and after
searched for late feijoas
in the winter wet.

Your text brrriings in my
pocket,
smells of oilskin, hay
*Hey going to a party
at Sam's k yo*
My fingers fumble the keys,
latch the gate
Don't be late
I head home
in my coat of caution
all the time aching
to be clambering again
at the gate of the world
instead of walking
this familiar track
past cabbage tree mound
where on a clear day
you can see Mount Ruapehu,
and which I've often thought
would make a good
burial ground.

Transit of the sun across Venus

from this hushed room,
not in Tolaga Bay,
snow falls, a cacophony
onto Papanui from the un-blue sky.

she stands there,
still, bare, silent,
naked arms shielding her face
from the glare of pale light,
the marble crystals smoothed
to her gentle torso,
a soft hot chill,
of the sun in transit across Venus,
too bright to view with the naked eye,
but not her creamy white body,
to feel that pin prick less
than the full strength
of the whole sun,
the projection of her shadow,
on to the icy path,
at the midday zenith.

Heidi North-Bailey

My god, you're getting married

like a spark in a dark room
the spike red flame
colour you can dive
into
you *give me your hand*

love to run your finger over
that band of gold
startle
of sparkle

joy to lift you
off your feet

oh oh oh

little breaths of wind
wine that spills
by the bottle *bubbles*
burst bubbles and bubbles

heat and feet
heels kicked off
someone glittering in the corner

and someone else is crying
in joy of course

so much laughter
and the room may be too
bright

but you can take it

Rimu rider

taller
than my life
can climb

spirit hangs
talks
calmly

above
the road
thoughtful

reaching
beyond
the useless

Silence can be cold

cold
but I can't see it

dirty looks
break my bones

silence
comes in two shapes

one is deathly

Triptych aftershock

1. Sumner

Monet bathers stretch out
on family towels
indigo blue sky reaches
for foam
the sun winks
through flyaway clouds

worn weathered on the sand
driftwood & seaweed display
a tired inherited artistry

beyond the canvas
beyond the lens
the landscape *deepens*
its game
containers line the street
unpainted unadorned

this container-city has no wares
but waits on the off-chance
a cliff-top house tumbles down
& breaks its crown

2. Weka Pass to Hanmer Springs

these hills
bare rounded binding bounding
the same Wordsworthian leap
well-strung a geography of loss
through moving pen shudders
with lack

these hills
evoke primeval hungry wanting
the circle that returns
to itself troubadour universe
spills its stories its poems
drunk dreamt sung

traverse
and be born a lover
these hills still raw sombre
verbless speak chaliced mysteries
symphonic structures

traverse
beloved of landscape
traverse this valley breathe drink deep
vapours this land exudes
the heavy heart of this land still mutters
its protests

3. The immigrant landscape: there & here

beauty, violence
tragedy, hope

the world turns
its rhythms distorted
& absorbs this new violence
taming it on the living room screen
as if to say
this too will pass

rife with too many lovers
McCahon's landscape groans
extremely loud & incredibly close

if Homeland is only an idea
is Home one too?

Papers Past

A voice from the past, survives
in newsprint: Farm Machinery, 1943, 1944.

A Mr T H Lawn, giving his views
in the *Evening Post* on the problems

in industry during World War Two.
He comments mainly on the position

of manufacturers; he is their President.
He fears manpower could be a problem.

Many men are retained by the Forces
to mobilise and maintain their machines.

His is a voice from home in war-time:
he comments on what can be done today,

while the Military seizes the future.
Farms need equipment to run and produce,

while the focus is on making munitions.
he is my Grandfather, Mr T H Lawn,

a voice from the past, surviving
in newsprint. I read the article

as if I'm there shaking his hand
at the end of a speech, face to face.

His voice is everyone's voice
in the branches of family tree,

a voice from Home in war-time,
a voice from the past, surviving digitally.

Marilyn Monroe eclogue

i.m. Norma Jean

MAN: I recall her, in *Playboy* or *Life*, that blonde, beautiful hair, bust, legs, curvaceous lines . . .

WOMAN: I respect her. She went to acting school already known as a movie starlet and wanted to better her acting.

MAN: That subway scene, skirt billowing in *The Seven Year Itch* . . .

WOMAN: She read poetry by Rilke. She studied hard.

MAN: I liked her dance in court in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, diamonds were her best friend . . .

WOMAN: She married one of the great playwrights Arthur Miller and tried the stage.

MAN: I'll never forget her singing 'Happy Birthday Mr President' for Kennedy, that see through dress, stunning . . .

WOMAN: Did people care enough for her as a person, the real Marilyn? It's hard to know what she could've become.

MAN: What a loss, what a waste, that beautiful body, overdosing on sleeping pills . . .

WOMAN: She was an inspiration, and like many women in her business, perhaps she didn't know who she really was.

Handley's woolshed, 1868

The imperial gaze reflects the assumption
that the white western subject is central—Ann E. Kaplan

brave they were
kai iwi militia
slashing pre-pubescence
with scything sabre,
their poltroon pale
raw fury
slitting & splitting

ngā tama iti *o*
 ngāti ruanui
 ngā rauru kitahi
 te āti awa
 taranaki

8 years old

maxwell was
undoubtedly the 'hero'
of this
feral enfilade

they named him a town:
 he
slurped this bloodthirst
first

10 years old

trampled little ākuhata herewini,
swinging & stinging incarnadine,
chopped

off

his head
like chaff

9 years old
7 years old
11 years old.

when

the words of Titokowaru
e kāore ahau e mate
kāore ahau e mate;
ka mate ana te mate
*ka ora ano a ahau*¹

cleave
history,

lacerate
the imperial gaze

*ka reka te utu, nē rā?*²

1 I shall not die; I shall not die. When death itself is dead I shall be alive.

2 revenge will be sweet, is it not so?

Notes: On 27 November 1868 a party of mounted Kai Iwi troopers— British colonialist militia—attacked a defenceless group of Maori boys playing at deserted Handley’s woolshed (near the master tactician Titokowaru’s Tauranga-ika marae). None of the boys had yet reached their teenage years, none were armed. Two boys were murdered outright, several others seriously wounded. Trooper George Maxwell received a commendation from his commanding officer at the time. Maxwell was not long after killed as he tried to steal a flag from a Maori pa on 27 December. A nearby Taranaki town was named after him.

The little boys (*ngā tama iti*) were Herewini, Takarangi, Kingi Takatua (also shot and sliced up dead), Ngarangi, Ngarutahi, Tamou, Taria, Toheriri.

In memory of a poet

for David Mitchell, 1940–2011

No longer do your feet
 pad this beat
these shaded streets & sheltered haunts
of black and gold beaches:

yet in their wake they bequeath
 a flickering tableaux—
one brief flash after another:
 a red line tracing the night

because you took the time to know
 felicities of time & place—
the people at a party, the people in the street
 or players on a cricket pitch

who dares mock a man like you?
 yet there were those who did
 —among them friends—
who hid from you, behind closed doors

in fear of you or what you bore—
 the weight of dumbed-down
 doldrummed days
the city merchants trade us for

yet now do they still hide
 and look the other way
from you who held your peace
and stole away?

Motelstown

houses families lived in one by
one in moonlight flits upped and
gone, dwarf platoons of
orphaned piles soon
scarper leaving a vacancy—
mud, rank grass, nightshade, ragwort,
junk the developer's
digger makes utter

an avenue now of side-by-side
motels flaunting rival
allurements STUDIO SUITES
LUXURY SUITES
SPA BATH
SWIM POOL SKY
VACANCY single or total
rarely boasting NO-
vacancy squared

eery enough being proudly led
inside the house I'd grown, belonged
in, walking through remembered
walls gone or switched
around imagine
finding it
marooned out in the
sticks on the tracks'
wrong side tired box

that staunch brick church I
first married in jaunty
steeple, swooping beams, brass and stained
glass history deemed now an
earthquake risk hence must be

bowled by a century's shakes
unbothered yet some force here
refuses permanence

Being and not-yet-being

Jackson Pollock needing,
at one stage, after
hours of flinging,
dripping, pouring, spattering
paint of many colours on
his horizontal
canvas, to ask his
wife, 'Is this
a painting?'

How often might Lee have had
to go something like, 'Umm, not
yet,' or 'Nope, another
mess,' or 'Yeah but
not a big deal?'

Streaking phrases, spattering
words, dripping images on
mind or screen or
paper, trying out
others, shifting them
round, finding out
shaping, rarely one arrives at
knowing it just is, but often needs to
ask, 'Is this
a poem?'

The right tool for the job

Roll

The second it happens is the best, the tree exactly
in your head its buds precisely fallow. Cement
ideas rigor around with their teeth bared
though they're friendly, they have a lamp that shines direction.

*The false bid over the predator
speaking of that flashy fluid
reckoning, you wait for every night
you turn your body upside down and wait.*

Time and again the woman with her hair on fire
and bony commandeering hangs before you with
her face to learn. Your teeth acquire points of view.

You have picked yourself careen, the dessert that is
your body twitches, someone holds the door and runs
in you with faces. Overtime calls out grateful.

*(given the last time someone calls
out you are ready, entirely together
to hit wherever it may)*

Tuck

Culture is a soup thrown at faces. They lick
their cheeks and

*all the custom they asseverate and liquid time
to mold their bones to dew.*

Ach me in line,
make me thine with predators, the long wait
shipping, the short wait for people with
arms linked the bones
clack shred adventure,

come on down.

You touch the next thing you see
something blowing and you look
to see who's blowing it, then you know
*you've left behind all knowledge
and are departed into Total Man.*

Your cloth starts fluttering
and twitching,
your lamp
blinks and the skin shifts down
becalm a pure asseveration of a time
someone looks at you, and someone else
looks at you, and they save their language
for some Really Excellent Cause
and you can look all you want
at the vaults of heaven, rain.

Image

Granted, the picture's awesomer than that,
the wind farms heave up mountain arms
whose edge accepts relation. The girls run
with their curls on fire and don't notice it.

*My culture wounds a salve
the liquid apertures open all the time
make cluster packets
someone calls idea. Then limbs drop.*

No apologia makes the space where
mirrors break to frame their disposition as
supportive. Your arm bones lift some objects
in return the travel passes can be copied
and the truck go through.
The bodies all lie down
and get back up.

The garden

) like if you could just hold it
still long enough you tremulate
on a basis , area and plot change
for the gardener kissing the ground
(which she among her Stations) ;

a Milliner wants to show her Cloth
ecstatic on seasonal turns , how they get
green or saved water for your linen
swirling down the disappearing drain ;
you follow your eyes as in a play
medial darkness smocking eyelids foreskins
as you tunnel idea through a Ground

a burlesque alienation leans in to keep you
company , groping your critical acoustics
listening for the bend where the cloth pushes
your own blood pipes dangling inside you
cupped like a wadi ; a stumped ear intentional

misdirects the program where you shade
(like Daphne procreating her own self)
loops certifying her identity , air
carving out exhale to troupe that back
ward dense your inside out to clothe
the tree stand-in for annihilation out (to bark

Freight

nearby, space as painting and the walls
around the corridors quiet in the long train
car, so one is bound with one's head and mouth,
held in head, her shapely eyes and round eyeballs

curling at you, minxing for a set of reasons such as
when two persons spread meat kissing, bouncing
from the love performance, calling on you to
take the parcel and fly to another part of the room

a group in plastic, a lateral man nearby the platform
scoring for you, walking with his eyes apart
covering up or masking, the grumblings of their torsos

planting hover, very near each other on the platform
without their holders, *suture suture*, blue lights
at intervals keep their footage steady, the event flare
of your extricated eye invisible records

the occurrence like the Steady Hands of Experience
balance a system escaping into allegory *but how can allegory
frame authentic living* (her myelin sheaths unpeeled
long back) (it can get you there even more quickly)

Modern love

Sure *trompe de l'oeil* incoming on pip plains
then and new like ice, the kick fill in her
shift. I have, and in having halve the heartbeat
of the woman there the rolled bed and equations.

Who made the life like? A woman living huge bodied
macramé and digs. A new way of writing
yet the principle is the same, hired to watch
for the body in mobile, in the ears that pitch shriek
streams a nice crowd with its instrument.

They thrill in answer, patiently the calibre of
the biological furnishings barking into
interloop, woman and its machine, what?

Saline push though present's co-humane, stripped
bark planch through opportunities for the human
world unspoken to be spoke. Your feet caught
in the wheels flap out where *everything's a letter*.

Six climes

farmer

after a day of slaughter
she stands outside
looks up
to the diamond sky

refugee

they come from flood times
famine & war
sometimes carry bags

life

a door of light opens
a threshold spilt
come in & share
my table

refugee

it's not just
what they leave behind
it's what they have to carry
love & enemies

farmer

arteries run foul
he cries dry river tears
& irrigates against
his own true flow

life

mother watches
earth being used
time resumes

The dark side isn't always

The dark side isn't always
dark, for the moon rotates exactly once
with every revolution around the planet.

When the face we see is full of light,
stars pale near the moon.

When the face is dark, the moon is new
and darkness visible, yet mystery remains
plain in the phases of shadow and sun

on the face hidden by the faces we see.
As we see only one face of the moon,
the unknown gazes always away

from sky-cast glances to confirm bearings
on Earth. Seeing what we think we see,
we see only half of what's there.

When the moon is new, skies blacken
with stars, and fire flares on the dark side

no one knows the sun illuminates,
one far face none see from here—
a dark moon now, a full moon new.

Phyllotaxis

1. New Leaf

by my back porch
the elephant palm
survives cutting back

new coils erupt
foreskin succulence
erotically
amatorily

so I reflect
sipping morning coffee
'it's all show and flow'

2. Brain Leaf

microtubules of
human brains are
plants of a cerebral kind

in technicolour dreams
your head flashes thought
pulsations through leaves
of silver/gold

3. Wind leaf

on an aerie axis
hurricanes spiral wild
wind forms similarly

lacing skies above
you into blue
black ferns

4. Attunement

you rouse me
from nightmare cries
God speak I mumble

a bedtime guru gavotting
the Golden Section
resonating Fibonacci numbers

into a semblance
of synchronicity

5. Finale

when you choose
to traverse my living
room your thoughts

are taking root
like artichokes
like ivy

I can only view
window reflections
mirror storm vortices

feel your veined
thoughts entwined
final silence

(Following death)

(every man has his limits)

(vanishing
into night
like an unspoken thought)

(scratching elsewhere for light
(a bold idea
now withdrawn
from usefulness)

(placed unprotected
(or the welcoming
duty of death)

(simmers like a loaded whisper)
(committed
to terminating
where the heavens meet
the underworld)

(who's to say such conclusions
should be dictated
by the fickle songs of men?)

First-time occupancy

In my single room
on a hard double bed (China like)
I hear traffic outside
and within—
the door lock of a neighbour.

Then to half sleep
I learn the noise of a worm
half out, half in
doing a slow squirm.

It is the water cooler
acting as a companion.

Reading faces

1. When serious
one can't think
what best
to ask at first.
2. When slow smile
again one can
enjoy it with him.
3. With her
to launch at oddity
is fun.
4. To share
is human
and divine.

Dallas Arena, 1999

In the city where JFK tragically died nearly 50 years ago, come on over to the Dallas Arena, Shania Twain and her 9-piece band are there. They specialise in acoustic and electric guitar riffs, with strings, keyboards, piano, percussion, drums; playing country is pop is rock.

Shania has her hair in long braids, it suits her. 'Are you ready America?' she repeats the question to get some rapport, then launches into the androgynous 'Man! I feel like a Woman!'; a catch-all, feminist song, moving around the stage, waving and flirting with the crowd.

Not a typical pop diva, she gets to her anthemic ballad 'You're Still the One', I first heard it on the car radio in the mid-'90s—love at first sound—had to know who this singer was—the song's about fidelity to the one you love, with deep piano chords and Twain playing acoustic guitar.

Shania ends her show amid flashing lights, smoke and fireworks, with 'Rock This Country', up-tempo rock. It moves around states from coast to coast, creating excitement, promoting brotherhood; my mood moves from sadness to joy, she always affects me like that.

—October 2012

Kopiko Road (1)

this place is old would know itself better
eggshell blue on a thicket of kauri
but damp at the cutting
(& not a little gamey)

Kopiko the wanderer—loose of scruple
round Henry's Hill
all hat atilt & sly asides
peppers the air with Kanuka seed
above our claim at journey's end

here
the sun knows winter
is only a tight left-hander
southeast of the gate
already it's in our bones

Kopiko Road (2)

all bent again wanting the kauris
to stop shitting off limbs
I've paths here & made the commitment
saplings coming on such that the bully-boys
might give an inch

wouldn't ask as much but cower under the weight
as if they couldn't otherwise hold up
a promise that large

I drink poetry

Bartender
pour me some more
let me stumble through the back door
let the police
smell the poignant aroma of rhythm and blues
collide with my Genius creative expression
handcuff me for resisting being silent
check my breath for the bubbles of a drunken poet
spitting up words and rhymes
expressively with profanity of poetry
charge me with intoxication
verbal sensation
before the judge
I plead guilty
poetic confinement recommended
on the walls I write art
painting out the graffiti of the prisoner's thoughts
and colouring with poetic expressions

Bartender
pour me some more
until my cup overflows
I just can't get enough
let this liquor become embedded in my arteries and lungs
let it be in my very DNA
let it flow through my blood and veins
through my heart and mind
let it be hypnosis for my dreams
I drink poetry and it tastes delicious.

A balancing act

The endless universe;
a ballroom for a million stars
like fireflies dancing in the dark
they sometimes collide

but other times they form galaxies
& waltz with one another,
while at home
we gather round & watch
a top spinning on the tip of a pin.

Russian doll

It's full of itself—literally
worlds within worlds.

Sometimes I wonder:
how it would feel to be right at its core
encased within yourself
& how hard it would be
to get out.

A line from Deng Xiaoping

Letters & reports from
missionaries are regularly
received. Their iterative
decomposition can build

a robust hierarchy when
describing the role of
vampires in fiction. Now
enable Javascript. Turn

your FaceBook profile into
a completely minimalistic
stub—when parental
substance misuse is a

major social problem,
indicators of temperament
appear early in infancy
& piecemeal linear

representations of gene
expression profiles prevent
the building of a taxonomic
hierarchy. Seek truth

from facts. Even simple
segmentation or echoed
asymmetry can provide
a more stable flight path.

A line from James Madison

The higher the pressure, the smaller the particles. Thus seasonings develop their distinctive

flavor characteristics. It was nearly 6 p.m. before the celebrities appeared on our side

of the red carpet. No man is safe! A special hobbit-decorated Air NZ plane did a really

low fly past above Courtney Place. The die off would make the Black Death in

Europe look like a mild cold. I missed the shot. A compromise candidate was elected.

Done

After the day, half through the night she
treadled her Singer sewing machine, the treads
of stairs inclined above her head—her *sewing room*,
she said; her space: shelves of reels and thread, lace
and tailor's chalk, folded felt, taffeta, gauze;
the radio announcer's talk to keep her company.

Brrmm! the shuttle shot back and forth propelled
by the synchrony of feet. Powerful calves. Fingers
turning tiny hems. Push, pull. Guiding straight,
straight, straight. *Brrmm!* Done.

Undone, redone

On the kitchen table, she sketched her visions
on newsprint; stitched them first from thread-
bare sheets. Bears, dolls. Done,

undone, redone

Jointed teddies from nylon fur, panda bears
with friendly faces. The shape of snout, the look
—critical. The Cowboy smiled at precisely
the right angle. Little Red Riding Hood,
orb of eye wide with innocence,
surprise. Done, undone.

Redone

The tread of metal shook the night, entered
dreams, assured the world was right. Delights
in sharkskin, crepe or lawn. A party dress
perhaps, across my bed at dawn.

Done. Undone. Redone

Trouble in River City

How I learned to stop worrying and trust poetics

Comment by Jack Ross

1 – The End of the Road

There's an interesting scene near the beginning of John Barth's second novel *The End of the Road* (1958). His hero, Jake Horner, is sitting on a bench in the railway station unable to decide what to do or where to go next. 'I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas.' Jake continues:

If you look like a vagrant it is difficult to occupy a train-station bench all night long, even in a busy terminal, but if you are reasonably well dressed, have a suitcase at your side, and sit erect, policemen and railroad employees will not disturb you . . . in the nature of the case I suppose I would have remained thus indefinitely, but about nine o'clock a small, dapper fellow in his fifties stopped in front of me and stared directly into my eyes.

Barth's novel operates, at least on one level, as a parody of the then-fashionable theories of Parisian existentialism: 'self-justification by an act of the will,' 'pure avoidance of the void of non-being' etc, etc. Jake is as close to a cipher as a fictional character can be—more so, even, than Albert Camus's famous *étranger* [outsider] Meursault. His novel actually begins with the statement: 'In a sense, I am Jake Horner.' And yet Jake's dilemma is not really a meaningless one, and most readers will find it easy enough to empathise with this moment of inaction: his complete inability to choose from the myriad options before him.

If lack of will-power leaves Jake stranded on his bench, what jolts him out of it is *theory*, pure and simple. Or, rather, in this case, the Doctor:

He was bald, dark-eyed and dignified, a Negro, and wore a graying mustache and a trim tweed suit to match. The fact that I did not stir even the pupils of my eyes under his gaze is an index to my condition, for ordinarily I find it next to impossible to return the stare of a stranger. (Barth, 1988, p.323)

After a quick consultation, the Doctor whisks him away to his mysterious treatment centre, the Remobilization Farm, where Jake undergoes intensive therapy in the Progress and Advice Room, as well as callisthenics

and other forms of mental and physical exercise. ‘It would not be well in your particular case to believe in God,’ the Doctor advises him:

Religion will only make you despondent Why don’t you read Sartre and become an existentialist? It will keep you moving until we find something more suitable for you. (p.333)

As far as employment goes, the Doctor counsels him to look for a job at a local teachers’ college:

‘Apply at once for the fall term. And what will you teach? Iconography? Automotive Mechanics?’

‘English Literature, I guess.’

‘No. There must be a rigid discipline, or else it will be merely an occupation, not an occupational therapy. There must be a body of laws Tell them you will teach grammar. English grammar.’

‘But you know, Doctor,’ I ventured, ‘there is descriptive as well as prescriptive grammar. I mean, you mentioned a fixed body of rules.’

‘You will teach prescriptive grammar.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘No description at all. No optional situations. Teach the rules. Teach the truth about grammar.’ (p.259)

Hopefully by now the point of this long preamble is beginning to become clear. What is ‘Poetics,’ after all, but a kind of grammar of poetic theory and practice—prescriptive or descriptive according to the whim of the practitioner?

2 – What is Poetics?

That’s one way to understand it, at least. While the word ‘Poetics’ sounds as if it derives from the English word ‘poetry,’ in fact both words come from the Greek *poiēsis* [ποίησις], which can be translated either as ‘making’ or ‘bringing forth.’ If poetry is the art of making a world with language, then poetics is the art of that art, the how-to (or taxonomy) of the discipline. Gérard Genette defines it simply as the ‘Theory of Literary Forms.’

Aristotle’s famous work on *Poetics*, then, covers a whole range of subjects which we might not feel inclined to place under the genre-heading of poetry. His principal interest is in tragic drama, which he is careful to distinguish from epic and lyric poetry (as exemplified by Homer and Hesiod on the one hand, and Sappho and Anacreon on the other).

Before we begin to discuss poetics, then, we have to decide just how far

we intend to extend the term. Strictly speaking, a ‘poetics’ can be compiled for any literary genre, from Historiography to Horror Fiction. Even (if we’re prepared to stretch the term ‘literary’ a little to include anything composed according to artifice), Automotive Manuals—or Textbooks on Iconography, for that matter.

If we are confining ourselves to a poetics of poetry, though, it’s as well to acknowledge that most contemporary poets use the term as shorthand for lyric poetry (originally: poems accompanied on the lyre). That is to say, more-or-less autobiographical (or at any rate experiential), musical (or at least song-like) word-patterning. And if that’s all you mean by poetry, then perhaps that’s all you need to know about it—‘if you are reasonably well dressed, have a suitcase at your side, and sit erect, policemen and railroad employees will not disturb you.’

Lisa Samuels, in her 2011 conference paper ‘Six modes of poetry experiment in New Zealand/Aotearoa’, puts it very succinctly:

poetry might be said to consist of experiments in language, thus ‘experimental poetry’ might be seen as a redundant term. But people who live in poetry contexts perceive different acts and values among those contexts. Over there some people want to report on how they feel, over here someone wants to appropriate language, across the room someone breaks apart syllables to see how they behave. (pp.1–2)

You don’t have to read music or have any real grasp of the laws of harmony to start a garage band. Nor do you need to understand perspective to slosh paint on a piece of canvas. What you do need to have (presumably) is some instinct which enables you to develop preferences for certain of the various musical or painting strategies you’ve occupied yourself in absorbing over the years. Let’s call that instinct your aesthetic sense.

Ditto poetry. If you read enough of the stuff, you’ll start to internalise the genre categories and even some of the endless permutations (chronological and theoretical) within those categories. Your sophistication as a judge of what you like in writing will, in other words, have to be based on a prolonged immersion in examples of the form you’re trying to engage with.

3 – The Machine Stops

Theoretical knowledge does not equal practical proficiency, or else Harold Bloom (inventor of the so-called ‘Anxiety of Influence’: a literary-critical concept that claims that every major poet is always engaged in an Oedipal

struggle with his immediate predecessor) would be regarded as a better writer than his near-contemporary Seamus Heaney. Perhaps he is. Who's to say he isn't, in fact?

All of which brings us back to Jake Horner. 'I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas,' is how he puts it. If there are no agreed-upon rules, no constraints upon how we write (or understand) poetry, is it possible to make any meaningful judgements about it?

Not so much judgements of the 'Keats is a better poet than Shelley' type, which are inevitably predicated on a whole theory of literary craftsmanship (as well as—hopefully—a close knowledge of the work of both poets), but internal judgements of the effectiveness of each word, each structural effect, in your own work?

I'm sure we've all met poets who inform us that not a word of their original spontaneous effusions can be altered without the risk of compromising their inspiration. They're generally the same people who tell us that no value judgments are possible within the field of poetry—that you can have no possible basis for claiming (say) the superior interest of T. S. Eliot's 'language experiments' over (say) those of Pam Ayres or Rod McKuen.

A mystical belief in inspiration is its own kind of theory, though—and tends to foreground that teleological element in literary criticism which is always lurking somewhere there inside. It is, however, a dead end, since it leads to more metaphysics, not to more precise discussions of poetry.

What, then, *is* poetry? Any attempt at an answer requires one to enter the field of poetics, either prescriptive (concerned with value-judgements, albeit within categories) or descriptive (a synchronic [historical] or diachronic [systematic] chart of the various forms of utterance which have been described—at one time or another, by both its writers and its readers—as 'poetry').

It may have occurred to you by now that the Doctor in John Barth's novel is some kind of confidence trickster, preying on the weak and unfortunate for his own profit. And so (in context), he is. Is he also a genuine healer, interested in curing his poor patients and saving them from their own demons? It's hard to say. Almost as hard as it is to answer the same question with regard to Freud or Jung—or, for that matter, B. F. Skinner, whose theories of behaviourism also receive rough handling in Barth's book.

Poetics (or 'theory,' if you prefer) is just as dubious a guide, I'm afraid. There are as many theories of poetics as there are eggheads in English departments—more, if you include all the querulous autodidacts thronging the land. It is tempting, at times, to wish to return to simpler times,

when Caedmon or William Blake received their songs directly by dictation from angels or the Holy Spirit.

When the machine stops, though—when you cease to be able to delude yourself that more than a vaguely versified version of your own prejudices and experiences is filtering through your pen—what then? Then, I'm afraid, you need some sense of context, of being one thing in order not to be another, to enter the equation.

Are you, for instance, a formalist, devoted to solving complex technical problems as adeptly as possible: a virtuoso—W. H. Auden, or Marianne Moore? If so, why? Is poetry (for you) a glorified form of crossword puzzle, re-arranging deckchairs as the *Titanic* goes down? Or do these technical experiments you delight in act as some kind of purification ritual, straining your thoughts into an ever more concentrated form, turning the mash of impressions into ever more heady triple-distilled spirit?

The study of poetics will not, in and of itself, make you a better poet. But it should, at the very least, serve to enlarge your bag of tricks. What's more, it may enable you to write in such a way as to engage others struggling with the same dilemmas.

There'll always be a certain appeal to those four-piece groups who set out to save the world with 'three chords and the truth' (as country singer Harlan Howard once memorably put it). Only a very few of them still seem to be up to producing anything equally passionate a few years later, though. They don't change, and they can't evolve, unless they dive back into the craft and ethos of their profession, and begin to take their vocation as musicians more seriously than the ability to strike naff poses on MTV.

The same applies to poets. If you don't take an interest in the history and theory of your craft, it's hard to imagine that there can be anything sufficiently thrilling in your personality or experiences to fuel the engine year after year, decade after decade. Not that it has to, mind you. There's nothing wrong with shutting up shop when you've nothing left to say.

But maybe there *is* more to say. Have *you* reached that plateau of self-repetition, of inglorious stasis in the midst of all your instruments of wonder (see Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*)? Of course you have. To pose the question implies an automatic reply in the affirmative.

4 – On the Plateau

Lisa Samuels's Melbourne conference paper, which I quoted from above, contains an interesting distinction between 'experimental' and 'normative' poetry:

‘experimental poetry’ points to modes of imaginative representation that are not in a one to one relation with a stabilized social real. Such poetic modes are not expository essays; they are not normative narrative works; they are not posited socio-economic persuasions (commodities or their advertisements) nor normative explications of neuro-emotional states. (p.2)

Don’t you just love that phrase ‘normative explications of neuro-emotional states’? She’s talking about poems that say ‘I’m sad’ or ‘I’m happy’—or even: ‘I’m in love.’ There’s a certain gain to Samuels’s hyper-abstract language, though: it’s very concise, and it enables us to climb out of the sandpit for a moment in order to get a more panoramic view of what’s going on around about.

But if these ‘experimental modes’ are not any of the things she mentions, what exactly are they? Samuels continues:

To push towards experimentalism, poems reach outward from normative employment of one or more of the following: syntax, punctuation, allusion, page use, screen utility, synchronic sounds, indexical logic, object telos, poetic seriousness, and stability in the line, word, speaker, and/or reference. All of these elements are consciously up for movement, in order to investigate the feeling and knowing ratios of creative language as it demurs from normative language utility. (p.2)

Stop Making Sense, in other words: just like in that old *Talking Heads* song. But *why*, for God’s sake? Why disrupt all these hard-won conventions of meaning-bearing language? Another Ancient Greek term springs to mind: *Barbarian*—a foreigner who can only bleat unintelligibly (‘Ba – ba – ba’) instead of conveying actual information.

Samuels has something to say about that, too:

It might be a truth universally acknowledged that visual art can escape from the bonds of Cultural Seriousness in ways that language arts never can. Language is our most crucial mode for logic and law, and unveiling its dynamisms will always disrupt efforts to stabilize its cultural applications. (p.14)

She points out that the acceptance for such experiments in New Zealand culture has something to do with the status of Colin McCahon, whose ‘painted words are generally Biblical or otherwise oracular (as in his use of John Caselberg’s poetry) and not especially invested in genre experiment,

though the non-word parts of his paintings certainly do experiment.’ Local poets can therefore ‘take advantage of a cultural acceptance for visual experiment and slip in verbal experiment while the blinds are open for verbal play’ (pp. 14–15).

It would be interesting to discuss at greater length the six modes of experimentation which Samuels identifies in our recent writing:

1. Historical looping
2. Lexical parataxis / lexical fracture
3. Haematopoetic
4. Transacted prose
5. Neo-ekphrasis
6. Digital poetry

However, I can’t really in good conscience spend more time summarising her essay, which I recommend strongly that you read in full (it should be appearing in print soon in an anthology entitled *A Trans Pacific Poetics*, co-edited by Samuels and Sawako Nakayasu).

In any case, my purpose here is not so much to recommend ‘experimental’ over ‘normative’ modes of poetry *per se*, as to point out that even to distinguish the one from the other requires a poetic. Any mode of representation—verbal, aural, visual—can be argued for, but that argument entails an engagement with the theory (distillate) of many creative acts (aggregate).

5 – Last Conference before Passchendale

[5th-7th January, 1917]

Everyone knew it wouldn’t work, but nobody
could think of a way not to go through
with it. *Lloyd George* knew
Douglas Haig was self-deluded,
believing every ‘intelligence report’
from crystal-gazing Colonel Charteris
—God (after all) was on his side.
Sir William Robertson (Chief
of the Imperial General Staff) knew
Haig was next door to an imbecile

but backed him—lacking better—
against any alternative. *Haig* knew
the Fifth Army Staff, Gough's boys,
were capable of stuffing up
the most elegant and foolproof
plan. *Everyone* knew
it always rains in Flanders
in the Autumn. The result was
the 'most indiscriminate slaughter
in the history of warfare.'
No-one could find
a good way to avoid it.

Without losing face, that is. (Ross, 2010)

Theodor Adorno famously wrote in 1949: '*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*' [to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric]. Further on in the same sentence he uses the word '*unmöglich*' [impossible] to supplement his earlier choice of '*barbarisch*' [barbaric]. They don't, of course, mean the same thing.

It may be barbaric to write poetry after the revelation of mass-produced slaughter in the Nazi death-camps, but is it—strictly speaking—impossible? The groaning shelves of poetry books and journals produced since World War II would seem to argue otherwise.

What it comes down to is, in fact, a question of poetics. The entire quotation (as reprinted in *Prismen* [Prisms] (1955), reads as follows:

Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.

[Cultural criticism is the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today.]

That's a far more complicated proposition. *Kulturkritik* [cultural criticism], the 'final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism' has

now become the villain of the piece, corroding—literally ‘eating away at’—the knowledge that tells us why it has become impossible to write poetry today.

What is this knowledge? Not so much the knowledge that there was once a place called Auschwitz, as knowledge which tells us why that place is significant, why there’s something in that massacre which transcends all earlier acts of horror and genocide.

If you don’t possess this knowledge already, Adorno appears to be saying, then theory—*Kulturkritik*—will not impart it to you.

Scribble away, guys—keep on producing what you call ‘poetry’. Adorno’s point is that it is impossible to regain that naiveté of outlook which might make a ‘normative’ (in Lisa Samuels’s sense) approach to cultural processes acceptable (or even feasible).

Now we can argue about the date when this fact became unequivocally apparent to humanity: to the non-‘barbaric’ (i.e. culturally informed) portions of it, at any rate. Henry James saw the final eclipse of liberal, ameliorative values in the outbreak of World War I, which he termed the ‘Great Interruption.’ (Lubbock, 1920, II: 402). This fall into the abyss seemed to him to negate all the fallacious optimism of the past hundred years, as he said in a series of letters to different correspondents.

W. H. Auden, in his classic ‘September 1, 1939’ identifies the moment with the outbreak of World War II, ‘as the clever hopes expire / of a low dishonest decade’:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
...
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good. (Auden, 1945, p.58)

I began this section by quoting my own poem ‘Last Conference before Passchendaele’, written a few years ago after reading Leon Wolff’s 1958 book *In Flanders Fields*. I know that his devastating account of the third Ypres campaign has been much disputed since, but the thing that really struck me about it was the fact that everyone knew what was going to happen,

but no single one of them could think of a way of putting that knowledge into action: choosing *not* to send 250,000 or so Allied servicemen to their deaths (not to mention at least 200,000 Germans) was quite impossible for them.

There were many reasons for this, of course (there always are), but since the institution I work at was in the middle of a particularly hostile takeover / 'restructure' at the time I read Wolff's book, I felt very tempted to send our Head of College a copy of my poem to illustrate the point. Some things are just a bad idea from the get-go, and everybody knows it perfectly well. That doesn't mean that they're not going to happen, or that any significant resistance can be mounted against them, though. Why *is* that?

Well, in the simplest possible terms, it's because the culture-machine controls and allocates meaning (and therefore action) along certain pre-set channels. For a closer analysis of just how these structures of power / knowledge operate, I would recommend to you a study of the works of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Perhaps *Power / Knowledge*, his 1980 book of interviews and occasional writings, might be a good starting point.

Hence Lisa Samuels's otherwise perverse insistence on disrupting 'normative':

syntax, punctuation, allusion, page use, screen utility, synchronic sounds, indexical logic, object telos, poetic seriousness, and stability in the line, word, speaker, and/or reference.

Not (simply) because she—we—want to screw with your head, but because we want to interfere with our culture's propensity to make *any* kind of behaviour (attaching electrodes to people's heads to calm them down; collecting them in giant shower-baths to poison them with pesticide; dumping leaky containers of radioactive poison in every ocean, lake and field we can find) seem perfectly rational and straightforward.

Once you've internalised the discourse of virtually any professional pursuit (death-camp management / currency destabilising on the Stock Market / online paedophile pornography distribution), the battle's already over. You talk a language which cannot admit change, which regards destabilisation as the ultimate evil. You have been subtly manipulated into privileging 'order' (in whatever form) over the alleged 'chaos' of open form.

Not so, says poetics. Every type of order is subject to analysis. Those who resist theory simply reveal that they are in the grip of an earlier theory,

proclaimed the pundits of Post-structuralism in the 60s and 70s. There's something in that. The sole merit of theory is that it can be isolated and examined, compared systematically with other theories. Praxis, on the other hand, is self-perpetuating. Once you're caught on the plateau of your own 'poetic practice' (your 'voice', if you prefer), no further progress is possible. Even Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a series of secular hymns extolling the cleansing properties of conflict in the opening days of World War I before he came to his senses.

Poetics may sound a bit tedious at times, a distraction from the sheer fun of monkeying around with language. It can also bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the 'cultural criticism' Adorno was desperate to warn us against. At its best, though, it is meant to act as an antidote to such systems for normalising the aberrant and abhorrent. In a sense, then, Shelley was quite right when he called poets the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Shelley, 1887, p.41). It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it.

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Poetry conference gathers momentum

Comment by Bill Sutton

The Hawke's Bay Poetry Conference, taking place in Havelock North on 1-3 November this year, began last November with the idea of bringing together all the poets who had been featured guests of the Hawke's Bay Live Poets' Society, during our first 21 years, to help us celebrate our 21st.

The Society's written records listed 56 former guest poets but contained little recent contact information. After 5 months, and with support from several others, I was able to contact 50 of them. Another 3 had died and 3 others were living overseas. Half of the poets I contacted were interested enough in the idea of joining us in Hawke's Bay for a weekend poetry conference, they completed and returned the conference questionnaire.

A second related idea for the conference, contributed by Alistair Paterson, was to enhance the standing of poets and poetry in provincial districts. Since the whole of New Zealand barely registers as a provincial district within global English language poetry, the conference committee soon determined that poets from throughout New Zealand, including Auckland, would qualify to participate.

Poetry groups can be found in most parts of New Zealand. They cater primarily for people ('poets') who enjoy writing poems and sharing them with others, and for people ('poetry lovers') who enjoy hearing poetry performed live. Some poets prefer to write poems intended to be read by others from a page or screen. Other poets ('performers') enjoy performing their poems aloud to a live audience, with or without dramatic effects and/or music.

Most New Zealand poetry groups welcome poets, performers and poetry lovers alike. The emphasis does however vary between groups, and new poetry groups are continually starting up, while others go into recess. So the New Zealand poetry scene is quite fluid and dynamic. There is room in it for everyone.

The Hawke's Bay Poetry Conference seeks to cater to the whole spectrum of New Zealand poetry groups, and not solely to enable people to enjoy eight hours of diverse live poetry performances in a congenial setting. We also seek to promote interaction and networking between groups, with little or no history of prior contact, and to provide a New Zealand forum to openly discuss some of the major issues confronting poetry and poets in the 21st century.

These issues can be loosely divided into uncertainty/disagreement over the appropriate 'form and content' of contemporary poetry, as a class of verbal construct; and difficulties being experienced in 'publishing' contemporary poetry, including all the many ways in which poetry is drawn

to the attention of a reading or listening audience. Given the focus in recent centuries on the printed word as the primary route for distributing poetry, one important subset of these issues relates to the views of those who decide which poems get printed, by established publishers, and which do not ('what editors are looking for').

There are of course connections between form, content and publishing. Some editors may use form and content as selection criteria. Some forms of poetry may be better suited to live performances. Other forms may be better suited to visual display on a page or screen. Editors employed by universities may favour their own staff or students, and the particular styles of poetry they teach or learn. There has been little or no public discussion of such matters.

Form, content and publication modes have seen many changes since the start of the 'modernist' period in the early 20th century. A wide range of different poetic approaches have waxed and waned in the 'post modernist' period, alienating many previous poetry lovers in the process. The invention and growth of new communication media means we are all constantly exposed to a 24/7 verbal barrage. Switching off the verbal communication modes, including poetry, that require concentrated attention, is a common and understandable response.

For whatever reason, the commercial market for printed poetry appears to have significantly reduced. Most New Zealand bookshops provide no shelf space at all for local poetry written in the last 10 years. Those that do provide shelf space are reluctant to accept anything not written by one of the few 'name' poets whose reputations were established in the 1970s and 80s.

New technology has greatly expanded the opportunity for poets to self-publish, either through self-printed books or journals, or on the internet. Whether this poetry is actually read is of course debatable. In any case, from my own observations the vast bulk of newly-written New Zealand poetry is either not published at all, or published only by being performed at meetings of poetry groups. Perhaps it is time these groups started to get serious attention from the poetry academics, residing in our universities and polytechnics, whose opinions seem to carry so much weight in deciding what gets published?

The obvious need, which the Hawke's Bay Poetry Conference may hopefully start to address, is better communication between all sectors of the New Zealand poetry world. Identifying a small sub-set of issues for following up would be a good start. One of our measures of success will be whether the 60-100 poets, performers and poetry lovers expected to attend the conference, enjoy it. A second measure will be whether other regional centres such as Christchurch, Auckland, and Nelson organise similar conferences in the future.

Books and magazines in brief

Celanie: Poems & Drawings after Paul Celan, poems by Jack Ross, drawings by Emma Smith, afterword by Bronwyn Lloyd (Pania Press, 2/5 Hastings Road, Mairangi Bay, Auckland 0630; 168pp, \$30) presents 'an amalgam of images and poems "translated" [reworked] from the work of German poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). Celan had a stressful and unfortunate life, losing his parents in the Holocaust and spending eighteen months in a labour camp at the end of WWII. From 1952 until his death by suicide he lived in Paris with his wife Gisele de Lestrangle (they married in 1952) except for brief periods apart. His letters to his wife contained 90 poems in German (his preferred mode of writing) with notes and comments in French for his wife as she wasn't strong in the former language. It's these poems Ross has reworked in English and presented to the reader—poems he has shaped with the mastery, subtlety and skill that only an exceptionally able translator and poet can demonstrate. The translations themselves allow readers to experience as close to first hand as is possible the subtlety of Celan's work, the slightly surrealistic style it's written in, and his inability to escape his deep concerns with death and separation. The element of obscurity in the poems is another matter, but in a strange and arresting way enhances and draws the reader more deeply into what they're saying and doing. Jack Ross lets us see this and allows us to recognise Celan as the major 20th century European poet he is now known to have been. Emma Smith's black and white drawings complement the poems and help us find our way into understanding them more than might otherwise be possible and to appreciate the spirit and quality of Celan's life and work.

Great South Road and South Side, Tony Beyer; with a wrap-around cover incorporating a line drawing by young Whanganui artist Catherine Macdonald; (Puriri Press, 37 Margot Street, Epsom, Auckland 1051; 45 pp, \$25 plus \$2.50 p&p). The first section consists of ten related pieces exploring Beyer's experience of South Auckland from his early years almost to the present. As such it's a pastiche of memories and experiences that brings to life a complex and moving inner and outer world view as does the second and longer section. This extends more deeply into the personal, exploring and enlarging on life and experience in a specific time and place, but doing it in a flexible and attractive manner that enriches the work as a whole and is likely to appeal to most readers.

JAAM 30, edited Anna Jackson, Louise Burston, Anna Caro, Brigid Kelly and Emily Tehrase; JAAM Collective, PO Box 25239, Wellington 6146, 258 pp. JAAM has, in the 17 years it's been operating, made an important and significant contribution to New Zealand writing and literature. This present issue continues and extends what has already been accomplished, giving readers a wide range of excellent poetry from Michalia Arathimos who is working towards a PhD at Victoria University, Philip Armstrong, Miriam Barr, Diana Bridge, Iain Britton with an extensive seven pages, Anna Caro, Medb Charleton, Rachel Fenton, Catherine Fitchett, Micah Timona Ferris (who is now in London), David Fraundorfer, Jonathan Greenhouse twice nominated for the Pushcart, Trevor Hayes, Caoilinn Hughes, Anna Jackson, Angela King, Helen Lehndorf, Mary Macpherson, Owen Marshall, Kate McKinstry, Frankie McMillan, Hannah Mettner, and many others, all of whom make JAAM a great place for poets, and well worth reading.

Last edited (insert time here), Va-wen Ho (Tinfish Press, Small Press Distribution in Berkeley, spdbooks.org, 47-728 Kelu St #9, Kaneohe, HI 96744) is a small publication of 44 pages with each facing page left blank so that the reader can insert his or her comments. It's the poet's first book and is best described in terms of the back cover blurb which says: 'sits in a complex place' while the 'poet negotiates these intricacies with smooth turns between playful intelligent, and funny. Va-wen Ho's stream of conscious word play rushes us through everything from pop culture to population control in China,' etc.

Wild Dialectics, Lisa Samuels (Shearsman Books Ltd, 50 Westons Hill Drive, Emerson Green, Bristol BS16 7DF, UK; 82pp) 'forges' as Charles Bernstein states on the back cover, 'imaginary rhythms into speculative anthems,' whose 'lyrics of elusive logos ghost provisional conditions of enduring transience.' Similarly these versatile and impressive poems could be described in terms of the way they work in challenging conventional verbal construction and its usually accepted and normative employment. To a large extent the constraints of conventional grammatical structure are pressed to but not beyond their limits and never entirely abandoned. The consequence is that while the poetry can't go further without shifting into linguistic collapse, it possesses a freshness of aesthetic appeal and feeling that demands much from readers, but at the same time is immensely enjoyable and totally satisfying.

Broadsheet 10, new New Zealand poetry, edited by Mark Pirie (The Night Press, Flat 4C/19 Cottleville Tce, Thorndon, Wellington 6011) presents a fascinating selection of poetry and poets that don't always receive as much readership and public attention as they deserve. This issue features the work of songwriter and poet Mahinarangi Tocker (1955–2008) whose poems are principally concerned with social and interpersonal relationships. Fully in command of format and style, her poems are well worth the attention Pirie gives them here. Other poets in this chapbook include Tony Chad, David Eggleton, (editor of *Landfall*), Laura Solomon, C K Stead and the earlier writer Ivy Gibbs (1886-1966?).

Portrait Poems, Barry Southam (Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop, PO Box 42, Paekakariki, 70pp, \$19.90). This collection comprises sixty poems giving well defined, taut representations of people such as the actor, artist, reporter, gardener, constable, medical superintendent, pilot, pensioner, poet and so on—people most of us have met at one time or another or might even know personally. While they may initially resemble stereotypes rather than specific individuals, it soon becomes clear Southam's people are often more specific than this, could be representative of people he may have known or knows. This is an unusual mode of writing but it has an antecedent in Browning's 1855 collection, *Men and Women*, in which the latter poet offered twelve extremely detailed and subtle representations of noted historical figures. Southam has written in this mode earlier—a mode which perhaps led him into playwriting which he's noted for as well as he is for poetry.

King Willow, Selected Poems, Robert J Pope, edited Mark Pirie (HeadworX Publishers 4C/19 Cottleville Tce, Thorndon, Wellington; 192 pp) is a scholarly piece of research—a timely and substantial publication. It presents much of the work of Robert J Pope (1865–1949) who had largely dropped out of sight and might otherwise have remained so—as have many other poets who preceded Allen Curnow's 1945 *A Book of New Zealand Verse* and became overwhelmed by the latter's new orthodoxy. In this respect, Mark Pirie has done stupendous work in rediscovering him (as he has many other writers) and bringing him back into notice. Pope certainly deserves such discovery and recognition. A long term and substantial writer, he 'deserves,' as Pirie says, 'recognition . . . as a significant precursor to the urban 1950s Wellington Group. This is an enlightening and extremely worthwhile publication.

The Baker's Thumbprint, Paula Green (Seraph Press, PO Box 25230, Wellington 6146; 99pp, \$25) continues as with Green's previous poetry publications exploring the social, domestic and the personal. This time however, she employs the very effective stratagem of involving writers and other literary persona she has become familiar with through her studies and reading—these include Simone de Beauvoir, Plato, Albert Einstein, Florence Nightingale, Rosa Parks, Mr Ripley, James Dean, Johnny Cash and so on. Typically Woody Allen sits next to her on a Central Park bench, Gertrude Stein 'entertains everyone on the picnic blanket', and she's about to go to New York City with Copernicus.

Memory Gene Pool, Michael Morrissey (Cold Hub Press, PO Box 156, Lyttelton 8841; 28pp), is illustrative of the numerous small but excellent series of chapbooks currently being put out by Roger Hicken. Morrissey's book comprises a selection of twenty-one poems reflecting aspects of the style of Jackson Mac Low but still retaining the traditional structures of the couplet, triplet and quatrain. While not specifically drawing on Mac Low and his contemporaries' fluxus mode, Morrissey's poems serve to present similar disjunctions and dislocations driven perhaps by the bipolar disorder he described so well in his 2011 memoir, *Taming the Tiger*.

Singing With Both Throats, Maris O'Rourke (David Ling Publishing Ltd, PO Box 34601, Birkenhead, Auckland 0746; 72 pp, \$24.99) offers the work of a distinguished educationalist (first Director of Education for the World Bank and New Zealand's first Secretary for Education). She took to poetry writing only five years ago and in this short time has been both widely recognised as a poet and widely published (including in *PNZ* 44 as the featured writer) in New Zealand and overseas. This collection, divided into three sections, Passages, Parallels and Pathfinder, explores the extensive and various directions her life has taken—including both the personal and the geographic. It presents personal experience and events in a graceful and flowing style that's easy to read and memorable in the way poetry deserves to be but often isn't. *Singing With Both Throats* not only introduces readers to a collection of fine and graceful poems, but also acquaints us with an unusually interesting poet—an intelligent and attractive writer, well worth getting to know.

Notes on contributors

David C Bellusci PhD (Canada) lives in Ottawa where he teaches Philosophy.
Tyler Bigney (Canada) lives in Nova Scotia. His work has been published in a number of magazines and journals.

Owen Bullock (Katikati) has been a *PNZ* guest editor several times. His work has appeared widely both in New Zealand and elsewhere.

Adam Clay (France), who teaches English at the University of Franche-Comte, taught earlier at Auckland University. This is his first poetry publication.

Jenny Clay (Auckland) has been published widely. In 2012 she was runner-up for the Kathleen Grattan Award.

Alison Denham (Dunedin) has previously appeared in *PNZ* (issues 22 & 42).

Jake Dennis (Australia) lives in Western Australia. This is his first appearance in *PNZ*.

James Fagan (Palmerston North), who enjoys presenting his poetry in schools, has previously appeared a number of times in *PNZ*.

Jan FitzGerald (Napier) is a poet and an artist whose work has been widely published in New Zealand.

Vaughan Gunson (Northland) had a collection of his poems published by Steele Roberts in 2012.

David Ingram (Muriwai) is a former seaman as well as a yachtsman and sailing trainer.

Gail Ingram (Christchurch) has previously appeared in *Fin eline*, *Takahe* and *Penduline Press*.

Sophia Johnson (Auckland) is an actor. Some of her work has appeared earlier in *PNZ* and other magazines.

Barbara Kamler (Australia) was born in New Jersey and has lived in Australia since 1972. Her recently published first collection was highly commended by the Melbourne Poets Union.

Sarah Katherina Kay (UK) lives in London. She edits the bilingual literary magazine *PostPoetry*.

Robert Kempen (Auckland) is a poet who has earlier appeared in *PNZ* 42.

Leonard Lambert (Napier) is a regular contributor to *PNZ*. A new collection, *Remnants*, is with a publisher.

Jessica Le Bas (Nelson) won the 2008 Jessie Mckay Award for the Best First Book of Poetry. She has appeared in a number of issues of *PNZ*.

Joel LeBlanc (Christchurch) is a natural health professional. He earlier appeared in *PNZ* 41.

Owen Leeming (France) is originally from New Zealand and was noted as a leading NZ poet during the 1960s and 70s.

Janet Newman (Levin) has appeared several times in *PNZ* and in other magazines.

Piet Nieuwland (Whangarei) has been published in a number of journals such as *Landfall*, *Takahe*, *Mattoid* and *Printout*.

Heidi North-Bailey (Auckland) in 2007 won the Irish Féile Filiochta International Poetry Competition with her poem, *The Women*.

Keith Nunes (Bay of Plenty) has been published in *Landfall*, *Takahe* and *Poetry NZ*, etc. He lives with an eccentric artist, kids and a collection of neurotic animals.

Sugu Pillay (Christchurch) holds an MA in Creative Writing from Victoria University of Wellington. Her work has been published widely including in *PNZ* 44.

Mark Pirie (Wellington) is a writer, a distinguished poet, editor, critic and publisher, and the founder and editor of *Broadsheet*.

Vaughan Rapatahana (Hong Kong) is an expatriate New Zealander whose work has appeared in *PNZ* earlier.

Ron Riddell (Auckland) who lives in Titirangi, is a well-known and widely published poet. Earlier this year he launched his very successful, futuristic novel, *The Guardian of the Shield*.

Jack Ross (Auckland) teaches at Massey University's Auckland campus. His latest book is *Celanie: Poems & Drawings after Paul Celan*.

John C Ross (Palmerston North), formerly of Massey University, appears in *PNZ* for the first time.

Lisa Samuels (Auckland), who comes from North America, is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Auckland.

Penelope Sell (Dunedin) is a novelist and short story writer. Her poems have been published widely.

Eric Paul Shaffer (Hawai'i) teaches at Honolulu Community College and in 2002 won the Elliot Cades Award.

Bill Sutton (Napier) has worked as a scientist, politician and a policy analyst. His poems have previously appeared in *PNZ* and *Takahe*.

Deirdre Thorsen-Lavery (Hawkes Bay) writes, paints and cares for horses. She appeared earlier in *PNZ* 45.

Chris Tse (Wellington) studied film and English literature at Victoria University, and holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing.

Roland Vogt (Wellington) is an international educator currently living in Naenae.

Michael Walker (Auckland) makes his first appearance in this issue of *PNZ*.

Mark Wilkins (Titirangi) is a non-fiction and educational writer.

Christena Williams (Jamaica) is 21 years old and hopes to become a lawyer.

Rheymin Yau (Dunedin) is a student, and a newcomer to poetry.

Mark Young (Australia) has more than 20 collections to his credit (another is in the offing) and edits the ezine *Otoliths*.

Karen Zelas (Christchurch) was the winner of the 2012 IP Picks Best First Book Competition published by Interaction Productions, Brisbane.