



**Poetry**

**NZ**  
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**NZ**

**48**

**featuring the poetry of  
Jan Kemp**

**comment by**

**Charles Bernstein & Alistair Paterson**

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# Poetry NZ 48

Nicholas Reid

*Guest Editor*

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# Editorial

Do you write poetry to be read silently by others or do you write it to perform it out loud? Do you prefer to read poetry off the printed page (or computer screen)? Or do you prefer to hear it read by its author?

Many will respond to these questions by asking simply 'Does it matter?' Poetry can be that purely literary and even typographical experience, which allows 'shape' poems and experiments in lineation to be devised, and the absolute luxury (from a space-rationing editor's point of view) of one-word-per-line verse to be indulged. Poetry can also be declaimed, shouted, chanted, acted and otherwise vocalised in public. It can work either way, and there will always be English 101 students to remind us that all poetry began in public performance; that 'lyric' poetry was originally poetry performed to the accompaniment of a lyre; and that the repeated catchphrases in epic poetry ('the wine-dark sea' etc.) were there to cue the bard who had memorised thousands of lines for a listening audience. Poetry was around for millennia before most people could read or write.

Yet it seems to me that there is now an essential difference between the poetry meant primarily to be read in private and the poetry meant primarily to be performed. In November last year I had the great pleasure of attending and contributing to the poetry conference in Hawkes Bay, organized by Bill Sutton. One of the many highlights was a jocular and ironical piece acted out expertly by a young performance poet. I joined the whole audience in applauding it lustily. Then the worm entered my skull. No names, no pack-drill, but I at once recalled the good public performances I had heard pub-poets give of poems which, on the printed page, I found to be nothing in particular.

My mind flew to the damning comment John Dryden made in 1681 when he read a printed version of a play he had enjoyed in stage performance, George Chapman's tragedy *Bussy D'Ambois*. Said Dryden 'I have sometimes wondered in the reading what has become of those glaring colours which amazed me in "Bussy D'Ambois" upon the theatre; but when I had taken up what I supposed a fallen star, I found I had been cozened with a jelly; nothing but a cold dull mass, which glittered no longer than it was shooting.'

Are we sometimes 'cozened with a jelly' when we enjoy the public performance of a poem? In poetry, density of meaning and good public performance are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But what grabs the attention of a listening audience can often be thin in texture, meaning and allusiveness, like the lyrics of a good song shorn of its music. It is good to be reminded of this in an age when rap and poetry slams are talked up as if they were the best current poetic practice.

*Nicholas Reid*

## Jan Kemp

PNZ 48's featured poet Janet Riemenschneider-Kemp, better known as Jan Kemp, has had a distinguished career as a poet beginning with the publication of her first two volumes *Against the Softness of Woman* in 1976 and *Diamonds and Gravel* in 1979. She has written six collections of poetry since then, her most recent being *Voicetracks* (published by both Puriri Press, Auckland; and Tranzlit, Kronberg im Taunus) in 2012.

Jan spent the first 25 years of her life in New Zealand, then taught in many countries before settling with her German husband in Germany in 1994. After a return eight-year sojourn in New Zealand (1999–2007) she wrote the poems of her *Dante's Heaven* (Puriri Press 2006). In 2012 it was released as *Dantes Himmel* in Germany, translated by Dieter Riemenschneider in a bilingual edition. Jan Kemp now writes poetry in both German and English. Currently she's working on a new collection, *Slippery Ice & The Love Planet*.

She has played an important part in collecting and archiving sound recordings of New Zealand poets performing their own works—the Waiata Archive (1974) and Aotearoa New Zealand Poetry Sound Archive (2004) <[www.aonzpsa.blogspot.com](http://www.aonzpsa.blogspot.com)>. In the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2005 she was awarded an MNZM for services to literature. Invited in 2006 to have her own webpage & CD on the Poetry Archive (UK) <[www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)>, she was Project Manager for *25 N.Z. Poets for the P.A.* (2012). A member of PEN-Germany, the Rilke Gesellschaft and the Katherine Mansfield Society, Jan Kemp brings a distinctively New Zealand sensibility to encounters with European high culture.

Discussing her poetic practice, Jan says 'My view of how I write hasn't really changed since I first wrote of this in the anthology *The Young New Zealand Poets* (1973) . . . I still hear a line or lines or just a phrase in my head and have taught myself to listen, to let the words keep on coming; I chant them aloud, to remember them, say if out walking; when I can get to paper and pencil, I write them down. Later, I type them up into a text and spend time finessing them. I do the thinking work then, once I've seen what I've said or am trying to say. A poem can take years or a moment to write itself. The music or cadence of the line and its rhythm are of utter importance to me—the speaking voice of the poet in me who, if I'm lucky, sometimes speaks up.'

As influences she cites 'all the poets I've loved reading' including the Metaphysicals and Blake; Moderns including Wallace Stevens; and classic German and Italian poets; 'plus the New Zealand poets I grew up on, Fairburn, Mason, Curnow and my contemporaries like Mitchell and Wedde; later Hone Tuwhare, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell and Sam Hunt with whom I toured in 1979 on the Four Poets Tour.'

## Un jardin suspendu: to Music

*Le jardin suspendu, c'est l'idéal perpétuellement  
poursuivi et fugitif de l'artiste, c'est le refuge  
inaccessible et inviolable—JEHAN ALAIN*

With each note  
I fall in love another  
thousand times,  
as Goethe with  
his Friederike,  
*princess of freedom,*  
Wagner with his Cosima,  
*the world is in order,*  
*(the cosmos too!)*

Love is being  
the resting point  
for the other;  
the hanging garden  
is refuge for artists  
as well as lovers.  
Jehan Alain sought  
escape to Semiramis's,  
wrote there his  
*Le jardin suspendu.*

You are the green  
summer willow leaves,  
wafting slowly over me,  
again and again,  
like an oriental fan,  
whose soft feathers  
glide & glide, drifting  
lazily over me.

# Going into the Gewölbe/ turn to where the light's coming from

*i.m. Elisabeth (Else) Riemenschneider (1905–2008)*

like a sunflower  
as yet unwearied

after efforts  
of a lifetime

she reads the signs:  
the harbour light

vatic,  
pouring

from the vault  
where she'll fly

to wing about  
& dance on God's

right hand—when  
you're 103 in 2008

what else might  
any Else wish for?

\* das Gewölbe — heavenly vault

all men are tyrants, even he . . .

or is it anger that implodes  
and did you  
trigger it in him

you are implicated  
but must step  
away  
and beyond

you have your mountain  
sit on it  
watch the sea

## Rilke's early poems

I dreamt  
I wheeled them  
in a white perambulator  
into a pond  
where  
they sank  
& I suppose  
we all  
drowned.

## A death, its toll

*i.m. Bruce Purchase (1938–2008)*

Now his book I've read  
he's too soon dead  
this kind man of talent.

There's no one to tell  
when you grieve  
save his friends.

*Yes, I knew him too*  
so proud of his dad  
of his mum, yet his

son's sad story. The  
world his stage, all  
of our bit parts.

If only I'd said: *I'm*  
*beaut at death, knocks*  
*me out every time in rime*

so he'd know: here's one  
for you Bruce, to  
give us purchase.

# Answering call

*S//CRAPBOOK iv Why I didn't get to Jan and Dieter's party*  
*'The Black River' — C.K. STEAD*

Come to the party  
bring plums bring

birds from your pocket  
bring Kay, Karl.

We two too are alone.  
A lone—all one.

Mutti's 102  
& still asks why

as night the stars  
as we the sea.

As did Wagner, Händel  
Xerxes, Agamemnon

any of your heroes  
they handled it as

you do: as Cosima did  
her huge head Sphinx-like

a statue in the now full now  
deserted gardens at Bayreuth.

Echoes in the off-season  
*Hihihahi hihihaho* from the Valkyries

be Siegfried, Karl, step out  
of the wings & come.

We have a leaf for the patch  
on your back from your new

book—we'll cover (for)  
you, should an arrow fall.

## Osama—Obama—we

that they can sit there grouped  
watching the filming as it occurs  
the squad's cameras fixed to their helmets  
helicopters still whirring

high-tech reports the shots  
the death the shattered face  
the terrorist unarmed  
fast buried at sea—no pilgrim spot

whatever he did & he did  
our will to kill appals  
sin laden our lot  
such bloody hands such deeds

# Mediterranean

the word's so big you swim in it  
bashing its basin sides  
& then near Malta  
bobbing saltily  
you're all at sea

she married here  
a pebbled shore  
with Cocteau's pictures  
on wedding walls  
*Hôtel de Ville* & Händel's  
Queen of Sheba marched  
them out into sunlight  
a crêpe-paper arch  
over her wedding hat  
from a *chapellerie*

a straw sunbonnet  
the girl wore  
& the fisherman  
a red cap—they each  
said *oui*—then forever  
we—it's that  
mid(dle)terrain.

## César Franck's feet . . .

. . . are not to be seen  
though we hear  
they're there  
glimpse a sliver of shoe  
after he swings  
onto the seat  
& walks abroad  
legs dangling & swivelling  
over the pedals  
treading this one that one  
with his feet inner sides & heels,  
the magnificent hands  
holding a chord  
pulling a stop  
in the famous photo of  
Jeanne Rongier's painting:  
*César Franck at the console  
of the organ at St Clothilde  
Basilica, Paris, 1885.*

César's white-blond hair  
& grand side-whiskers  
suit his creamy skin  
fine face—  
& he looks onto  
the moving surfaces  
as he works  
in quiet command  
with attentive grace.

# Cri de coeur de Katherine Mansfield

I hear her cry out from her grave  
not *leave all fair* but:

leave me alone!  
Let me *RIP* through  
your societies your conferences  
your codswallop about me  
& tear it all apart

read me read me  
for all you're worth  
that's why I wrote

but *STOP*  
carving me up  
& serving me  
at too many tables

stop the industry  
stop the production

get off my back  
stop flying on my wings  
fly on your own

let me be  
please  
let me  
are eye pee

(on you all)

hear me!

# Easter in St Johann, Kronberg im Taunus

A spot-lit effigy of the Crucifixion  
throws shadows right & left:  
Kosmas und Dismas,  
the diocese Bishop explains.

*Think of me, when you reach Paradise*  
& to His left the terrorist's  
already there, as the scorner scoffs.

A long, wooden cross, black-draped,  
like the altar candlesticks  
rests on the chancel steps:  
*the mallet & nails with barbed wire &*  
*halo, symbolic, a chorister reassures.*

On Sunday, above the organ pipes  
peeling Hallelujahs,  
from under a curved 1617 painted  
wooden ceiling, dancing *putti*  
pluck & pass round roses:  
their petals fall as singing sounds.

# Songs for four-part choir

*bucolic soprano*

a hare's ears  
are like  
two treble clefs  
pitched for  
the high notes

*mellow alto*

your love  
doesn't wilt & turn  
yellow with age:  
it is tender, warm  
& soft—it holds me.

*bass clef tenor*

A cat's silhouette  
with two emeralds  
glinting  
in the moonlight

*bassi profundi*

Tibetan monks  
hold deep  
to the sounds  
from where  
mountains come

# The Kiwi in me

I've swapped Tane Mahuta  
for two mighty Eichen,  
the woods for the sea

tui, tuatara for  
Rotkehlchen, Eidechse,  
but the Kiwi stays me.

I now speak the language  
of Goethe & Grass,  
like a palimpsest

over my Kiwi-English,  
Maori place-names & songs  
I learned as a child.

These stay me.

I long for the sea,  
for islands  
even the kea's raw call,

but love our Berg & Burg  
with its cobble-stoned wall.  
Now trim & as neat

as a Hausfrau should be,  
but my unruly nocturnal  
rambles stay me.

## Two questions for the Archbishop

I

Was the Easter Sunday Christ  
a shade like Dante's? Did He know  
an embrace would go straight  
through him till her arms  
wrapped herself around?

And so he kept Mary at bay,  
knowing she would find herself  
again bereft.

But might she then have  
found Him within her? Her chance  
of a taste of Paradise?

*name my name, you bring me close  
noli me tangere, you keep your space*

both of these. Is this the story?

II

Or, because on his way, did He  
not want to be held back?

# A little pneumonia

to Katherine Mansfield

The German for lung is *Lungenflügel*—lungwing—  
clever you, Katy, calling it your ‘wing’ to fly. Now,

one of mine’s infected too & antibiotics will kill  
all those bacteria, well, on the wing. Also cures

gonorrhoea, would have cured your TB & you’d  
have had more life, looking in death’s face at 34:

‘shall I try to get up, if I do will I cough,  
if I cough I can’t breathe,’ ‘lift my head Ida,’

‘say it pathetically, please’ (you quote yourself)  
into the pillow. ‘I’ve got to try.’ Your will, that steel.

Lunch over, having to lie down again, (know what  
you mean & me a swimmer. Lungs!), then,

all those stories like mist off the land  
lifting up to your pen; then, all that quick,

fine, flying work till they found  
their places: your children of the sun.

## The anniversary

(for Sumra)

The wedding day washed away  
wisdom says the pot-lickers  
inundate their bridals—

guests squeezed without embraces  
huddled women sang no songs  
only calmed their bawling children

winding up last words hurriedly  
the *Molbi*\* pampered his dripping beard  
anchored us an island surfaced  
we claimed a shore

marooned by the first night  
which brought its drizzling dispersals  
from the chinks in ceilings  
lateral drops fell on thumping hearts  
we remained noiseless

in time your white elbows dangled  
like egrets enfold oceans in wings  
now another year the flight is downwards  
but cruising all the way

passages, rails, ferries we boarded  
sit in the albums coasting us home.

\* cleric

# The English lesson

Inside a falling room  
I learnt the first lesson;  
vowels ejected sluggishly  
from a throat oiled by Ghazals  
the skin collected  
jaws and palate resisted  
verbs messed up the taste buds  
I traversed punctuations  
but all freedoms are short-lived  
the English teacher  
reined the rebel in me  
the subdued ones  
stilled into mock-alligators  
swallowed a tricky idiomatic  
figurative or metaphoric  
God knows! I chewed and gobbled  
but some of it remained  
beneath the tongue  
with fricative diphthongs  
and signs of exclamations  
I choked cramped  
made faces like a harlequin  
until the appetite for Punjabi tales  
and Urdu flourishes  
perished in caries  
then consonants took root  
in time the local enamel went away  
they made a new denture  
for I was their advanced learner.

Come! and pluck me, each entry  
each page is a bleeding gum.

# Pakistan meets a terrorist

The world had one 9/11 and one 7/7  
we live through them each moment

every day rehearse a dumb-show  
of ridiculous stares   silently

sift through the detritus  
fingers limbs heads

a heck of imagery on roads  
a grin tagged to each anatomy

out there on ticking check posts  
police place their heart on triggers

under yellow bulbs rains pelt in ditches  
all over cities   cradles of fear

rock children to terrorist's dissonance  
now they speak powdery rhymes

ripped end-lines pelleted syntax  
climax riddled   form obscured

in smog and flames  
like surreal poems trapped

between detonators and detectors  
peeled and barbed bodies

in TV footages   virtual reconstructions  
thrice removed from reality

cameras run through smoke as ghosts  
find out a way of communication

jacketed in contentment  
people respond to *azans*

in this debris of confusion  
life plays its tenebrous rhythms

battery and gun siren and yell  
downlink mortuaries with hell

still not enough to stop world's tongue  
from screaming headlines

*the dangerous corner of the world*  
not knowing that our poetry is terror-free.

## Iowa where Everyone is

'nobody goes to iowa' Dean said—grinning a charm to stay put  
while on great fields spring trees pretty danced and greened  
corn cut or scorched—pale yellow stalks short and scratchy  
our green nakedness and iowa's rolling fields could blend

*the plane from seattle then atlanta, (yes Ma'am)—a curved window*

back and forth this and that messages coloured with years  
accidental sameness—Julie and I style-snappy  
met in cyberspace then turned into shandies with fried fish  
on a Friday in a bettendorf tavern with TV basketball

*le claire's main street high noon tourist cars—on a Mississippi angle*

in the Buffalo Bill Museum Julie recalled she copied the Gettysburg Address  
yards of hard writing detentions towards our stubborn laughter  
cases of guns and quilts beside framed indians and sharp-shooters  
we escape pounding laundry on rocks to be Annie Oakley with her rifle

*Buffalo Bill wrangled over 200 cowboys and indians—bang bang shaving wallets*

arrive to squirrel trees and davenport confectioned houses  
woodpecker knock knocked while I walked uphill from a deli sandwich  
to a green Victorian bed and breakfast where electronic love arrived  
family of bluebirds on the vintage wardrobe and the clock blind

*you and I writing about kidnaps and stealing each other's moments*

parked in the driveway by Bert's black amrkn muscle car  
an overture revved behind the sleek red 70s V6 with white upholstery  
hammered iowa rock brain in my cherokee medicine pouch  
swapped pounamu and geode to own each other's land and *o don't let go*

*ropes of sentences bridge our impossible everywhere swinging*

a sunset chair below plans in their wood-panel garage ceiling  
into a fairy tale with a furious blonde child to tell us off  
and Dana held a tell finger on the notebook re alcohol  
while a handsome stetson man vocalised about journeys

*but a woman sang her curtains off til everyone's windows cleared*

me a hi-jacked guidance counsellor to a liar texting ransom  
the band louder than the evening dark so we rode light home  
next day Jo placed a decoy spider with twirly-gigs of poppet  
gas station on the way a message to a soldier leaving town

*large black letters above the logo where truth plays*

in their gingerbread house Miguel and Veronica's swirl of children  
cherry tree blossom and violets studded the lawn like bravery  
spiced food built by grapefruit-soda tequila and spanish  
clues to a test and our picture guide talk smiles

*this waiter earlier studying quantum physics and my accent*

but almost first of all they drove me to the Miss spread wide  
*my blessed mother* I had to think then traipsed pale rocks to touch  
three fingers into the drink while shouting about insurance companies  
Mississippi rolling Twain's books through shimmer and deep

*since we've got our arms here other full of each found*

photographs passed back to me captive on cream upholstery  
row upon row of white markers with bright flower outbursts  
discussing grandfathers who'd fought for our countries  
river outlook a vast graveyard of their fallen ever brought home

*driving policy asserted with outspoken flim flam foreigners*

‘watch for the anvil-shaped cloud, it’s just like that’  
Julie said if a tornado appeared we’d have to leave the car  
she’d been in two and you need to get out  
and then underneath something like a bridge

*all the ‘things’ she wanted to show me were people*

on her brother’s cleansing lawn a recently felled tree circle  
(cedar’s creosote-sap-soil—difficult to grow anything when they’re gone)  
his man-cave wall Jim Morrison silk with black dog behind glass  
we found a Hendrix chaos song Dean hinted a travel return with

*warm snow over me from balloon words and wishes*

and a Galesburg railway station swooning eagle was you  
‘we’ll protect each other with the nonsense of this careful’  
the artist said to me, ‘good-bye an’ you go and sing your song’  
so here I am with my voice back

*no one may take from me as if I were an abandoned shop or store dummy*

my genius pretenders lit up a true woman with a wall  
fine places we live have protective signs  
here now let us plant the carbon-soaking trees then dance  
amongst true singing of love and our beautiful

## Dialogue

I want to know you, sweet pardoner  
to think that I know you, come  
sit beside me, this is the season of feast  
we consume all that is beautiful, make it part of our blood  
and wait—

Is dying easier if you escort me?  
Will you carry my soul on the palm of your hand?  
Or did you teach us an elaborate dream?

You dazzle me, your never stutter, never slip,  
and here I am with my broken nails, buckled knees,  
my screaming, whiplashed paradise.

I was parroting you, your words, your gestures. I tried hard.  
I studied like an owl, I broke your laws.  
I confessed to thin air my pitiful sins. Did you hear me?

The seat beside me is vacant. I know I will never see your face.  
Why, then, waste a moment on you, imaginary being,  
who has a hundred thousand dwellings,  
churches and cathedrals built with blood and tears,  
to please you? in absentia? to humble ourselves to death?

## Cut loose

and what do you do for the universe  
press your shoulder against the mountains?

not enough to raise your cup and taste  
the salt and the tang ?

chip in with riots of smiles?  
a new breeze could build a city

limbs lax and permissive are assets  
your task to find the sweat glands of freedom

a willing branch supple and green  
is a happy babe at a milky nipple

take away the darkness  
fill your inner chambers with sweet thoughts

escort the censor to the door  
let your hair down

## Young man with hawk

Talons latched on its minder's wrists, the hawk  
has chosen a companion. Seduced by  
the vivid green of the hillside, the new-shoot Spring  
of the cloth, draped over an arm,  
but mostly by being whistled to, and summoned.  
The pair look up, where two hawks ride  
across a pillar of sky. Choosing one partner  
means forsaking all others, though the young ones  
do not yet feel the ax of this, in their happiness.

After the woodblock print *Young Man with Hawk*  
by Isoda Kory Sai, 1735-1790, Japan

## Girl playing samisen

Patient one, plucking the trio of strings and reading  
the music on her lap, struggling  
to leave behind her body, become the vibrating instrument,  
quiver of song. The caged  
bird over her shoulder listens: solo audience.  
Its notes once called forth a mate, or answered a request.  
Now the marriage is between itself and the girl  
who will be one day a true wife, and wants to learn before  
then the lonely joy of the samisen.

After the woodblock print *Girl Playing Samisen*  
by Unknown, Edo period, Japan

## The stranger

In macrocarpas click cicadas  
The somewhere females (assessing)  
Flutter by on tips of hedge a sear-  
ing orange butterfly, breeze hardly  
And every window open, kids in  
Pool over fence, a scream and splash, and  
Chilled in fridge the next glass of lemon  
Barley. bird sees behind with eye a  
Flick of head and sees right with rife eye  
The stranger passes by, I dream a-  
nother life, of less ground down and grudge  
of home in heart and rosy wife

## Crumbs

In middlemarch the drought, brown and dead  
And dust the grass, the broken cattle  
Sold to works, the crops parched. in town the  
Sprinklers, the few still-clicking crickets  
And to and from retainer walls the  
White black-dotted butterflies flitting.  
Adrift on self, a mind is dual  
And worries churn like fly round a room  
Buzzes and through a door at last (peace)  
Claws scratch the eaves and drop to boards hop-  
hop for crumb but not too near—keep guard  
Sparrows—for mine's a species and some

## te ohonga ake

*the re-awakening*

mauri breathes me in  
breathes me out  
my chin re-awakened

six waka pakeha  
have carried me  
here

five generations  
later this aotearoa  
this green and brown

has made its way  
under my skin  
into my veins

tinted my heart  
another hue  
this aotearoa

centuries of te reo  
underfoot this  
the place I stand

opening my throat  
to waiata  
i long for powhiri

to karanga  
into the light  
of luscious lines

carved, curving  
to walk with  
to be proud of

on my otherland face  
beneath my silent mouth  
a living ancestry

## first haiku (*tanka*)

a future springtime  
see myself among petals  
language snows on me

cherry blossoms framing their  
heaven of walking people

## Ulysses and the sirens

*(J. W. Waterhouse, 1891)*

Everything is in flight  
the wind breathing hard into the sail  
ropes stretched bowstring-taut  
oars flailing at the sea  
the ship wide-eyed, horrified.

Only the hero strains to hear, but why?  
not lust for these undesirable sirens  
gliding in on raptor wings  
with their blank implacable  
Pre-Raphaelite faces.

The artist has painted the music  
but failed  
as words fail to describe it  
as every attempt to sing it fails.

We are silent witnesses  
lured and repelled  
as deaf as the oarsmen  
to that unimaginable song.

# Canongate, 12.04am

the moon is yellow on a painted backdrop  
with an artful smudge of cloud

the cars are last-minute props  
in hardboard and acrylic

canned laughter disturbs the airless night  
but is switched off  
fast

I hurry through spotlight circles of grace  
and the ominous dark in between  
I am neither actor nor viewer  
I have opened a door in a dream  
and again and again I cross the empty stage  
I cannot find a way out

yet once at twilight  
a subtle shape comes out of those bushes  
a shadow moving in shadow  
small lithe self-possessed  
not dog nor cat nor possum  
a stoat

I stop dead

I hold my breath

it vanishes  
and I know it has returned to its nest  
in the illuminated margin of a prayer-book  
to feed its young on  
a basilisk's gilded flesh.

## Greetings

She moves away.

He comes out wearing  
a plastic glove on one hand  
he bows deeply once and then again  
he follows up with a cricket wave,  
a country wave, a wave at full stretch.

He returns to the kitchen,  
as if he'd only had time  
for this one grand farewell.

She boards the bus, pausing  
to greet the driver who,  
keeping his face in neutral,  
waits for her to swipe her pass.

'Please, check your balance,'  
the recorded voice says blandly.

Every day we smile and bow to our neighbours  
unable to engage in more than simple  
conversation. Our cooking smells are shared;  
fish sauce, garlic, roast chicken or lamb.

We watch out for each other, help if asked  
but discreetly part at each identical front door.

## Control

Taiwanese cherry trees brighten  
the edge of the bush when  
we should be waiting for kōwhai.  
Imported in the sixties then  
purple and orange were in fashion.  
Those were days of hope and freedom.  
Consequences were all to be positive;  
marches and sit-ins would change society.  
Peace songs would bring war under control.

No-one thought cherry trees  
would need to be eradicated.

Mating tuis in the cherry trees,  
destroying bright pink blossom  
drunk on the fermented nectar  
they hang upside down      almost in reach.

## Kowhai

Today I watched the removal of a dead kowhai.  
The van towed the mulcher across the mown grass.  
The machine switched on and off to force the trunk through.  
Only leaves remained to rake and shovel.  
The tree's gone. No stump remains.  
The park's taken back the roots left in the ground.  
No-one will notice the circle of dead grass.  
Through the window I see the space for other trees.

Long ago I watched through a different window.  
The pine trees round the farmhouse were felled.  
We sat on unfamiliar branches.  
The spiky snags caught at our clothes.  
The trunks were trimmed to take away.  
The stumps remained to remind us  
where we had climbed before.

## How to read murder-mysteries

First work out the key character, who will survive  
(probably the detective who has a TV series)

only identify with him/her

be indifferent to the family,  
(they may be victims)

be objective about the crime scene  
count the bodies, the forensic scientists  
don't worry about the innocents  
ignore blood, the wounded flesh  
knifing, decapitation and torture

be immune to f--- and c--- words  
they don't refer to anything.

## On leaving the youth hostel

The boy manoeuvred his pack over a home-made hose reel that lay halfway across the hostel path. Nearby, a tap hung from a pipe on the side of the house where it dripped incessantly.

At the letter box he looked at the morning sun and sea, which were set well back, each blue and variegated.

Over the city, cranes slewed, raising and lowering their loads as some dog men stood in steel caps on flexing rusty steel, or balanced on other loads.

Some children looked smart in uniforms as they walked close by, with the pedestrian workers who mostly looked fresh on the first morning of the week.

To the left, a taxi stopped two doors further down the hill. The driver retrieved luggage from the footpath while the passenger stood looking flustered and annoyed. She stood close to where a tree branch had fallen the night before. Its leaves appeared marginally wilted on the parched mown verge.

Then, two small cars raced up the hillside. The red one gave a tiny automatic surge as it went ahead on the other side. It caused some loose leaves to flutter away from an expired starling that lay in the gutter.

While the boy stood, he contemplated his journey to another place and thought about his next walk on the road.

## Dancing on the edge

we believe in extinction  
the coldness of old basalt

it's our city  
we'll dance if we want to

balloons and fireworks  
little wooden houses

big-leaved whau  
snowdrops and sheep  
runners at dawn

but come to the volcano's edge  
look down imagine

nights of liquid fire  
tall tephra columns

fire fountains blazing nights  
and far below

dull embers sleeping deep  
drifting molten plumes

awaken to rise through cracks  
steam and turmoil lava bombed

lahars would settle all our laughter  
slow our foxtrot hip-hop boogie

our faith could be in scientists  
and seismographs but

may I have the next dance?  
you ask because we both know  
that is all we can do

# River city

to grow up in a river city is to get used to seeing things pass by  
the river goes north takes broken trees friends volcanic ash  
a lover arsenic jobs flowing water unrelenting current

high snow melts  
river force spins turbines  
lights go on

we learn not to build on a flood plain hopes gardens consumed  
'the river is high today came up quick in the night'  
we learn there are no sandbags for the heart

grey-green river  
drifts sullen  
swollen with spring rain

a narrow bridge each step a fight against vertigo  
a goods train grumbles past a breath away count the wagons  
count footsteps don't think of the river below

summer-humid air  
heavy wet breathless  
the scent of lemons

long days spin out to winter drowned in a river of darkness  
black fog lifts from the river fingers into gullies  
rolls down roads 'careful driving home watch for the white line'

river fog  
wraps the silent willows  
a dog barks

'you can't see your hand in front of your face'  
we are invisible forgotten frangible as the last  
dried rose turned to blood-smear underfoot

we go north  
live by the sea

which returns to our footprints each day

## The dread: a thermoelectric duet

(for Edgar Allan Poe)

We stood like two icicles in the summer night, as though  
Hoping for the moon's light to melt us back from a  
State of suspended animation. But with our bodies  
Shackled almost with a cement of fear which even Jonathan  
Could not rival or produce, puzzled with disorganized  
Thoughts unable to reach a synthesis of the happening  
It had perceived, knees shaken with an involuntary horror  
Spasm, eyes dazed as though hypnotized or iced and blinded  
With confoundment, faces contorted more than that of a  
Stutterer left dumb, hands trembling as though struck with  
A palsy with fingers more fidgety than two gunslingers  
Standing at a close distance, lips trembling as though  
Enthralled: in some ancient ritual prayer to the dead, we  
Staggered toward the holy or unholy place as the four winds  
Converged and smacked our faces, the grass tripped us, the  
Branches and twigs smote violent blows and hindered and  
Choked us and we perceived ourselves to be moving through  
Some mad jungle when we finally converged at the spot just as  
My eyes suddenly opened, straining under an intense ray of  
Sunlight which had slipped through the half-drawn curtain  
Before my bed.

# Cosmic metamorphosis: a twentieth century Galileo

(Immanuel Velikovsky)

A Huss of nebula wilderness bones,  
Napthal melted rouge rod of Exodus,  
'Van Allen belts' robbed from his honored zones,  
He mocked the fire, chain and stake of dazed fuss.

Drunken stars swerved out of orbit, nailed  
Near collision of Venus, Mars and Earth:  
Oil fields born, rivers reversed, gods unveiled,  
Ritual progenerated prime hearse.

Cunning scholars with jealous gray matter,  
Pelted warped stones at his space synthesis;  
Moved less than snails to view data lettered,  
They coldly buried new analysis.

Truths surfaced like bites of tsetse flies,  
Now hailed a god among peers, prophet-size.

## Altostratus

*The rim of the sky will be the colour of hard crimson, and your heart,  
as it was then, will be on fire — АКХМАТОВА*

Anna, the tundra swan  
nested with you that squandered winter.  
The vast ocean was icy, and displaced  
to the shore, you hissed at the watery sky

which imprisoned you. This was spite  
peculiar to commonplace clouds.  
When the eye was overcast,  
there could be no poetry.

The steppes, the mud  
on your *valenki* and the snow-fox  
teased at your thoughts once more.  
With wing and bill, an altostratus flew

across a low sun. The sky crimsoned  
with words, cloudberries that will ripen  
in some uncertain summer inhabited  
by four year old Cloudboy who'll read you.

He'll imagine a miracle flowering for you.  
It will be clean as paper, prescient as pencil-lead  
you were persecuted for. Anna, he'll bear witness to it  
and will memorize: *Серое облако в небе накладные расходы . . . . \**

\* 'A grey cloud in the sky overhead' — Anna Akhmatova

## A parental guide to clouds

All parents know that we never own our children.  
We're gifted them to caretake, to raise for lives

brief as strati. The milky astonishment of  
their births. The evolutions generated for us

by first steps and first words, a startling  
of new clouds. The full skies which form

when our children start school. The tears  
of the honoured shed, as mares' tails, when

they love someone else. Such simple beauty  
as our offspring possess—in wisps of hair,

in float and vapour of their bodies—  
exists in us as a mirage momentarily.

When they leave us never  
to return, we remain buoyed,

like altocumuli, at having had them  
sail through the world at our sides.

When we're old, this knowledge floats us  
to our beds and allows us to close our eyes.

# An occasional boat

Aotearoa's first waka were clouds  
bearing, like precipitation, our future  
gene-pools in their bellies. They began life  
in Hawaiki, Portsmouth, Apia and Hong Kong.

Even now, in settlement, our people turn to their ancestors,  
the clouds for connection, understanding and loss.  
And the clouds oblige with reassuring rain, silveryeyes,  
stargazers, dragons, trains and even an occasional boat.

## Every body continues in its state of rest

Day one of six, you're having mechanical issues.  
'Jockey wheel's chewed up. Damn rear derailleurs. Where's the mettle?'  
Your bike won't let you crossgear to chase me up a hill  
to be the first to see the Tasman. (We are fresh-limbed;  
bull-willed.) You have to work your way up, cog by cog. This is fair.

The pannier bags are doughy backsides wagging. They are equal  
and opposite to our Daedalian bodies. We equipoise the question  
of feather versus carbon crankshaft, hammer versus asphalt gradient,  
drag coefficient as opposed to Kevlar purchase: the acceleration  
is inversely proportional to the mass of the frame. This is tedious.

We are a pair of lunatics we are repeatedly informed, seesawing  
the extremes of bliss and agony, blood and sugar, natural beauty  
and freight traffic. We push the road behind us so that we might outpace  
our calendars. We make 'lifecycle' jokes. Eight hundred kilometres  
is enough to talk ourselves tire-flat, saddle-sore. This is inertia.

The pollen in so many cubic metres of countryside is countless.  
I sense you fall back from the joy of it: the theoretic physics of the peloton.  
Head down, heartrate constant, *One Square Meals* clogging in your gut.  
You note placenames like a bibliography: We have been here, we will go there.  
In between, there may be photo opportunities, subject to punctures.

This is fatigue.

Mauve doesn't suit my buttocks, you say, let alone crust. Let's hitchhike.  
'Are you done?' You shrug the oil-stained condor shoulders—the bastard wings  
we have developed. The velocity is fitful. We violate the conservation of spirit.  
*Our itinerary is not a closed system.* I fight the damp nor'wester;

pry apart a slipstream.

'Come draft off me.' I grimace. It's the pollen, you say, eyes streaming.

This is endurance.

## Dreams at the end of a string

He sees her:

Orange skulled bather, in melanin lightly clad, he would protect this Celtic Tinder from the sun, if he could. Would trap her creamy,

curdled beauty in a camera box. But Irish to the bone; and tough, she'd buzz him off like a fly. Coffee alone at South City, then.

Spilt Coke sweetens counter tops.  
Panoramic beach views, a hint of chip fry.  
Gulls boss all the plastic stools. Glove puppet gulls.

Tide water running through plumbing.  
(A noisy reflux at The Gents.) Walking  
by. Rickety. He's an old dude tied to a

balloon; responsive to its string. Obedient  
to his flighty red rubber wife. Following  
string to its very end, he takes off.

A Mako shark in thongs. Stencilled  
silk shirt billowing pineapples.  
His bodyweight plumbing pillowed

sand. His spirit a dirigible in the sky.  
Reaching the end of that, oh so long  
knotted piece; the lifetime of a dreamer.

# Observation for an activist

Without your envy  
smoking from the road

bringing tears to their eyes  
or changing their perspective

penthouse people might look down  
at the boxed flowers on the glass lip  
of a lower apartment

scan citizens slipping chains  
of fitful, shifting traffic

spy me, having Mexican on the pavement

discriminate that pigeon  
mining specks beside my feet

excrete their dew of  
languid disengagement.

## Illustrations in a history book

Buller, at the relief  
of Mafeking;  
Richard the Lionheart  
landing at Joppa;  
the early Britons  
with wooden shields  
and short swords  
wading out  
to do battle  
with boatloads  
of armour-clad  
Roman soldiers;  
blind Milton  
being read to  
by his daughters;  
and lastly  
the Duke of Monmouth  
grovelling before  
James the Second  
as he unsuccessfully  
begs for his life.

## Writers

Children like me  
can't take responsibility.

No-one expects  
any special effects  
from this man.

To be a wizard  
it helps to be wizened,

I still like sombre poetry  
though it seems too deep to see,

## Giving cheek

If the boss were stupid  
he'd shoot  
himself in the foot.

But he isn't,  
so he doesn't.

After listening to him  
wouldn't it be funny  
if I turned out  
to be ordinary.

## What better totem

I dreamt a tiger seized my throat in his jaws,  
which wasn't the nightmare you'd imagine.  
He spoke to me telepathically in a despotic dialect,  
our minds one pyre chained together;  
I felt his claws on the knuckles of my spine:  
his breath was hearty as home.

I should have been terrified but was honoured  
that this majestic creature had chosen me,  
as if in silence the selector selected the selectee  
free of his prejudicial brethren, daring to brave  
the grieving realms of a dreaming man's brain  
to stitch his torn heart with threads of fire,  
kindled by time to twist crepuscular forests  
to its burning, muscular favour.

Out of the blue  
of our lives black with the loss of our son, this tiger  
stole into my skull and cuffed me into epiphany  
by saying, as the homiletic cleric to the animalist:

*I will teach you about blood.*

## Whither the bunting

*And golden fruit is ripening to excess . . .*

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Whither the bunting of a wild dependency  
—still flush in tremors of outset—,  
strung across spindled foreground:  
burlesque birds, sleek and shining black,  
pull up into warm unsteady air.

If anything needs be celebrated,  
let it be light (photosynthesis is astounding):  
moments between dusk and dawn;  
moments, especially, between rains,  
when everything, the sum of it, is flung wide open,  
gates swung true by sunshine  
and summer comes haring over fields.

Celebrate, by the by, indomitable Green:  
bursting like gutters, thick with life  
and getting thicker still. But there is a green  
so dark it remains untouched  
by this shaking loose of light. There is something  
ever-green, ever-growing, ever-dying.  
It is something older  
than the weatherboard United Church;  
older than any fluttering standard; older  
than the face carved into wood; older than everything  
but the hill itself. And the kauri tree leans  
into the present.

Beyond the hollow-way and its wellspring  
deeper than its roots, time stalls  
and rigs itself with darkness. Roots  
and sap and stems and rot—  
its life is all that lives, sustained  
or not by something past indifference.  
It has outlived its own promise.  
Yet futures twinkle in its shadows.

Water mutters from the stone hole  
under the tree's massive bulk  
and flows down an iron drain onto the roadside,  
singing thereabouts of blackness.

Later, in the churchyard behind the tree,  
light rattles little butterflies  
from the flowering bushes—they can't help  
but fly  
above our names and dates,  
drawn up  
and on towards the sun.

## Fruit salad sky

Cold air clings to rain-soaked skin, whilst crashing waves provide a constant soundtrack. Walking along an empty beach, footsteps dissolve in wet sand. The artistry all or nothing. When a seagull swoops and glides away, there is an immediate sense of freedom. Suddenly, the sky seems closer, almost within reach.

## Melt

A slice of lemon floats precariously. It provides a necessary distraction. Tears become camouflaged when staring into a shiny glass. Like an ice-cube lost in water. Silently, slowly, shrinking.

## the kiss

watching me  
watching her apply lipstick

practised  
swift

eager to attach  
those lips to mine

she says sure,  
be my guest

and we do

## next door

tenderness sossed its way out of the room  
and left us with lust  
to be issued like a uniform

afterwards there were faint attempts at contact

but we knew  
neither had the desire  
to leave fingerprints

so we'd get up  
wipe away the evidence  
and talk as though the crime was next door

## teetering

teetering  
on the edge of something that looks like a brink

I should jump  
and avoid the hours of angst

measuring up  
is for tailors

I like to lurch,  
stammer

walk the boards  
backwards

if only for a moment  
before everyone turns up

## devoured

in through the unguarded door of her emotions  
asking for support,  
for unconditional love

she believes  
like a congregation in front of a false prophet  
she gives more than is fair

you take  
devour  
discarding what can't be digested

engorged, you throw her up  
onto the footpath  
for everyone to see

there,  
you say,  
it's over

John O'Connor

*From the poetry sequence*

## Transactions

### BEANIE

With his beanie off  
Jake looks 20 years older . . .

never goes into the church proper  
sits in the foyer / regular as clockwork  
thinking things through.

Jake knows almost everyone &  
everyone knows  
Jake.

•

Last birthday he was 90  
this time he's 81.

None of it matters—  
he's OK  
by the guys he knows

'that's what counts.'

So what if he's 'old as the hills'?

*You would be too  
if you'd lived by them 'since*

*Adam was a cowboy'.*

## REAL

Zima says she won't be here next week

her brother-in-law's coming for a visit  
& she's looking forward to it

'Better than church,' she says.

He lives somewhere else. 'There—'

She doesn't have a brother-in-law  
but it makes her happy. Tom's operation

didn't / and Joe dying  
—both on the same day—made her lower lip tremble.

But she's OK now.

## HARD

Likes to think he's quite a man

quick witted, knows his way around a bar  
bordello

& all the stuff between—that he's heard of  
somewhere on the street.

*Has a twinkle in his eye  
can ride a bike  
read a little*

'even swim'. So he says. Didn't like getting caught  
though

when Di needed assistance. Hard men don't help out.

## CAKES

A behaviour problem, or more of a disappointment  
problem

certainly disappointed Bill  
who had hoped for a bit

of nookie & got a cuddle.  
Disappointed herself once too

but who hasn't?

When she brought along cakes  
for supper one night you could tell  
she meant it.

Made sure no-one saw / as if you could hide it.

You wouldn't call her 'smart'  
but you couldn't call her 'dumb'.

She calls herself 'Mum' / when no-one's around.

## WHEELS

Certainly paid his dues  
been singing out of tune for years

likes to help out where he can  
being tetraplegic's never held him back.

Greets you with a smile every time.

## STEPS

If I were him I think I'd just forget the whole thing  
& string myself up.

But he wouldn't know how to tie the knot. Not  
that he thinks that way.

Wouldn't cross his mind.

*takes it* *As far as I can tell he just*  
*step*  
*by step.*

## Your word against mine then, is it?

As long as we sleep, the partisans are ready,  
the cleverly sly housekeeper distracts the search,  
the handsome underground agent fingers his throttling  
wire, rather than leave a comrade in the lurch.

As long as we wake, the collaborator considers  
the chances for sex before he decides to run,  
the chubby grocer slips notes between the layers  
of the habit he hi-jacks from a weary nun.

And those hours then between sleeping and starting up,  
between stark awake and out to it like a light?  
Jesus, we say, not sure which side we're on.  
Hero and swine at once about gets it right.

## To finish the story . . .

When he came to enrol, quite in fact by chance  
timetables suited for 'Mythic Studies'.  
He sat fourth row from the centre front  
to watch and attend a very nice-looking  
woman almost as young as his mother, who ran  
through Creation stories before upsetting  
some at least of the class with 'Saviour  
Figures, Divine Sons.' By second vacation  
Babylon, Gilgamesh, already completed.  
They came then to the stories he knew  
with a sudden flaring, as when tilting a plastic  
ruler the sun corruscates its blade,  
were Berhampore, all over. Give or take

the actual murders, voices from off-stage  
could be gods, or even himself—he knew,  
'So it's home they were on about, even then.'  
Maths he decided on for the next semester.  
Numbers don't lose you sleep the way life does.  
Don't wake you, their wrenched breathing, the bedroom cry.

## The hare, he said,

'You can't imagine what it was like, to see a *creature*  
other than rats,' to see, he meant, its living pertness,

its ears alert and standing and the sun pink through  
them, 'a kind of warmth we'd as good as forgot.'

Its bizarre, insistent confidence, its paws casual  
even, between coiled snagging wire as if

mere brambles, not a dozen yards to the left  
a corpse-infested ditch. He said, 'We watched

him with childish wonder, as though an angel  
had landed at an atheists' picnic,' a Methodist

as he'd been then, wryly thinking back. 'And no one,  
none, the hare, the angel, the bleeding enemy,

us, knowing who should disturb it first, who'd  
regret for ever wrecking its undamaged world.'

Who did? He did not remember. 'The one fine thing  
I brought back with me,' he says. 'The hare.'

## So much to remember, dad, at the Colosseum

You ensure slaves have calories enough, for instance,  
to be dead beat by evening, but not dead  
by the next day.

You choose a man with a gifted  
eye commanding where great rocks begin,  
the splendour mounting, the shaped stone beneath  
to bear the stone above.

The arena's angles  
neatly lock. The sky blue if the day's well-chosen.  
(One gift of Rome being the weather it requires.)  
The brass conches racket streets away to excite  
you imagine yourself being the boy a father  
brings to a treat,

until 'Ecce! That's your prize!',  
the black raking of sand once stabbed losers  
are lugged off. But red, the brilliance of so  
much red, before getting to that!

Hot  
and red as the games you re-play when it's maths you  
should be learning, declensions to spell out, as dad  
will tell you, who otherwise builds the future? Knows  
the right words to chant at dying Gauls?

'When the wind lifted . . . '

When the wind lifted the curtain,  
an intruder about to step in,

then minutes later flung at the open  
door so the house quivered,

and you'd hear the moan as it set up  
in the wires at the dark end of the drive,  
  
it's then his aunt would call, not 'beastly',  
but 'the beast.' She knew it lived,  
  
she knew behind its roar was a body  
we might not see but was there, was vile.  
  
'Of course it will win, either now or later.'  
When the sun next morning skidded  
  
the lino, picked carnivals along anything  
that shone, she'd forget she ever said it,  
  
as normal, her smile, as the next woman's  
who fears, if not the rising wind,  
  
some beast of her own. His aunt  
could not believe in a beastless world.

## Fame among the siblings

They were talking about being very famous  
which after all is what being alive is about,  
and one whose exquisite arse as she knew  
was her ticket to acclaim, said 'Like the Empire  
State Building, that would be *really* famous.'  
And her brother who fancied 'Stud' as the screen  
name he would go by, said 'Like the Great Wall of China.  
Beat that.' And the weed in the family with imagination  
the size of a pebble couldn't do better the loser  
than come up with—can you believe it? *grass*.



## Big Jack

*(Jack Iverson, 1915–1973)*

Big Jack, mystery spinner's  
in the nets at Brighton, flights  
his orb, and leaves the batsman  
grasping, as it spins and turns

delightfully away from and  
around the bat. Hear Big Jack  
roar with delight each time  
the ball lands and leaves the

batsman in disarray. Big Jack,  
a legend of the game, who  
emerged from obscurity and  
bowled Australia to Ashes victory

in Sydney, 1951. Big Jack who  
learnt his trade with a tennis ball  
and ruler playing French cricket in  
WWII. Big Jack, also family man

and estate agent who had to  
put cricket second to his family.  
Big Jack, mystery spinner with  
his solid frame, who often felt he

was an impostor in the game, but  
who was great. Big Jack, sad Jack,  
who shot himself, and yet remains  
an original, with his finger bent.

Source: Gideon Haigh's *The Story of Jack Iverson: Mystery Spinner*,  
Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1999.

## The old house

The old house is still there  
obscured by branches, leaves, at  
the top of the street. He doesn't  
look, and I won't look. It's  
where we're not going. Not now.

Childhood was there, is still  
there. Adulthood is here, as if  
both are housed differently  
in what we see and do.  
He doesn't mention the old

house, that place where we lived.  
For more than 20 years we were  
there, and now we are here.  
The branches, leaves, obscure it,  
and neither of us will look.

## Time ball tower, Lyttelton

My first camera  
took a photo of it;  
now, destroyed  
amid the ruin.

For years it stood  
doing its job;  
then preserved as  
an attraction. Any

restoration work looks  
difficult. How you've  
crumbled, fallen.  
Time tells and tolls.

*After the Chch earthquake, February 2011*

## Visiting the rest home

Sunlight fades photographs. After a while  
features are chastened into faintest blur;  
faces acquire white anonymity.

Sun lightens writing on cards, to sepia at first.  
Then lines of the script disappear until all is expunged:  
the greeting (familiar or not),  
the message, so carefully phrased,  
and the name of the sender—  
all gone. All of it, gone.

## Subversive

Daily, we expend effort  
negotiating the waterways of language  
(snagged, ever-changing, chancy),  
skirting stagnant reaches of cliché,  
rapacious rapids of verbosity.  
and obscurity's clogged canals.

But the sub-text, the intonation?  
'Awful dog,' I say, fondling  
the soft, black ears.

## Octopus

Old shirt sipping waves, a closet  
of surprised ocean  
spread across the bottom,  
found feeling

up the shallows  
among kelp for crabs.  
Shrinks into the reef  
on approach (however cautious),

savvy of my kind,  
casting as we do the shadow  
of a common story:  
long centuries of murder

in hot pursuit of coal,  
skirting the floes for tail,  
outlawing fauna.  
So this dotted chemise,

thrown into the corner,  
stone-washed, crumpled,  
of generic fabric,  
this cloudy moon

anchored to the rock  
with its vested passion,  
distrusts, rightly,  
we flipper-flappers.

Remote cousin, of an age  
before numbers  
rose out of the floor  
into human apprehension,

I come in peace, poet  
behind the glass and rubber.  
Come to sip with you,  
the water laughing—

small waves on the shore  
in whose collapses  
the naff of ages echoes—  
share a moment

eyeing up the other;  
how your head dithers,  
follows cautiously behind  
trending tentacles

away from the human,  
off into that deeper ocean  
in whose back rooms  
I remain unwelcome.

Honorary vertebrate,  
back-tracker sifting through  
territory unshaken  
by the shopper's roar,

will you one day walk  
the footpaths of Dunedin,  
your arms in business  
working the Octagon?

Mankind the wastrel  
has walked off the job.  
Gangly restaurateur,  
you mop up the past.

# Westport

Sodden weatherboards, stink of sweating coal,  
and always the mountains, misunderstood, oblivious  
to misunderstanding though men's mines seep

into their rivers. Town muzzled by the Care of Children Act,  
town at pains to prove itself after dark, raining,  
musty, drunken, sun-lit peeling town,

after Rununga, the buck-toothed coast, wave on wave  
wearing through limestone, then lowland manuka,  
sprawling paddocks, and stretching north

the slow profound swell of range on range  
confronting, concussing its elemental other.  
By the highway, dottery cows. Poetry is here

neither irony nor the pastel peaks of sentiment.  
The subdivisions jostle, on the Paper's front page  
two children flash posters, 'Save the World';

the world doesn't give a fuck about Westport.  
The world, being all about itself, is the Buller River,  
gathering its poetry in an irrepressible surge.

## Surf Nazis

watching the 1987 trash movie classic *Surf Nazis Must Die*—  
about a gang of sick bullies in California,  
a glorious wave of politically incorrect fantasy shot thru me.  
I was feeling as happy as a Jew on the day Hitler shot himself!

how could I use this gift?

I remembered a friend of mine back in '83, taking a shit on the bonnet  
of a CEO's car—which I didn't fancy doing myself—  
but it did lead me to consider how victims feel.

I remembered laughing & teasing a boy at school one day—  
for the crime of 'looking like an ugly warthog'.  
a friend & I teased the crap out of this kid,  
reducing him to tears, chanting 'Warthog! Warthog!'

we thought it was so funny—in a vicious, thrilling kind of way.  
what do I remember most?  
the look on his face—the hurt & disbelief.  
the world was picking on us, so we picked back.

we enjoyed our roles that day:  
innocent little fools, stuck in our ugly, frustrated adolescence.  
trapped in the cruel school playground—itching  
to do anything that might release us.

it all came back so clearly  
& a feeling of shame swept thru me—so many years later.  
I decided to do nothing—  
even though the world loves a victim.

# The tree outside my window

for Owen Bullock

the temporary tree outside my window is bending—  
furiously, in the wind; anchored.

it's a class act.

wind is a free-ranging show pony—lacking finesse at times:

unable, say—to slip exclusively thru portals,  
tending to fly straight into anything it approaches

but forever regulating power, changing direction.

I'm envious—

floating in the pool, watching lightning overhead—  
stuck on how much we gaze.

*an intense outflow of electricity in the air—occurring within clouds,  
among clouds, or between a cloud & the surface of the earth*

relentless precision, interaction—  
an exploding nest of verbs!

my behaviour?  
not so tree-like.

freeze-frames of choosing & tasting—  
the details of which are ultimately lost in summation:

an existence—  
somewhere between waiting in line

& riding the tick-tock click track up to the final  
roaring descent.

## Dancing bear

I'll be your fierce bear in a vest  
With little bells

I'll dance at the roadside  
Until my footpads scrape raw

Until my flanks  
Are matted with dust & sweat

O put a ring in my nose  
I'll dance I'll dance

Put a shackle round my neck with a chain  
I'll be your fierce bear in a vest

## Driftwood

So they bring this hunk of driftwood home.  
It's got a damp smell to it. But if you touch it—  
if you stick your finger into it—it's dry.  
There's talk of attaching some googly eyes  
to the driftwood. 'Ya know, glue gun 'em right on.'  
They wanna borrow my green scarf—tie a nice bow  
round the neck. They give him a name.  
'Skeeter.'

After all the planning, Lizzy's sleepy. My wife goes  
to put her down for a nap & I guess Lizzy grabs Skeeter  
& demands that he sleep beside her.  
She wakes up with mites.

*L. E. Scott*

## Lost keys

sleep dreams  
walking in the house  
from locked room to locked room  
daylight coming dressed  
in ghost colours

## God's kiss

this candle burns with memory  
yesterday was a match  
time has locked the door  
your coming death  
is god's little dirty secret

## Birth gives birth death

Time enters darkness  
with no regard  
for the randomness of life  
as abrupt as the water breaks  
so too, the thread  
this journey  
never was moving to the light

## fleeting phrases

*i) black & white photography*

street light traces a tree  
on bedroom louvre door  
a black lace filigree  
its bones in sharp relief

juxtaposed by a thick  
charcoal line down the side  
edge fuzzes out of focus  
like feathers or toetoe

*ii) on-call*

slipping between worlds  
she floats her poems  
on the wonder of  
red & gold autumn

the airy creature  
is dragged down by drear  
dank days of winter  
a slip on her deck

wishes the weather  
would settle into  
a less slithery  
stylistic track

*iii) a cold cryptic night*

stars shiver  
window shakes  
black sky opens  
folds carpets of cloud  
weaving through fingers of stardust

cloud faces morph in moments  
leap over a train to town  
track a man in black fedora  
smoking a cigarette  
red reflecting off  
a wet window of words

## End-stage motor neuron disease

His drapes, even at night, are never drawn.  
They frame in paralysed light our  
star, (and others blinking), bitter rain,  
and birds too old to reach Siberia.

His windows too are set ajar, even  
after dark, and bare air, (lung-forbidden),  
forces his eyes to drip. They are the last  
to live, his eyes, and he watches as  
drops spread like spider on linen.

His preference though, especially  
at night, is looking in—in  
to REM with eyes flicking:

It is then that his hands can resurrect  
caress, and his dead feet dance.

## self-censoring

The white  
dishdashed Omani  
company driver  
says little from the Dubai  
marbleclad arrivals hall  
to the Hilton Al Ain's  
oldest hotel.

We keep missing  
each other  
Kiwi mixed with  
Buraimi broken  
English air  
currents icy  
A/C airconditioning  
now I hear you.

Humour is riskier than  
juggling two mobile phones  
at the wheel checking  
texts, surfing the net  
cruising on a near  
empty superhighway with no  
upper limit.

## folded light

numb number  
numbered  
the patient

triage is  
running orange  
repeating

women only  
spaces  
where spouses

pity that  
creature  
woman

behind glass  
checks settings  
my head in

calves  
feet stick  
thrombosis

exposed  
body still  
thoughts

through hospital  
Maria wraps  
around legs

waves boom  
light flows  
render

numbness spreading  
filed  
exists

a stock market display  
mother tongues  
codes

screened off  
wait  
steal looks

anomalous  
the married  
alone

Muhammed  
cradles  
Indian English

ankles  
out the MRI  
or not

unexposed  
thinking  
minute twitches

blankets as  
herself  
ankles feet

tick beep  
images  
soft tissue

*Barbara Stanley*

## On receiving a rejection letter from Mr Paterson

I am on a beach. Not a sandy beach,  
a beach covered with black pebbles.  
One catches my eye and I pick it up and put it in my mouth.

It is a word, round and smooth and salty with tears.  
It clinks against my teeth as I polish it with my tongue.  
I spit it into my hand and cast it into the sea.

There are other pebbles. Flattened, balanced, skipping stones.  
I flick these sounds across the lapping water  
they bounce and dance and make a splash and sink.

There is a glossy, glassy piece of obsidian.  
I splinter it on another pebble and have a note sharp  
enough to slip between my ribs and pierce my heart.

Beyond high tide, driven by wave and wind are bits of pumice.  
Tangled in the kikuyu and clover, ash cold,  
an insubstantial phrase, they float like scum when tossed away.

Here too are the green waxy pods, seeds of the mangrove.  
I pick them up with care, feel their weight, throw them furthest.  
An utterance that will find a soft muddy shore and germinate.

## Hedged in

Grazing this graying planet, necks stretching  
reaching for more, cool death stalking  
the tangled remains  
when twice under a tune  
the sad bell tolls  
down the hardscrabble hill.

Steel-edged waltz cuts the thinning air  
these last few times around the sun,  
that burning star of one last hope.

Elixir of life whose rolling viscosity  
once flowed for all  
no longer bears the price of its keep.

Oh, master of the once-dark universe,  
would your churning mind  
still send its thoughts  
knowing this?

So when will the end begin?  
The steeple-stalked abyss proves no match,  
potentialities unprovoked  
pointing the compass round.

## The watching

and of rock  
that is as iron,  
earth-cast, standing in sea, jagged,

and of coast, its trees  
salt-tempered, twistings  
out from the root,  
long limbs of a black  
searching the whitening  
of sky over water,

and of no beginning  
the immense of day,  
a widening by light,  
its cyclorama pale,  
standing over Moehau,

eastern spur  
of the land/fish/spine,  
a long music,  
te Moengahau o Tamatekapua

before you  
actual,  
and in the lens  
of mind that is you  
and your knowing  
of it by sight.

Moehau.

Such physical  
structure of being  
that is time  
in the terraqueous body



into day's myriad  
figurings of light.

october  
2013

and the  
international  
panel on  
climate  
change  
records  
the scale  
of  
human  
influence

And at all times climate.  
Watch it at all times, its  
world haul of winds, its  
physics unresolved of cloud,  
metamorphosis at all times  
outside the cranial earth.

Gaian thought it is  
temperature shift,  
the tide in skies  
entering your body  
to be there the living  
of heat and cold.

At all times weather

large as death  
storms breaking down  
certainties of coast  
and the raised nature  
of land above seas

or pregnant  
with the warm  
that starts the plant,  
folds mind into structure:  
its fractal branching trees,  
its stamen thrust of flowers.

(ii)

Day coming in  
making its manifest  
of islands  
from the touching of photons'  
waves on stratified cliffs,  
scoria fields, black inlets  
of lava opening out  
to the bird-seas

inshore of Moehau.

Soundless the touching  
of the light, its wave  
over Kawau,  
                                  the touching  
over Hauraki. Over Wai-te-mata  
and Auckland,  
                                  the touching.  
Soundless over Kaipara and over  
Waitakere,  
                                  the touching.

In such witness  
you to live, to die,  
a knowing shaped  
by world enigma of surfaces,  
its meanings of depth.

And without sound  
the touching of light  
indivisible.

## What kind of thing

*In memory of Sarah Broom*

What kind of thing is the soul, Sarah  
asks when we are between nothing  
but the ridges of waves and blue becomes

blue. I should say, I am high  
up in a propeller plane, a testament  
to miracle, some might say the soul

is a testament. But I don't know  
what to say. They weighed  
a soul and I know it is lighter

than paper and clings like pitch.  
My father has a collection of ties  
he showed me only last night

saying 'Everything is what it is'  
bulimic ties of cloth, living now  
within moths, broad 70s ties of polyester

and, more important, the labels.  
Herzog's used to be on the village green  
and Dad says it has gone—a place cars zip

between. I should say, we are in a car  
in the bucket seat, a kind of rumble,  
on the way to his new, dry house

and each tie a weightless stone I will snug  
around my neck. One from Reese's  
of New Haven, hand-made

by my own Great Aunt Clara and Reese's  
of New Haven is gone too and Aunt Clara  
and the hands that touched these ties,

we know where they are, we have closed the box.  
And I am sure when dad opens his box of ties  
he can see her hands, small with knuckles fat

as marbles, a thumb that has been pinched  
and pricked and some red nail polish, left over  
from the holidays but chipping off like resolutions

in the new year. And if Aunt Clara has a soul still,  
it is with my father when he lengthens and knots  
her hands around his own neck. And if my father

has a soul I would like to feel it when I wrap  
his cloth hands around my own neck and maybe  
the ties of our work, and the names they bring

are all we can keep. And I am sorry  
I need to pay attention,  
to look out the window and wonder

the name of that river, that peak,  
that snow, that mirrored pond, that spit  
of islands and the good light hitting the cape

casting a gold, pleasing color of an old tie.  
And I wonder what it would be like to stay  
up here, looking down, onto everyone

you could name, every face bathed,  
occasionally, in the gold gleam of sun.

*Michael Walker*

## Wimbledon, 1975

*In memory of Arthur Ashe, 1943–1993*

We were near centre court where two Americans, J. Connors, 22, a left-hander of medium height, would play A. Ashe, 32, 6ft 2ins. and right-handed, in the men's singles final, Connors being the odds-on favourite as he had won Wimbledon in 1974 and would do so again in 1982 ; Ashe, an African American, had won the U.S. Open in 1968 and the Australian Open in 1970, however.

Connors liked to hit his ground shots from the baseline a lot, as did Ashe, to a lesser extent, so it was not just rush-the-net-smash. Ashe, however, soon unsettled Connors with his big serve, continually breaking Connors' own less powerful service. Connors hit the ball on the rise—his usual strategy—but Ashe slowed the game down, using lobs, to win the first two sets 6-1, 6-1.

Connors did not look too flustered to me, and, using his strong, two-handed backhand more, won the third set 7-5. Impassive, like Bjorn Borg, Ashe won the fourth set 6-4-and the match. Arthur Ashe, an iconic civil rights activist, is now at rest on a higher court where there are no rallies to win or lose. Jimmy Connors married a model and is now a coach and commentator.

## The location of heartache

I'm gazing at a published page,  
of someone else's writing,  
words as bouclé as raw silk  
nubby with flecks of colour,  
the meaning slipping away now  
along with my dream  
and a company of poets  
who collude to some signal that excludes me,

surface puffy with night meaning  
awkward, dismantled,  
heart-sore, here, in the area of the left breast,  
certain that the most meaningful part of life  
is lived while dreaming,  
and that to awake is to fail, to fall  
into an abyss of light.

Each day begins with fastening and fixing.  
The rhythm and meter of feet on pavement,  
poets whispering and hinting  
just out of sight along the ridgeline.

A hiatus in traffic as quiet  
as on Blake's heath,  
and I too am pacing the imagination  
navigating the body of god,  
searching in the luminous velvet of moss,  
dappled spaces of old garden,  
caesurae where cats bed privately  
and grass grows feathery.

Life is not edited,  
marches on without explanation.  
It is hard to know where it begins  
and where it will all end.  
I pray for a poem, to have something to live for.

Sometimes I dream of a surprise,  
the unexpected. Often I'm running late,  
missing something. There are particular locations—  
auditorium,  
rock wall vertical against bright turf  
with vast, filigreed copper doors  
like the first gates to paradise  
or guarding the entrance  
to under the mountain.

In the matrix of city,  
dream poets disguised as real ones  
at the launch of somebody else's book.  
I'm patchy, spectral,  
escape to cool air,  
taillights and head lights streaming,  
the mercy of a bus driver  
reaping his transport—  
minimal wage, cheap shoes,  
jacket pocket dragging—  
his face keeps turning towards me,  
flattened by street lighting, saying  
if they drink and drive and won't stop  
they deserve all they get,  
he's got no sympathy, none at all.

There's no margin for error.

I step over cracks so I don't marry a Jack,  
resist walking out into traffic,  
we don't have a bath and I'd have to find blades,  
it's an end I want not intensification,  
someone to find me before I drift away.  
I've looked after myself well enough,  
but if I tenanted this body as a temple  
would it be squat mausoleum?  
Palladian folly with elongated pillars?  
Or Angelino crematorium,  
all smooth and cream  
with niches and colonnades,  
smoke puffing into blue sky?

Distant traffic on the causeway  
slides across surplus light.  
The tide is high, pillows the mangroves  
like blossoms dark on light on dark.  
I navigate blind,  
following gravel underfoot,  
passing Max the dog  
twitching and dreaming,  
he knows the smell of me  
and doesn't bother barking.  
A lifetime on the chain,  
but Max inhabits his garage  
unburdened by the incessant hopes and fears  
which activate my human mind.

On the field, dew wets my shoes.

DAVID HUME: . . . *the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind.*

## Road trip to Paeroa

It's my day tomorrow.  
Come with me in dreams.  
Travel through late autumn trees  
shimmering antique gold coins &  
plum jam spread thickly  
over green velvet fields.

I arrive in this vintage town  
searching for ghosts  
& find oak, glass, pottery, the kitsch  
of other people's lives.

I give you brightly-coloured pieces of me  
to take with you—  
yellow, turquoise, red and orange—  
retro, found oddments  
rescued from contempt.

You store them with care  
& rediscover them,  
the dusty junk of every lived life  
hung on to in the hope of an increase in value.

They are tucked away  
in your heart for now, hidden  
but not lost .  
I wait for the day  
when I'm in fashion again,  
you turn me round in the light  
& I sparkle once again.

*Mothers Day 12 May 2013*

## Nowhereeverywhere

There is nobody of whom to ask directions,  
no way at all to get to know my whereabouts.  
You may go searching for years, or never move:  
your chance of locating me would hardly increase,  
even if you swept the whole of space from star to star.

Because I'm here, and there, and everywhere:  
I'm over this plain and on top of Everest,  
by this river and on Lake Baikal shore,  
on this street and in Times Square,  
in this town and thro' Beijing.

Yes I'm in Rome and in Singapore,  
in Buenos Aires and in Antananarivo,  
in Moscow, in Wellington and in Tokyo;  
in, or far from, every given city of the Earth.  
Along the Equator and amid Antarctica at once.

I'm in deserts, in swamps, in glaciers and in oceans;  
I'm in billabongs, in maelstroms and in geysers;  
I'm also in the mist and in the highest clouds.  
I may be right here, or who knows where:  
nowhere, or where the universe ends.

# Dedication to Gertrude Stein

## Charles Bernstein

Distinguished American poet and critic Charles Bernstein has given *PNZ* exclusive permission to print the following commemorative speech given in 2001, to which he has added his own introduction.

*On October 29, 2001, Gertrude Stein was inducted into the American Poets' Corner at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, in New York. As part of the annual ceremony, which fell on the day Eastern Standard time resumed, a chorus sang a few settings of Stein's work, among other choral works, poet Honor Moore read from Stein's work and Molly Peacock, Cathedral Poet-in-Residence, spoke about Stein, along with New York University Dean Catherine Stimpson and myself.*

Walking through the cobbled streets of Providence on Thursday night with the poet Keith Waldrop, I mentioned my great pleasure that Gertrude Stein was going to be inducted into Poets' Corner on Sunday. Keith immediately replied, 'And the time is changing too.'

It is indeed, and there is no time like the present time for time to change, as Stein might say, for for Stein there is no time like the present because the present is like no time at all.

And the time is changing too.

The Poets' Corner honors both poets and prose writers. And while Stein can certainly best be described as a poet, one of her remarkable achievements is to have written lustrous works in all genres of literature: plays and novels, autobiographies, librettos, essays, lectures, mysteries and valentines, portraits and landscapes, children's stories and travelogues, and, well, about half a dozen literary types for which we haven't yet come up with a name.

In Stein's most immediate generational company at Poets' Corner are Eliot and Williams, Cummings and Stevens and Frost. And Stein is the first of any of the poets included here whose parents were immigrants and indeed the first whose parents did not have English as their native language.

She is also the first Jewish poet to join the poetic elect here at the cathedral.

And the time is changing too. So much to celebrate.

The newness of Stein's family history in America made America if anything more important to her, as she wrote in her epic novel *The Making of Americans*:

It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realize our parents, remember our grandparents, and know ourselves and our history is complete.

The old people in a new world, the new people made out of the old, that is the story I mean to tell, for that is what really is and what I really know.

Gertrude Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1874 and lived in the United States, mostly in Oakland and Baltimore and Cambridge. She moved to France early on and that is where she died in 1946.

Stein was not always celebrated, as she is today. Throughout much of the 20th century, her work was derided and belittled. She challenged the prevailing notions of poetry, language, and communication in such a powerful way that even today you will find that her work stirs controversy. But maybe this is just what verse needs to be contemporary, to stay in time and not be 'out of it' as Stein writes in 'Composition as Explanation.'

And the time is changing too, even now, exactly now, exactly now as as is as as is now as now is as and how and now and as and is and wow.

So now let's actively repeat it all, exactly as she do, she does too, she does truly, exactly as she do. As as and as is and as is now. And how.

Among all twentieth-century American poets, Stein was the most radically inventive, the one who went the deepest into the turn toward language that characterizes much of the modernist art of her time.

In her modernist compositions, Stein found an alternative to the teleological thinking that underwrites much aesthetics as well as ethics: the idea that meaning lies outside or beyond what is at hand. She found meaning inside the words of which a poem is composed, a discovery and exploration of the wordness of words that has parallels in Einstein's discovery of relativity and Freud's of the unconscious.

In Stein's work, every word has a potentially equal weight in a democracy of language. Rather than emphasize nouns or verbs, Stein created a writing in which articles and prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions, would have an equal weight and where the words and phrases are no

longer subordinated to received prescriptions of grammar but shimmer in syntactic equality in poems that avert beginnings and endings for the ongoingness of middles and that elide past and future for continuous presents.

Perhaps this achievement is best described in terms of representation, for Stein created works that do not represent some thing other than what is happening as it is happening, works where the entity of writing takes on a fullness it rarely is allowed to sustain, where literary figures are grounded in actual word stuff and where the hierarchic distinction between figure and ground is collapsed into a compositional plane where words sing not so much for their supper as for our collective succor.

As Stein says in *Tender Buttons*: 'Act so that there is no use in a center.'

Stein, like several of her contemporaries, was a poet of everyday life, using common words to create new constructions for the new worlds we are hourly craving. Stein's aversion to symbols and allusion created a poetry richly saturated with sounds doing their business of making meaning as it is made not reflecting meaning as if it were already a done deal.

In her essays she insisted that doing was much more significant than explaining or anyway that what is done is always more important than anything won.

One of the last things Stein wrote, in the year she died, was a preface to the Modern Library edition of her *Selected Writings*.

'I always wanted to be historical, from almost a baby on,' Stein writes.

Well now, just in time, and the time is changing too, and Stein, always historical, all of us are always historical, is being taken out of time as we celebrate her as someone necessary for her time and our time.

And the time is changing too.

When I was 14 [Stein continues] I used to love to say to myself those awful lines of George Eliot, may I be one of those immortal something or other, and although I knew then how it went I do not know now, and then later when they used to ask me when I was going back to America, not until I am a lion, I said, I was not completely certain I was going to be but now here I am, thank you all.

And now here we all are and the time is changing too and thanks for that, thank you all, yes thanks for that, that Gertrude Stein is here, all here, here and now, and how.

And the time is changing too.

# Dark Sparring

Selina Tusitala Marsh

Auckland University Press, 2013, \$27.99, ISBN 978-1-86940-786-5

Reviewed by Nicholas Reid

Selina Tusitala Marsh's second collection *Dark Sparring* forces us to consider how exactly we react to performance poetry—specifically the sort of performance poetry that depends on chant and repetition and strong, overt rhythms. The topic is unavoidable. Auckland University Press has released this volume with a CD on which the poet reads 13 of the collection's 43 poems, accompanied in a low key way by musician Tim Page.

I made the mistake of first listening to the CD while following the printed text of the 13 poems (which have some slight variants from the performed versions). I call this a mistake as I think I should have just listened. The prologue poem 'Matariki' is rather too politely enunciated by the poet's voice when the story it tells is a feisty one—an assertion of the power of poetry by a young woman symbolising the Maori new year feast. Two of the performed poems are clearly occasional pieces. 'Lead' was, according to its heading, written for the Best Leadership Academy and 'New Zealand, the Lucky Country' was written for Leadership New Zealand.

I imagine they would have worked very well in their intended purpose of telling young people, at a public gathering, to take up leadership positions and to enjoy and make use of the democratic freedoms that New Zealand offers. Hearing only the voice of the poet reading them would have allowed us to enjoy their cadences, verbal skill and sly rhymes. But regrettably, on the printed page they come across as sloganeering. There is no irony here, no analytic thought, but the phraseology of a tourist brochure. *New Zealand's a lucky country / where our birth-right civic duty / lets you vote, or not—it's free. . . We've got water like no other / wind turbines and solar power . . .* and so on.

Conceivably the poet is proud enough of these pieces to include them in this collection, because they did efficiently the intended work for which they were commissioned. But I think they stand uneasily beside the better poems in the volume.

And yet not all the poems recorded on the CD have the same effect. The long 'Chant from Matiatia to Orapiu' is not only a sprightly sequence of rhyming couplets, but a very specific piece of description. The poem 'Noose' is a witty variant on the old spelling game of Hangman. 'Fatele' is a reflection on the death of a grandmother which earns its rhythms as it mimics a dance, where *the cycle spins / a line is sung / flighty taketake hands*

*/kava cloths wrung / ocean wave sway / pounding of tin / the salt-ridden tide seeping back in* all remind us that an aged life ending can be as much cause for the celebration of the life as the mourning of the death. And then there are, both on CD and in collection, three poems reflecting one of the poet's new interests—Thai kick boxing. The poems are 'Muay Thai on Saturdays', 'First spar' and 'Kickboxing cancer'. Dare I say that the repetitive self-assertion of these is a matter of specialised taste—and perhaps represents a poet 'psyching herself up'—*I am the sought-after woman / I'm the seeking woman / I'm the woman skinned with taboos / I'm the censoring woman / I'm the self-censored woman* etc.

I have deliberately focused on those poems in this volume that have been released simultaneously in two formats, because I think something needed to be said about the disparity between printed word and spoken performance.

I'm more comfortable making the point that the balance of this volume—the three-quarters of its contents which have not been recorded—fulfils the promise made in Marsh's first collection *Fast Talking PI*.

As the blurb reminds us, Marsh is of Samoan, Tuvaluan, English and French descent. The chief commitment is to Pasifika, but there is a conscious distancing from Pacific cultures as often as there is sheer celebration of them. A poignant protest poem like 'Girl from Tuvalu', for example, suggests the girl is *like her nation / running fast / nowhere to go / held up by / Kyoto Protocol / An Inconvenient Truth / . . . her face is 10,000 / her land is 10 square miles / she is a dot / below someone's accidental finger / pointing westwards*. This does not identify with the girl. It presents her as a situation. In other words, it sees her and her culture in terms of the wider world that impinges upon them. The many poems of mourning (which dominate the collection's second half) situate the death of a relative in the modern Pacific world with references to the neon signs of Hong Kong, television transmissions and so on. Do not look in this volume for a naïve idyll.

The poem to which I kept returning is 'Niu Sila Skin', about a man hanging in soul between New Zealand and a Pacific island—deracinated, but unable to replant himself: *uncle always wants to go back / even though all the kids are here / lining up for pay packets, groceries and state houses... / but every time he goes back... /... he gets sick*. This is the sense of cultural dislocation, of being neither fully here nor fully there, which is the lot of many of New Zealand's Pacific peoples, and to which Selina Tusitala Marsh is particularly alert.

# Getting reacquainted with Alan Ross and D J Enright

Alistair Paterson

It was a strange place for a second meeting—Alan Ross and D J Enright—Tawharanui, a camping site an hour and a half north of Auckland. We were camping there to escape work, responsibility, literature and the city, to enjoy sea and sand, the sunlit coast. And there certainly was sunlight and blue water and birds (dotterels, pukeko—many of them), and the horizon leaning over the edge of the world. But I'd brought a book with me, just one of them, a book on writers and writing and found in it two people I'd met previously—Enright and Ross interviewed by Alex Hamilton in 1978 and 1975 respectively<sup>1</sup>.

I met Enright in 1968 while serving in HMNZS *Otago*, a New Zealand frigate based in Singapore in accordance with New Zealand's obligations as a member of the South East Asian Treaty Organisation. The ship went into dry dock half way through the commission and I was temporarily assigned to HMS *Terror*, the Royal Navy's shore establishment. Not much was going on as most of the people were on leave. I used what leisure time I could find on things that interested me—phoning the university for example and making an appointment to meet Edwin Thumboo, a lecturer in English and already Singapore's leading and later most honoured poet. Arriving at his office I found an extremely agreeable man in his mid-thirties who welcomed me with green tea (cold because of Singapore's heat) which he poured from a traditional Chinese teapot into handleless Chinese cups.

He told me of his students' increasing interest and involvement in poetry and particularly poetry in English, as well as about the then head of Department, expatriate British poet D J Enright. I knew little of Enright at the time, although I'd encountered some of his poems in British anthologies and magazines and was impressed by his having such an international reputation and poetic status that he'd been appointed professor of English in Singapore. Thumboo could see I was interested in Enright's achievement and we chatted about poetry, readings at the university and the department's recently inaugurated magazine, *Poetry Singapore* which he edited and invited me to contribute to—as I did, finding myself in the company of a wide variety of Singaporean poets and Grace Perry (founder and editor of *Poetry Australia* who published some

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1 *Writing Talk, Conversations with top writers of the last fifty years*, Alex Hamilton, Matador, UK, 2012.

of my poems<sup>2</sup>). Thumboo was interested in New Zealand's poets—A R D Fairburn, and Johnson, Baxter and Campbell who he knew of and who as a one time member of the Wellington group I knew and could talk about. It was a great feeling to be greeted so warmly by a poet I'd previously never met, who was obviously a committed professional and wanted to know what I was writing myself.

Talking with Thumboo was doubly enjoyable as the naval officers I was serving with had little interest in poetry, which forced me to confine my writing to what I could manage in the minimal space of my cabin and reading what books I had with me or could get hold of. W B Yeats' *Collected Poems* was the most important of these which I dipped into and read and reread almost every day. Searching for additional reading in HMS *Terror's* Singapore library (quite a good and well stocked library) I discovered Wilfred Owen's biography—three hefty volumes if I remember correctly—written by one of his brothers (the painter) and covering Owen's brief life in almost endless and minuscule detail. During off duty time between naval exercises in the China Sea, work ashore and the ship's courtesy calls to Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, and Thailand, I read all three of them, but meeting Thumboo and making the acquaintance of Enright were the highlights of being stationed in Singapore.

Enright was somewhat different from the formal academic I thought he might be, an impression which was reinforced by Alex Hamilton who in 1978 quoted the poet as saying, 'If you have this craze for writing DIY poetry . . . which perhaps should be rooted out [presumably meaning readers were writing poetry themselves instead of leaving it to real poets] . . . you would naturally not want to read your contemporaries.' He was equally condemnatory of and claimed to be baffled by 'the spread of writers' workshops, little groups, cosy cliques,' and thought that, 'In America it was felt that everybody is as good as everybody else where poetry is concerned.' Not knowing anything of this, when I met Enright I found him elusive and difficult to understand. The occasion of the meeting was the reading Thumboo had invited me to where he introduced me to Enright as 'a poet from New Zealand'. His response, 'Is that so?' was vague and quirkish, tossed off hurriedly in between rushing about organising his readers and stirring things up with 'Get a move on,' or, 'Make sure you know what you're doing,'—nothing like

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2 I was fortunate to meet Perry and talk with her in the early seventies when she visited Auckland at the invitation of a women writers' group, and doubly fortunate that one of my poems published in *Poetry Australia* was picked up in America for the Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards and published in the international anthology, *Best Poems of 1971*.

the calm and assured way Louis Johnson had organised things at Victoria University in Wellington.

His attitude towards his performers was puzzling. They seemed very young, very naïve. English was their second language which might have made them nervous, but they did their stuff and did it well. Enright himself read which was strange in view of his later condemnation of poetry readings as ‘drag[ging] down standards . . . reduc[ing] the sales of books’. His delivery was coloured by a sardonic, cynical tone, his poems often denigrating Singapore and in one piece referring to it as ‘the arsehole of the East’. He was applauded of course, but the applause seemed fragile and somewhat polite. After the reading there was a talk and chatter amongst the various participants and a cup of tea. Strangely though, and despite Thumboo’s efforts, he seemed unable to connect closely with any of us—kept at a distance as if he didn’t particularly approve of the people around him and again unlike Thumboo, wasn’t interested in writers in New Zealand and could only talk about those he knew in the UK.

Again Enright’s inaugural address as the newly appointed professor of English in 1960 so offended Singapore’s officialdom that he was forced to write and publish a formal apology. He lost his appointment in 1970, principally because Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, his senior politicians and the university’s administration could no longer see him as a suitable person for enhancing the country’s reputation—which Enright wrote about as follows:

An odd sensation, to enter a favourite bar  
And hear oneself denounced on the radio.<sup>3</sup>

Enright also had strange habits, one of which gave him a connection with Coleridge. As Hamilton reported of him, ‘He and his colleagues . . . used to mark their exam papers in their favourite [opium] dens,’ and, ‘The exam papers tended to be marked rather high, but at least they were consistently high.’

Alan Ross was another matter—a man I first met through a chain of unexpected (or perhaps not so unexpected) events. It began with my writing a short story—the first short story I ever wrote. I thought it might be suitable for the pages of *Landfall* and sent it off. A reply came back from Iain Sharp, the magazine’s fiction editor, who described it as ‘a fine piece of writing’ and had no hesitation in telling me so. His enthusiasm caused me to ask him to hold off publishing it so I could put in for the Katherine

3 *Instant Chronicles, A Life*, D J Enright, Oxford University Press, 1985, p 20.

Mansfield Short Story Award—which I did but without success. I went back to *Landfall* but the fiction editor had changed and declined it with the condemnatory observation that the characters were contrived and the plot artificial and unconvincing. I was disappointed and unaware this was taking me a step closer to meeting Alan Ross

Still hoping it wasn't too bad a piece of writing, I entered it in the NZSA's Lillian Ida Smith short story competition. Again it didn't win but it was highly commended and much praised by Phoebe Meikle<sup>4</sup> the judge. It was now *Sport's* turn to look at it but the editor posted it back almost as soon as he'd received it. Again disappointed, I thought to give the piece a last try and sent it off a second time to the KM competition in the waning hope that it might be successful—and this time it won taking the first prize of \$5,000!<sup>5</sup> But the saga didn't stop there as the KM committee tried without success to get the piece published in the *Listener*.

There was nothing else for it, I'd have to seek publication overseas, and discovering that the prestigious *London Magazine* had printed one or two New Zealand writers I sent a copy of the story off, and by what seemed return mail received an acceptance from Alan Ross. Eventually, when my copy of the magazine reached me (the October/November 1995 issue) I was extremely pleased to find my name in the short list on the front cover in company with such distinguished writers as Harold Pinter and Roy Fuller, thus moving me to hope that eventually I might meet Ross himself.

According to Alex Hamilton, Alan Ross was an 'all rounder' and among other things a yachtsman, which on account of being one myself I wished I'd known earlier. As Hamilton who once sailed with him said, 'We had trouble with a gale off the Needles.' Ross was seasick but as they shipped water, kept at the pumps all day which he explained as, 'want[ing] to do something . . . he felt too overwhelmed by the situation to try anything else.' I liked the comment because I've been seasick myself and admire the man who persists when things become difficult.

Hamilton's book gave me my second meeting with Ross—even though it was at a distance and Ross died in 2001. The first took place in 1996 when I was visiting the UK, and having been the editor of *Poetry NZ* for three years thought talking with him might help give me ideas on how to improve the magazine and extend its circulation. Ross, in terms of the kind of description the American poet Robert Creeley who used it often

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4 Phoebe Meikle—at the time a well-known publisher and editor of considerable standing.

5 The judge was Ken Arvidson, the Massey University English Professor, who later acknowledged he'd thought the award had been won by C K Stead.

would almost certainly have given him, was ‘a charming and lovely man’. He was as pleasant and as welcoming as I’d found Edwin Thumboo earlier. We met at his office—surprisingly small but well-organised and entirely different from the ill-assorted collection of cardboard boxes I so often worked from—and talked about the magazine he operated and some of the writers he’d published. He told me of *London Magazine’s* openness and his willingness to include work from anywhere, and of course the magazine’s history (it was founded in 1732, and beginning as a political journal evolved into the distinguished literary publication it had now been for so long). I felt flattered to be in the company of a man who had edited the magazine for thirty-five years and established it as a leading publication known throughout the English speaking world.

Ross suggested we have lunch, and a little later we settled into a rather pleasant mid-market restaurant where the discussion turned to poetry and writing and included nothing of Ross’s interesting earlier life and the fragility of the magazine he published—a fragility Hamilton described in his book as the result of ‘an excellent formula for losing money’, and its editor as having ‘schemes . . . that would allow him to lose money on a much grander scale’. Ignorant as I was of these difficulties, I asked Ross what he saw as the best way of increasing a magazine’s circulation and securing its financial position.

‘Variety,’ he told me, ‘make the magazine’s contents as various as possible—print reviews, fiction and non-fiction, essays, articles on art and literature and illustrations as well as poetry. It draws people in because of the variety of material and this results in more copies being sold.’

He was right of course. It helped if subscriptions increased and sales from bookshops decreased—no distribution costs, no percentage mark down for bookshops. I’d tried the same tactics with *Mate* and *Climate* magazines which I edited for 10 years and at their best printed 1500 copies—a considerable print run for New Zealand literary journals of the time. But *Poetry NZ* was a specialist magazine. Its sole interest was poetry and therefore none of these strategies except the subscription approach seemed appropriate. The luncheon, which Ross paid for, went very well with a good chicken salad, a dessert and a bottle of wine to go with it.

Like Thumboo, Ross was interested in what was happening with writers in New Zealand. He knew of and had met people such as C K Stead and he wondered if I would write an article for his magazine on the New Zealand literary scene—which sadly on account of pressure of work, I never got round to. But there were things about Ross that I didn’t learn while we were lunching, things that Hamilton wrote about: his interest in cricket, these seven

years he served in the Royal Navy which included the WWII Murmansk run—the same run New Zealand poet Denis Glover participated in. But we didn't discuss the parallels that we both sailed yachts and had served in naval vessels—a missed opportunity and one I regret.

I liked Ross and Thumboo. Discovering them again at the Tawharanui campsite and looking out over clean white sand towards the sea, the clouds and the sky, brought a peculiar awareness of contrasting realities: the world of people and books, and a sense of isolation, of solitude, and the world's wondrous indifference to human hopes, aspirations and needs. And there was Enright as well, a man inclined to distance himself from people and therefore that much more difficult to understand or get close to—but a poet whose career has interested me and which I've followed. They were professionals committed to the pursuit of literature and writing. Their example, irrespective of personal circumstances—of the costs and difficulties, and the stresses and strains of a literary life—confirms such a life as of worth and value.

## Books and magazines in brief

***Intercolonial***, Stephen Oliver, Puriri Press, 76 pp, \$28;50 plus postage

In 60 pages of loose, unrhymed quatrains, Stephen Oliver has created a poem ambitious in its reach and dizzying in its effect. *Intercolonial* is a personal epic, but being an epic it links the personal to the cosmic. In its different sections Oliver traverses his own childhood in Wellington in the 1950s; the whole geological formation of Wellington and the shipwrecks on its coasts; the history of his great-grandfather Thomas McCormack who came from colonial Australia; the cruelty of old penal Van Diemen's Land and its hangman; the earliest of Maori navigation; and the deep Celtic background that takes in Viking raids upon the Irish coasts. Is this a loose congeries or grab-bag? No, because Oliver has the control to let us see that this huge history leads, as all history does, to the individual. By blood, inheritance, location and family legend, we all of us carry as capacious a history on our backs. The title *Intercolonial* underlines the strong links between 19th century Australia and New Zealand. The poet gives real weight to specific and telling features, whether he is noting that ancient streams still flow under solid Wellington suburbs or describing his great-grandfather's foundry in the heart of grim Calvinist old Dunedin. A short notice does not allow extensive quotation to prove the poet's skill, but there is much that is quotable, whether the conjunction of Lucifer with the 'Big Bang' or the charming vignette of dolphins butting through Wellington harbour: *hear dolphin pods cog and hiss the harbour, / side-slap a wave, sonar click a herd of herring, sound an estuary, / ping-pong playfully off steel-plated hulls, mid-harbour*. An expansive and affecting poem.

***Aspects of Reality***, John O'Connor, Headworx, 80 pp, \$20

Melancholy Romanticism met Surrealism en route to Jim Baxter's hideaway at Jerusalem. They said 'We can't be too serious about things', so they joked. But they joked in a wry, melancholy style. They thought of Napoleon living in Sydney and hanging about the opera house while Josephine worked in a fish-fry. They quoted poetry. They imagined Dr Johnson and Bozzie in a modern café sipping cappuccino. They imagined Osama Bin Laden having a tourist centre named after him and glad-handing the customers. They arsed around the page a bit, with a fragment of a sentence here and a fragment of a sentence there and typography running this way and that way horizontally and vertically. Oh, they were erudite! They could quote and reference the best. But they never let old Gravitas waylay them. For this was only 'aspects' of reality, after all. Flashing, joking aperçus, not sententious statements. And wasn't the first 70 pages called 'Twilight Over the Sanatorium' after all? The broken bits and pieces of civilization, not hanging together. But their tune changed somewhat in the last 10 pages, called 'Blues for Cousin Sylvia', for now Melancholy Romanticism gained the upper hand even as Surrealism still did handstands. And there was real anguish in this lament for not finding meaning, for not finding a 'dominant theme', for not being able to shape the bits and pieces meaningfully. A true and widespread condition, accurately reflected.

***Aue Rona***, Reihana Robinson, Steele Roberts 68 pp, \$25

In Maori mythology the moon takes Rona as his lover. And though this collection of (mainly) short lyrics is not one single narrative poem, the spirit of Rona hangs over it in the form of the maternal principle in nature: the controller of tides, the mother of warriors and lost men, the mourner for destroyed nature. Reihana Robinson writes robustly. Nature here is not always pretty, but if irony enters into poems like 'God of ugly things' (about the weta) it is not for the purpose of deprecating nature. Even more to her credit, the poet has a strong sense of the present, as well as of the distant and mythical past. Rona's descendants are often people deracinated from an indigenous culture and unable to find their way back in. 'Rona's descendants: Raro Taro' is a poem just this side of bitterness in its account of a teenager alienated from ancestral society, more attracted to the bright lights of the big city, and most likely to live off the tattiest scraps from the table of modernity. Satire might hit at Pakeha misconceptions in a squib like 'Treaty', but there is a subsumed satire even in a poem on mythological themes like 'In the beginning was fire'. It is as if the gods of creation myths are wearing jandals and strolling the beaches. They are taken seriously enough to provide a framework for the understanding of the world, but they are not revered with awe. This is a strong collection tasting of salt and purpose.

# Notes on contributors

**Rizwan Akhtar** (Pakistan) is Associate Professor of English at Punjab University. His poetry has been published widely in international reviews, including *PNZ*.

**Raewyn Alexander** (Auckland) is an editor and writer of fiction and poetry whose work has frequently appeared in *PNZ*.

**Madeline Barna** (Canada) is Hungarian by birth and Canadian by choice. Widely published in North American journals, she has a special interest in comparative languages.

**Charles Bernstein** (USA) is a distinguished poet and literary theorist widely known for his contribution to language poetry and semiotics.

**Paula Bohince** (USA) makes her first appearance in *PNZ* in this issue.

**Chris Cantillon** (Wanganui) has appeared previously in *PNZ*.

**Michelle Chote** (Auckland) makes her first appearance in *PNZ* in this issue.

**Jonathan Cweorth** (Dunedin) is a Sydney-born poet, musician and playwright, resident in Dunedin since 2001.

**Maryrose Doull** (Auckland) has been published in *Takahe, Poetry Live* and *PNZ*.

**James Fagan** (Palmerston North) has appeared previously in *PNZ*.

**Alexandra Fraser** (Auckland) has had work appearing in both on-line and print journals, including *PNZ*.

**McArthur Gunter** (USA) is a Maryland poet with a special interest in astrophysics.

**Siobhan Harvey** (Auckland) is an expatriate English poet who teaches creative writing. She was featured poet in *PNZ* #33. Her collection *Lost Relatives* was reviewed in *PNZ* #42. She is the recipient of the 2013 Kathleen Grattan Award for poetry.

**Caolinn Hughes** (Wellington) is undertaking a degree in creative writing at Victoria University of Wellington, and her first collection is nearing publication.

**Ross Jackson** (Australia) has been published in a number of Australian poetry journals and makes his first appearance in *PNZ* in this issue.

**Will Leadbeater** (Auckland) is a former poetry reviewer for the *New Zealand Herald* who has several books of verse to his credit.

**Simon Lewis** (Auckland) is a West Auckland poet, who appears from time to time in *PNZ*.

**Andrew McIntyre** (Hastings), born in Wales, is a field worker in Hawkes Bay. He makes his first appearance in *PNZ* in this issue.

**Robert McLean** (Lyttelton) was featured poet in *PNZ* #40. He has had four volumes of poetry published, his most recent being the long, discursive poem *A Grave Yard by the Sea*.

**Linda Nathaniel** (Australia) is a poet and short-story writer who makes her first *PNZ* appearance in this issue.

**Keith Nunes** (Tauranga) is a former journalist who likes grunge music and has been widely published in New Zealand poetic journals.

**John O'Connor** (Christchurch) is a long-time contributor to *PNZ* who is noted for his expertise in haiku. He has had ten books of verse published. His latest, *Aspects of Reality*, is briefly reviewed in this issue of *PNZ*.

**Vincent O'Sullivan** (Dunedin), Professor Emeritus of English, is widely regarded as one of New Zealand's greatest living poets. His long and distinguished career has

- included editing the *Oxford Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry* and the collected letters and fiction of Katherine Mansfield, writing the biography of John Mulgan, and the publication of many works of prose and poetry. His most recent collection is *Us, then* (VUP).
- Alistair Paterson** ONZM (Auckland) has been *PNZ's* editor since issue 8. A prolific critic as well as a poet, he has had many collections published and is noted for his mentoring of other poets.
- Mark Pirie** (Wellington) is a prominent New Zealand poet, editor and publisher. His work has appeared frequently in *PNZ*, and he contributed a major essay on New Zealand's 'forgotten' literary history to issue #46.
- Kerry Poppell** (Wellington) is a native of Napier who now resides in Ngaio and has contributed to a number of anthologies.
- Richard Reeve** (Otago) is a literary editor, lawyer and conservationist whose doctorate was in poetics and hermeneutics. He has had five collections of poetry published and was featured poet in *PNZ* #41.
- Jeremy Roberts** (Auckland—currently sojourning in Indonesia) is a widely published poet who is particularly concerned with poetry as performance and who has regularly MC-ed Auckland's 'Poetry Live' events.
- David Romanda** lives and works in Kawasaki City, Japan. His poetry has appeared in a number of international reviews.
- L. E. Scott** (Wellington) was born in America and came to New Zealand in the 1970s. He has published many collections.
- Ila Selwyn** (Auckland), originally from Winnipeg, lives in West Auckland. She is a key figure in Auckland's live poetry scene, arranging readings and musical performances.
- Fred Simpson** (Cambridge) is a doctor who was raised in Africa and has long been a general practitioner. His work has appeared previously in *PNZ*.
- Jane Simpson** (Christchurch) teaches literacy in the workplace, writes both words and music for contemporary hymns, has had two collections of poetry published and has appeared before in *PNZ*.
- Barbara Stanley** (Auckland) makes her first appearance in this issue of *PNZ*.
- Charles Thomas** (USA) lives in Tennessee and has had his poetry published in a number of American reviews.
- Denys Trussell** (Auckland) is a distinguished poet, biographer and pianist who has appeared often in *PNZ*. So far, he has had ten collections published.
- Ryan Van Winkle** (USA) is an American poet currently sojourning in Edinburgh who has won prestigious awards for his first collection *Tomorrow, We Will Live Here*.
- Michael Walker** (Auckland) makes his second appearance in *PNZ* in this issue.
- Kirsten Warner** (Auckland) has been widely published in poetry magazines, has edited two anthologies, performs as poet and musician and currently manages the New Zealand Society of Authors.
- Pamela Williamson** (Auckland) makes her second appearance in this issue of *PNZ*.
- Alessio Zanelli** (Italy), resident of Cremona, is a prolific poet widely published in European journals. He writes in both Italian and English, although English is his writing preference.