

Enduring Love

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the University of Canterbury

by Robert McLean

University of Canterbury

2009

CONTENTS

CHURCH HILL, NELSON.....	3
HOMING.....	4
A CREPUSCULE OF RAPAKI	6
UNWRAPPING THE GREASIES	7
REX NUNQUAM MORITUR.....	8
LA VIDA ES SUEÑO	10
NIGHT THOUGHTS.....	11
THE MEMORY OF WATER	12
MR MCLEAN AND THE SPIDER	14
FOR RENATO CURCIO.....	15
WHERE DARKNESS SHINES.....	17
A POSTSCRIPT TO THE DEATH OF VIRGIL.....	18
INSTEAD OF AN ELEGY	29
AUBADE.....	21
TRYPTICH - AFTER GRÜENWALD.....	22
KAIAPOI, ETC	24
DUST AND SHADOW	25
MATHEW 14:25 (SLIGHT RETURN).....	26
L'AMANTE	28
HYMN TO CREATION	29
IT IS HERS,	30
CHILD'S PLAY	31
EPITHALAMIUM FOR DE FACTO COUPLES	32
AN ENVOY TO DEVOTIONS.....	34
WINTERISE	35
RIMBAUD AT THE EMPTY INN.....	37
FACSIMILIE CHRISTI.....	41
ALLEGIANCES REVISITED	43
MEMIORS OF A PIG HUNTING MAN	44
SPRINGTIME IN AMERICA	46
BLACK LOVE.....	47
AT THE SIGN OF THE PACKHORSE I STAND LIKE A TREE AND SING MY SONG OF JOY	48
NOTES	50
ESSAY.....	52

CHURCH HILL, NELSON

Heel follows toe: fifty-two steps.
This is my casual observance –
weekday, itinerant. Ordnance
echoes in here: forging friendships,

building character. Read Chelmer,
Colne, Wairau, Mary Ann Blakemore:
just names and places we endure.
Lying open, Psalm fifty-four:

people to whom God means nothing.
On Sunday, elders will collect
offerings, sing praise songs, earn respect.
The absent are beyond caring –

for now, I'm merely curious.
High windows will admit a light
filtered through lemon and violet –
I'm affected by the stained glass:

less cynical. Almost brand new.
The architect and the martyr
remain my heroes. And yet there
is still a place in here for you.

HOMING

Assiduous in his bower, the wailing owl
Plies his sad song.
JAMES THOMSON, *Winter*

I find it terrible to contemplate
what we no longer know of rural England:
mud, fog, dripping trees, blackness, floods,
mighty rushing winds under doors that don't fit,
damp hassocks, sticking organ keys –
therefore, it's from a distance
I decide to reassemble a calendar year
of bucolic reverie, to ensure that I, a diarist of sorts,
am nimbly engrossed in the routines
of a settlement where the daily newspaper
has to be fetched from the gate and the water supply
depends on the annual ministrations
of the well-inspector –
here, holed up in my ancient house,
I feature as a kind of ghostly registrar,
forever pondering discrepancies
between scenes of old age
and my purportedly native life
of boyhoods more than twice removed.

The biggest change has been the swift
onset of silence –
the fields are attended only twice a year,
songbirds have flown, and the ploughman
leaves the pastures relatively unscathed.
Not all these absences ought to be regretted;
an unexpected charity has come
to characterise the meek cottages,
the hissing gossip, the disembodied hearty laughter,
the persecution of the recent past –
soon, all these will have gone the way
of overgrown greens and a specifiable swarm
of children 'playing' with rabbits in a meadow.
Perhaps the passed possess a sharper eye
for continuity, for what has been invested in
these unshifting stones
that have stood by the wayside
since Redwald and Sutton Hoo –
so I suspect that this twitch on the thread
goes far beyond the Suffolk of my dreams.

Nearby, though probably unknown
to the burgeoning hordes of half-cut younglings,
is the site of the Garden of Eden
(of George Herbert, Clare, and, on occasion, Geoffrey Hill),
now an ageing community winnowed by death,
struggling to find appropriate tools
to ravel this tapestry of human feeling,

in which chipped tombstones and chintzy modern catafalques
stand sentinel side by side.

An amount of repetition
was always inevitable, but it simply hasn't been enough –
not given the halting whiff of formaldehyde
souring the capitol's auction houses,
or the kittens that rollicked in the snow
morphing into squads of incidentally deceiving girls;
maybe all that remains of home
is a solitary parishioner (or parson)
attentively attending to
a vacuum that can only ever take place
when the reality of what shall not occur
has become too great to bear,
as for the hardy handful here –
scattered amongst the mildewed bales
delighted by the unrelenting Jutland wind.

A CREPUSCULE OF RAPAKI

A dry slab of nor'wester flattens
cylinder, cone and cube.

Fluids

shift due to predicted tides,
yet *here* the light feels almost solid:
it's 'beautiful.'

Rapaki seems

utterly different in 30°–
beside my huge irrelevance,
every detail looks concrete,
substantial to our end.

And yet

I cannot see what isn't here,
not since a liquid's vague insistence
has erased the handiwork
of men and dogs.

Elements conspire

(pyrites glinting in honorific
sun and air; muskets bright
and clean; red gabardine frayed on rock):
my hyphenated daughter swims
on and ever on; an emptied can
is deposited onto the beach –
I tuck into my fish and chips,
an ill-disciplined adoptee
pent by volcanic stone.

If truth

be told, we had a lovely day,
but now my family's gone away:
no reclamation – just a picnic.
It's 22° in Rapaki,
and after 7-30.

Neither savage

maker nor some satirist in garlands
of electric light, must I refuse
to see what is no longer here?

UNWRAPPING THE GREASIES

It seems there's 'a knack of multiplication'
on Clifton Hill, 2.5ha
of flowering seedlings, an explosion
in purple, stands of Douglas Firs,

(leukaemia has been ruled-out;
Mr Arafat remains 'in power')
as an unseasonable bout
of BAD weather, a drizzly shower

or two, re-hydrates withered blooms
and is forgotten (on Pitcairn
Island an indecent spectre looms
over nominally Christian

protagonists. I think Foucault
would have had quite a lot to say
about *that* trial. What lay below
has been brought into the light of day,

seems glaringly obvious now.
Politics, it seems, is everywhere)
just in time for section D – the wow
factor of forget-me-nots, a queer

director's prospector cottage
at Dungeness in Kent: Jarman,
diagnosed with Aids, planted sage,
lavender and Californian

poppies adjacent to a Nuclear
power station, flint and flotsam,
honey-scented gorse. He died here,
seven years ago. It looks the same,

his partner has maintained it since
his death. Politics? It begins
and ends with Jarman's words in print
today – 'paradise haunts gardens.'

REX NUNQUAM MORITUR

Let no man comfort him if he chance to weep,
But amplify his grief with bitter words.
MARLOWE, *Edward the Second*: Act V, Scene II

Pucker up and lick your wounds:
we mortal unbelievers
are undistinguished
by our grim naturalism – pre-empted
by the baseborn
royalist minions,
party to recalcitrant outbursts
and petty quarrels,
to sundry deaths enacted by
entirely natural causes,
to a panoply of diffidence,
we are christened with excremental sacrament
and trodden underfoot
(cut to an immaculate death
on the seething point
of a red-hot spit – sniff his fulminating
fundament,
prescribe singular torments,
probe the aesthetic limits of dramaturgy).

We are ensconced on the tragic periphery –
lost in defeat and deposition,
and with the family name MORTIMER and its supposed
etymological root,
de Mortuo Mari;
ENTER, WITH WELSH HOOK,
the mower with his scythe,
an "effective but unobtrusive" concatenation
wherewith England's royal vine shall be pruned
of a "flatterer",
a putrefying branch, an anachronism,
a syllogism of state, courtesy of God
the almighty husbandman
who "shal cut downe the branches" of the vine
"with hookes. . . & cut of the boughs. . .
and in his hand a sharpe sickle. . . And the wine
presse was troden. . . and blood
came out of the wine presse" – O it is time
for the gathering angel to put his pruning hook
to work.

I looked and there was none to help . . .

Let's take a moment to witness
the blood-stained robes of Bozrah –
thus bedizened
as a sacrifice
ascending to the throne of God
and standing center stage with angels
upon the clouds,

he is trodden and pressed; for there are clusters to be cut;
cut, and cast in;
cast in, and trodden on,
and out flows blood and water both.

On a darkened stage, in mire and puddle,
we are deafened by
rhetorical bravura –
a "shepe before her shearer",
with NIPPERS glossed,
the clean-shaved monarch
eschewing the pietism of his sources,
not omitting the mock crowning;
an anti-ritual coronation,
he is forced to drink from Cedron
(a brook outside Gethsemane),
is "up to the knees in water,"
prey to various non-historical scatological torments,
whereby our senses are annoyed
with stench, our sorrow consisting solely
in smelling the ordure and filth
of the Pascal lamb on a spit,
the spit submerged beneath the cross,
a gibbet of execution, the *ne plus ultra*
of human suffering.

MORTIFICACIO CRISTI....

make our bowels melt with compassion
if our hearts be not flint,
with neither form nor beauty,
devise BY ALLE MEANES
to disfigure him
that he might not be known to us –
to admirers of his grisly art,
he rehearses a theatrical strategy of the Vice,
learned in Naples and variously practiced,
to culminate in this: the "braver way". . .

"Who's there?"

Read the "tympanum" as a metaphor,
mounting him on his palfrey,
numb, his mind distempered –
*all my bones shake: I am like a drunken man –
I am poor, and in travails ever from my youth;
and when I was exalted, I was cast down
and troubled –*
now raise the cross and drop it into the mortise;
now that we've skewered the whimpering Ganymede,
know that forever I, alone, am king.

*Observe this scrutiny of the libido dominandi. . .
sweet God. . . receive my soul.*

In his pathetic shadow, so we suffer, too, and die.

LA VIDA ES SUEÑO

Night falls on an unusual scene of public rejoicing.
ALLEN CURNOW, *Survivors*

I zip my pants or wipe my lips – and see
a palm tree has been planted just adjacent
to a Ti kouka, close to where a cabbage
tree was soon after planted next to a palm,
pingao on the fore-dunes a stopgap
erected to protect our native plants
from heavy human traffic, (southern limit)
spinifex, taupata (not local), manuka
(suffers from blight) and steadfast NZ broom,
and, nearby, the ocean’s whispered sibilants
pulverising perpetually, the prevailing
wind erasing ripple-drift and sand-scarp
alike, flattening acclivities, which fall
away indefinitely as far as my
good eye can see:

a ubiquitous dog-
turd is deposited into a plastic bag
with a well-trained flick of the wrist – my world
and its apotheosis co-exist
in such pristine moments, when the push-pull
of waves seems entirely peripheral,
as when I find myself (to be at dead centre)
so let light perpetual shine upon them
when I gingerly dip my little toe
into a rumour of self-mirroring
abyssal in the Marianas and yet
so shallow here, where unsupervised toddlers
wade waist-deep into a substantial part
of 149 million sq
kilometres of surface area,
of which 70.78 %
is water, this being a small part of that,
and more and more each day, hot sunny days
in which the things that are and that are not
are all mixed-up, made brilliantly inscrutable –
or life is a dream and we just walk and talk
and New Brighton sees us differently.

And yet what his eye saw, I cannot say.

NIGHT THOUGHTS

The one moonlight, in the simple-coloured night,
Like a plain poet revolving in his mind
The sameness of his various universe,
Shines on the mere objectiveness of things.
WALLACE STEVENS, *Note on Moonlight*

Tonight the night is young, abandoned and bashful,
a sky's worth of scattered stars glint and glimmer,
not sequins on satin, purple satin, or black;
yet the moon is an encyclical, a crescent
for extensive circulation, sharpest white.
It's dark outside – too dark for Poetry –
but I'm somewhere else, here, behind this window,
looking at the moon and at the stars,
joking perilously with metaphysics,
as if there's no one else to think these thoughts.

It's terribly quiet
(*no opalescent sundries – O such opulence!*) –
a levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind,
an encyclical, a crescent for extensive
circulation, sharpest white: I repeat
myself incessantly. 'The night is young' –
this sentence curls up on my lap and purrs.
I realize that I write like an old man.
I'm getting not exactly where I thought.
And now it's getting cold outside. *Let me in.*

THE MEMORY OF WATER

All that I know of Vilnius
is emerald-green and second-hand:
deceased estates, our family curse,
tarot cards, uncle's prize greyhound.

And prolonged vacations in the sun,
adventures of some kind, begun
and finished in discrete enclaves
or urban convalescence, where haves

and have-nots were equally prone
to charity. When domiciled
amongst the equally unknown,
you hoped for more than just a child:

but alcohol distilled the painful
absence of extended family
into Pop's pot-bellied rage, which I
still can't relate to. And we all

sat cross-legged on the lounge-room
floor and listened to character
assassinations. Grandmother
would tell tall-tales of her 'home',

skip-over the failed first-marriage,
and omit details of the second:
her accent wrapped itself around
each consonant and vowel. A page

in the local rag was watermarked
and torn out. My Dad's car was parked
outside: eavesdropping through the window,
swatting away flies, he couldn't know

what mummy knew: that his exotic
bride carried such weighty baggage
and that he'd never be first pick.
At least he earned a decent wage.

Although the stories that she told us
now ring false, I understand
that needn't make them any less precious.
She'd made her living on a grand

scale – Revolutions, World Wars,
and transmigrations (cued by Stalin
redrawing Baltic maps free-hand) –
so I don't think I could ask for more.

Inconsequential émigrés?

Pigs squealing at the watering-trough,
stiffly beaten cream, flame-scrubbed trees,
and tractor rides: more than enough

for ten year-old boys. Angelic choirs
filled in the blanks: her wedding-gown
was shot-through with grief and the fires
burnt much hotter in Campbelltown

than in Dresden. At least they did
in her. Somewhere in the kitchen
(in the padlocked pantry), she hid
her essentials from the husband siphoned

through the Suez Canal. Her pride
had been deposited in New Zealand,
yet her joy was something she would hide
from those who didn't understand

her codified vernacular.

We discreetly left her to her own
devices and looked on from afar,
disinterested but not disowned:

many blatant mispronunciations,
an air-rifle, and anti-Catholic
contumelies – kicks to the shins
the coup-de-grâce. I would expect

no less from one-eyed Protestants,
but not to such a great extent,
especially if your scapegoat's living
in a garage in Wollongong.

What did I learn on Grandma's knee?

All that and just a wee bit more:

Lithuania was pro-Nazi,
uncle gambled, I'd a score

to square with empty home-brew bottles,
Balts are good at basketball,
an E.U. passport may help travel,
my fortune would be found in opal

mines and garage sales, a warm bath
is a privilege. And that a homeopath
with cataracts could see my future
in the memory of water.

MR MCLEAN AND THE SPIDER

In scarcely thirty years I'm come so far:
to a run-down building on Oxford Terrace.
I pick a space and park my car –
I hope they'll recognise my face.
The wind's nor' westerly,
and certain sane pedestrians can see
the sky for what it is: futility
on stilts – not proud heaven: I think their trick
is not to think. Emergency Psychiatric

Services, who've rented premises
just down the road from a cosmetic surgeon
who demarcates appearances
from timely wear and tear, specialise in
risk assessment: this knife
or that syringe fixates one's quickened life,
and the results may well endure. My wife,
for now, seizes my hand. Whose self-control?
Whose self-respect? – I kid myself I'm Robert Lowell,

that I must be your dire and fugitive
and prodigiously gifted prodigal son.
Still, we're better off than Smart – we live
and die in enlightened times. The sun
seems brighter. And much hotter. My namesake
and I, though, vary, as I always take
my medication and would never fake
psychosis for sedation – a hospital
has come to be a privilege for when we're ill

or otherwise at odds. Poor William Cowper
knew this much at least: to lean on God
is silly, which I know, too – so I help her
up the flight of stairs to where my blood
is nominated as what harms us:
deliberate brain and blood. Dressed in pyjamas
and slippers, our children safe at their Grandma's
house, it's fallen to psychiatry
to score my shuffled blanks. And yes: they've recognised me!

The ant's a dragon in a centaur world
(canto 82) – sense is removed
from where I take Ezra curled
up in a foetal ball, unloved
and unwashed. Natural law
is not reality? My hands feel sore
from writing but neat stanzas may restore
my edge. As when my ribcage is a loom
on which I weave a spider's web in this spinning room.

FOR RENATO CURCIO

We must change the question from “How should we live, whatever the circumstances?” to “Under what circumstances is it possible to live as we should?”

THOMAS NAGEL, *Equality and Partiality*

For a man of your age,
judging from the jpeg
that I found on the web
after googling your name,
you’re still quite good-looking –
the scary beard’s gone, the
once wild hair’s close-cropped. And
that’s a nice turtleneck:
it looks expensive. What’s
next? Cigars and cognac?
At least time has been kind to you.

Granted a public stage,
after abandoning
academia, you
dutifully parsed Marx
and sad Leopardi,
got married (in a Church!),
then performed acts: i.e.
PRAXIS. Ever hopeful,
you struggled to hasten
our realization of
your inevitable future.

Sweet Mara dead, a cage –
like the *Cosa Nostra’s* –
post sabotage, murders,
robberies, kidnappings
(the ‘Years of Lead’) – held you
in. A broadcast trial:
a novel spectacle,
precisely as Debord
had foreseen. On cue, you’d
scowl at the cameras.
TIME printed photos of
you – *Le Brigatista Rosse*.

Closer to home, a sage
(but not seer), journalist,
English professor, and
private/public poet,
Allen Curnow wrote of
your comrades in ‘Moro
Assinato,’ of their
anti-humanism:
just? No – vulgar. And you?
Sentenced, serving, out of
the loop, you weren’t even mentioned.

And, still with verse, who'd 'rage
against the dying of
the light,' when, contra
the Welsh celebrity
whom I quoted, there's no
light, neither dying nor
otherwise, against which
one can rage? Darkness – lack
of light – is what fuelled your
anger. Yet it seems you're
going to go gently. Will you?

Determined to engage
with the 'real world,' the French
intelligentsia
had rallied round Negri –
he was free from guilt; you,
an embarrassment, were
forthrightly abandoned
by all except Foucault –
and Genet. Professor
Negri's star rises – and yours
(golden on red standards)? Let's see:

freed '93; a page
of *Le Monde* featured an
article in which a
respected actress (though
not from Italy: she
was French, too) referred to
you as a 'hero' – the
public was aghast. One
man's freedom fighter may
be a terrorist to
the Other. O...such is wisdom.

A slight attempt to gauge
significance of facts,
I hope that I've sketched a
sympathetic portrait,
not warped by convictions:
a dissociati
writing to his mother
from jail 'I cannot
be but proud.' Dear Wystan
clucked history cannot
help or pardon – yet what
were the other (better) options

for a man of your age?

WHERE DARKNESS SHINES

With raw flesh I feed the eagle
For the last time; he shall taste my blood.
W.H. AUDEN (trans.), *Hjalmar's Death-Song*

My prison cell
was filled with love
I could not feel
and yet spoke of

and understood
(within my mind)
as best I could –
His darkness shined

into my fear
where I found Christ,
our swastika
His shattered cross.

Theology
proved not enough
to satisfy
my lust for life:

a fiancé
helped. Some inmates
would call on me.
I smoked. Most nights

I'd write letters
or papers. At
times I prayed. Worse
was to come, that

much I knew for
certain. Yes: in
the end, horror
justified sin –

His lies caught-up
with me. Alone,
I drained the cup:
His darkness shone,

and Germany
was cold as death
in winter. I
stole my last breath

in Flossenbürg,
whose woods conceal
a bashful God
and Christmas trees.

A POSTSCRIPT TO THE DEATH OF VIRGIL

I capitulate to silence:
 an orectic
pause in the prescient hush, peacefulness
 poised above the brink of caustic
 seas ('steel-blue and light'),
 to bless
a house empty of circumstance,
especially school-age children, wherein night
 and day mingle
into electric now, and all

that has been has passed beyond my
 ear-splitting life,
is resurrected beneath the callous
 sun of Brundisium, mid-wife
 to Empire and Shoah,
 the place
where the poet Virgil will die
at the hand of Hermann Broch below a
 firmament of
adjectives, quickened by his love

of words, as fleets of thoughts patrol
 my mind, Cosmos
and no-thing intertwined, just as dying
 circles and turns, just as Logos
 is not yet close to hand:
 you sing
one last time of the Dichter's soul,
of WATER, FIRE, EARTH and AIR; we withstand
 His Word, and each
of us is silenced beyond speech,

speechless in the lamp-lit cloister
 of my lounge, worlds
beyond technique and slaughter. As I turn
my eyes from the phosphoric words
 that have kept me from sleep,
 that burn
dry my retinas, I hear her
voice from the bedroom, a promise I keep
 despite the facts –
The Death of Virgil and syntax.

INSTEAD OF AN ELEGY

'Elizabeth
holds a candle
for our Lady' –

the virgin birth,
her public scandal
(an adopted baby):

all accepted with
a knowing smile,
the just-maybe

of vested belief.
Her friends all
mock her: they say

hers is a faith
that is simply cruel
and ever distant. She

knows her path
is hard, and stays cheerful
in her poverty,

loyal when her strength
is lost and the thrill
has gone. So they obey

on her behalf,
and solemnly wheel
her every Sunday

to church: 'New Life':
an evangelical
handclap matinee.

Christ's de facto wife
shakes a miracle
from her rosary.

A divulgent breath,
more time to spend with all
the pangs and pains a day

brings. Left alone with
the cats, a week to fill –
home-help might stay

for an extra half
hour, since her commode is full,
her dishes just shy

of disaster. They laugh
at her: a teetotal
spinster, an old lady

barely past her sixtieth
birthday. And still,
even if from duty,

they visit, her strength
restored for a while
in prayers they pray,

the words of strangers. A life
well-lived: in gospel,
lapse and memory,

Elizabeth
holds a candle
for our Lady.

AUBADE

I'm just shy of thirty-five, still unemployed,
a beneficiary of the state
with time enough to contemplate the void
insinuated by these shadows. Late
to rise (like yesterday), I doze in bed,
the thought of dying and of being dead
amusing me. Uninterrupted by
the shriek of an alarm, my reverie
 does not mortify me –
no, I am sane enough to *want* to die.

It's not that I'm enthralled with death: a blank
unending finitude's innocuous
at worst. Half-heartedly, I start to wank,
summon imaginary friends because
there's nothing else to do except relax
and wait for this conglomerate of facts
to plot its own discretionary way
towards an end. Not terrible but true,
 there's nothing else to do
except repeat myself, somehow delay

what seems inevitable. My suicide
would disappoint or implicate both friends
and family, and yet it would provide
a sense of principle. My life depends
on other poets such as Phillip Larkin
and Thom Gunn, dead poets, but it's still dark in
my bedroom, still too dark to read. I lie
beneath my blankets, staring at the ceiling,
 half-awake and feeling
uneasy. My problem is I don't know why.

On Leinster Road, costly lease-held SUVs
begin to muscle up the street. Native birds
descant nonsense in blossom laden trees.
Naked from the waist down, I play with words
for entertainment's sake, toy with ideas
that somehow function to allay my fears
of succumbing to the well-versed tedium
each morning brings. In the artificial dark
 I listen to some Bach,
the St Mathew Passion. Eased by valium,

neither His life nor death concern me much
at all. The facts are plain. My room takes shape
and everything is as it was. I touch
familiar things. There's nothing to escape.
A present world must be enough for me,
its intricate brocade, its absurdity.
At half-past twelve I dress and go outside –
such emptiness and want. A whitish sun
 illuminates what's done
today. Last night we prayed. No one replied.

TRIPTYCH – AFTER GRÜNEWALD

1

A modernist until the end, you'd wake and cough
up lungfuls of art. In thick impasto, your love

of the Old Masters, such early Renaissance
devotees of egg-yolk and oil as Conrad Witz

and an anonymous Pathetic who painted
Islamic panels in France, had been translated

literally – monumental isolation
of figures in a landscape, as in the Avignon

Pieta; Witz's tubular bells; rich drapery
hanging heavily on a martyr. How far away

were those queer demons with which Heironymous Bosch
populated his nightmare-world? No doubt too gauche

for your taste. I'm sure when it came time for you to go,
you saw hovering blue oblongs. Death was a Rothko.

2

The 3rd Vienna School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern,)
so-called serialism, escaped you: a 12-tone

row, admitting fixed-pitch inversions and retrograde
variations, was almost pure sound. When played

on a violin, fingers and pig-gut somehow
squeezed emotion from mathematics. A piano

could maintain compositional integrity
despite an intervening human factor. We

both enjoyed Messian. Transcriptions of bird-song
and gargantuan symphonies couldn't prolong

your suffering. Palliative care, like the morphine
circling through your body via the one good vein

left to plumb, proved a superior medicine
to either *Wozzeck* or an intergalactic hymn.

Auden ticked-off those who read the Bible for its prose,
but that never bothered you. Glasses perched on your nose,

you would scan sacred texts for pleasure's sake, propped-up
with pillows in your gurney bed. A plastic cup

of iced water kept close to hand, Saint Mathew's gospel
(the King James Version) brought comfort when you felt ill.

To a point. The careful weighting of each word and phrase
was sufficient to allay questions of what was

to come hereafter. *Letters and Papers from Prison*,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer's testament to a hard-won

or costly grace, came later – secular funerals,
you explained, made you feel sick. You wanted candles,

prayer, Blake's *Jerusalem*. We talked till late that night.
In the morning you were crowned with thistles of light.

KAIAPOI, ETC

It had remained an apostolic town –
even after your death. Every
day it was windy. Every day
it would rain. Every fucking day.

Opposed to us, you were a wall.
We wept. We went out to find you.
It was useless. Nothing remained:
only the spaces left between us.

You had become an empty space.
Once you had gone, we reappraised you.
We burnt your church down to the ground.
The sky caught fire. *The sky caught fire.*

Bells rang out. We tore off all
our clothes. We danced down empty streets.
We fucked complete strangers. And in
the morning we went back to work.

DUST AND SHADOW

This life involves the pain
of solitude and loss.
Untenanted, His cross
does little to explain

or settle the dispute
between flesh and Word,
for Nothing shall be heard
or spoken. God is mute,

yet the Presbyterians
voted two to one
that His will be done.
Now gays and lesbians

(along with the de facto)
cannot be ordained
despite being contained
within His body – no

one save deferential straights
and nice monadic queers
can address our common fears
and unbolt Heaven's gates.

Still, apostates won't care about
a dumb decision of
the General Assembly: love
will never negate doubt,

nor uninformed opinion
impress itself upon
their Jesus who has gone
away. His dominion

trills on the blended note
of the ten-thousand things,
the whine of beating wings,
the message that He wrote

in the dust with His finger.
Beside the leafless tree
in the empty country
is where the homeless linger

awaiting His return –
these shadows cast behind
will find no peace of mind
until our masters learn

that this world they're leasing
is where angels once were.
Lest our distinctions blur,
let's pray: pray without ceasing.

MATHEW 14:25 (SLIGHT RETURN)

Snow is a strange white word.

ISAAC ROSENBERG, *On Receiving News of the Word*

You felt the cold,
your kidneys ached –
I feel it, too,
on days like this

(a Saturday
in early June),
I feel it in
my teeth and bones.

Dunsandel's borne
the full brunt of
a polar blast;
I walk across

the frozen ground,
and take the time
I need to take –
I'm blinded by

the light at first,
but soon my eyes
betray the fact
I'm riveted:

now everything
is black and white,
in stark relief,
not comforting

at all, at least
it's not to me.
I feel an urge
(the other one),

so, staving off
the southerly,
I try to light
a cigarette –

there is a spark,
though not a flame,
not in this wind.
A devotee

of 'Untouched World',
this chilly place
my element
(so I've been told),

yet in its midst
I'm sad to say
I only have
one word for it –

it looks so pure
from far away,
but get up close
and you will see

it's not at all
like that. I muse
on Pasternak
(or David Lean?) –

his frosted poems,
Zhivago's ones
penned in the throat
of winter, when

the Soviet
authorities
reduced his world
to playing parts –

my private parts
are shrunken. *Life*
is not a stroll
across a field;

eternity
is here-and-now:
I've almost had
enough of this,

I've seen and read
almost too much.
The sun is out...
where to now? Ann,

our love is this –
it's melting in
these footprints I
must leave behind.

L'AMANTE

I remember well those winter nights
spent drinking cheap Italian red
and smoking Dunhill cigarettes
till the room spun. Dizzy, we fled
the scene for the south after a few
weeks, you and I or me and you.

We occupied a penthouse room
on the third floor of a hotel
off the main drag – and knocked back dram
after dram. Lost lambs, we fell
in love, each with the other. Dressed
in black (and thin!), I was impressed

by heart-felt perspicacity,
exotic looks, the poise with which
you'd do your hair. Too soon the city
that shines would shadow us, the beach
at St Kilda and the Octagon
imaginary. Where we had gone

would be our home within 3 years.
Of course, we didn't know that then,
and much else too my heart avers.
Of course, I knew that I liked men –
somewhat like you. And even so,
how much can a man truly know

about himself? I knew that I
had felt a feeling known as love,
and till then I'd not questioned my
priorities – I'm not above
a sway of hips, a 'woman's wiles':
a Scorpio's sting sweetening smiles

that flushed our faces. Love endures
beyond what's logical, despite
a juncture of 1200 days,
despite my healthy appetite
for jpegs of the male nude.
There was no fight; there was no feud;

two orbits ceased to synchronize
around a blazing common sun,
our source of strength: please realize
I don't believe what's done is done –
I haven't ceased to miss you yet;
you're someone whom I can't forget.

HYMN TO CREATION

Drawn taut across Lake Ellesmere,
the stiffened air begins to stir –
inverse of Pentecostal fire,
a frigid chill on matted fur
and naked skin. Akaroa,
a sixty-five kilometre
drive to dolphin-patrolled harbour
and cafes (an hour by car),
is worlds away from where we are:
white-knuckled hills dulled by a blur
of cross-hatched cloud; flattened vista
doubled in feathering water;
sand in my shoes; red-hennaed hair.
I scrape my soles on a tyre,
feel something else stir. I hold her
close. Mountains move. Mud spawns its prayer.

IT IS HERS,

such Delft fragility,
that of
ground bones sifted:

but even so, I've twice
been gifted
her little voice –

she speaks not of what I lack,

but for my betterment,
to where I am

a fraction
purified,
established as a fact

beyond dispute,
yet delicate –

she concedes
these graceful measures

where something shines,

and I can see
that nothing is as precious,

not to me,

as porcelain.

This is my kind of miracle,

a little blue child
of fire
and bone,

for what is ours
was made
in what is hers alone,

and somewhere
in her little voice

the two of us
may start again –

as porcelain.

CHILD'S PLAY

His is an abrupt temperament – will you survive
your father's 'primitive renewing fury';
play dead; be patient, or, injured and brave,
be a silent witness to his injury?

Man's common nature is something to fear
and detest. Girl, you have become a gargoyle
squatting on a porcelain plinth; he is near
and close to hand to discredit and despoil

your child-self, but what liberties he stoops to take
from you we will judiciously give back:
our faces register the requisite shock –
who'll speak for those for whom no one will speak?

EPITHALAMIUM FOR DE FACTO COUPLES

What is it we celebrate? That we are together in distance and nearness. That we have somehow moved a specifiable distance from the original. Here we are gathered together, we two, to remain unknown until this day. A most awaited arrives, yet no other remains more open to surprise. We dig, excavate and erase ceaselessly the lines of faces: unending variations, sometimes blank multiplication of favourite passages.

In the distance: nothing but the uncertain. And I reach, whenever possible, some kind of balance, to altogether offer a heart to the whole, at its most painful point. In the distance: both of us, still uncertain. Far away inside, always moving with the landmarks and props, as if by chance: with whatever and whomever, countless and nondescript.

We sit rigid with silence. I am bathed in some kind of light. You are awake - yourself fluid among fluids, in the swelling brain of a dreaming child, committed to endure the disquieting final approach to some kind of peace, or to a new creation, or to end in an explosion.

New canvasses superimpose us onto the memories of flags and maritime horizons. I stand against the vertical lines of buildings. She lies along the horizontal lines of land. We are mixed and we are added to the rhythmical modulations of the sea. We are mixed into flashes of electricity and into the dissonance of modern music. We wake open to the estuary, to the passage of our breath, to the patterned rest of our heartbeat.

Here, where you sometimes read until late at night, with the hum of the fridge in your ears, quietly listening to waves and voices, the night draws new curtains and tells you in its own enigmatic way the story of my day. Strangely enough, this night work proves itself welcoming of many more colours. At present, it aims at extracting from a deep black a new awareness of the light that will come and lodge itself at the centre of tomorrow.

Some evenings, the sky overlooking the city is blue. At other times, like now, it is almost black, when, safe inside, we turn on the lights, and watch moths nuzzle and fizz against the naked bulb swinging from the ceiling. We are superimposed onto the whitewashed walls.

However suspicious they may be of our chromatic scales and irregular geometry, new friends still remain faithful to what makes up the essential axis of our faith: the stippling and modulation of what they themselves call 'they/their/them.' Both variation and repetition, our living is a rhythm, less impulsive than restrained, but relentlessly reproducing a sense of likeness for whatever difference it may bring.

Having become a space of indefinite modulations, living cannot but exist in the serialised mode, from day to day and week to week, periodical, each moment calling others one after the other to follow further and displace along a few degrees such a slow and laboured work.

The lover in my bed recalls himself with humour, as a technician of the superficial, less prone than he usually is to research that which makes him notorious in his own terms. He is more than willing to lay in his turn on the invisible surface that loving becomes when pressurised on the millimetre, when it holds in its net the memory of her eye that has come there to dwell through infiltration or osmosis.

At length his work becomes an anathema: a way to project visually the breath in a time when it hiccoughs and the eye is shortsighted. Towards the surrounding reality, the lover becomes an instrument. He erects himself as a servant of the invisible, which he carefully watches with undiminished concern. In the very time when he takes the measurements of the cadastre, he applies to giving some shape to this instinct of heaven in us both to he who is lacking it, or to he who is ceaselessly consumed by it.

A bias towards repetition and variation entails some idea of futurity. Every touch is singular. Every gesture is a lyrical fragment of this complex matter that is living. Every moment is familiar. The synthesis should hold together; it should impose itself as a coherent whole and remain alive in every single part. Like the world, she is a matter of details.

From the dampness of the bed I get up so as to free light from the gangue of darkness or indifference that confines it. She only wishes to free light through the good use of darkness. She opens a new path towards her own genesis, and alters the very gesture and the concern through which my loving proceeds.

In its own way does it become some kind of loving: or rather a pre-loving and a foreshadowing since those kinds of signs or gestures it gathers tell no stories, issue no knowledge, but rather portray the invention and learning of a specific and private language.

We silently find our own bearings towards a mute discourse, the watcher's eye that is meant to take over that other discourse of a silent look which was the very end of togetherness: the opening of a similar estuary or of the same fortune for the eye. And this is what we celebrate.

AN ENVOY TO DEVOTIONS

With all lost and nothing to prove
That even nothing can live through love.
LAURA (RIDING) JACKSON, *World's End*

A half empty flat. An evening sky blackens
and lightning veins it. A street is strewn with leaves
stripped from stands of poplar trees. My mind slackens
into a stupor – part of me still believes

that there is more to life than what we see,
or taste, or hear, or touch, or smell; that I
am a participant in reality
that supersedes our senses. You did try

to prove my enterprise of mind was vain;
must I admit that all was as it seems?
I know unprompted questions can't explain
corrupted laws, false morals, and falser dreams

that seemed so real, ideas provoking strife
by pandering to that connotative word,
love, and yet it's more or less a fact of life,
how things must be. To you, I seemed absurd

and almost unremembering. Awake,
I close my eyes: I hear the wind outside
my door, the rain upon my roof. I take
no hope nor consolation in my pride

nor in the fact such simple scenes amaze.
With nothing else to do, I drive to where
the Port Hills dominate us in a haze
of smog, diminished waters, and headlights' glare,

to rise so I might find perspective on
the prospect where our life took place. What do
I see? All I can see's the fact you've gone
for me – and so I leave your life for you.

WINTERISE

i.m. MJH

A certain sense of happiness,
of individuated light
and air. Limbic premonitions
scuttled the facts: *who knows the score,*
or, at least: who wanted to know.

And yet the tone was *usually*
affirmative: the enemy
remained acoustic ignorance,
(of either 6 or 12 steel strings)
preserved in backlit vestiges

and vestibules, where you expired
as snow glistened white within black
branches, and your scoured veins fed
intravenous missals, larynx
clenched into a supersonic

fist ill-suited to modern life.
His water was artesian. Your
fount was not hygienic. Men cry,
tributes flow: a little bit of
this, a little bit of that. Just

a little bit of noise: squeal
and squall in the autumn. Fire-off
short bursts of pure energy
until utter exhaustion (please
don't expect me to function as

dynamo or diesel, volt or
fuse etcetera: I am a
dimension of not stillness, no:
irrepressible momentum!)
that ink can never quite blot out,

nor feedback entirely expunge.
I was, at that time, just like you:
painfully shy. And the week passed
rapidly into a rattle.
When we left, you'd already gone

far away from discourteous
maidens who wept a dank fresco
in your honour (of a mermaid)
onto (I think) the south-facing
varsity wall. What remains is

an unrequited electric
energy crackling in thin air,
robustness and humour, flesh warmed-
through by brown buckram leather, blue
flames doused-down with ethanol,

polyrhythmic monotony
cribbed from eclectic pioneers.
We (the two of us) would not have
prospered for so long without them:
photos, paintings, etchings, and bits

and bytes spinning, laser-guided
contumelies, fluvial and/
or fiscal ebb-and-flow (as the
author of *A Love Supreme* knew
all too well towards the end: split-

reed harmonics that whispered or
screamed). What had been deemed sufficient
did not suffice: an invasive
procedure; a terrible bout
of influenza (22

million(s) (plus one more)). I have had
only a casual acquaintance
with the facts, but it seemed you were
the definite article, co-
conspirator of flat-screen pop

projections in grainy b/
w, a cellophane-wrapped sceptic
howling for all he was worth. And
the noise engulfed part of your mind
in a salty kind of darkness,

in absent light – a shadow raw
and indecorous, being in
a sense consequential to this
other darkness that now surrounds
us and encroaches and throws into

stark relief luminous spindles
of protein seen in silhouette.
Despite our lack of expertise,
(despite our love) ‘a great matter
has gone out of the universe.’

RIMBAUD AT THE EMPTY INN

1

At last: to lose himself – that's why he's here:
he hopes his skin will darken by this sun;
he longs for inattention – he prefers
what's curious to love. The mob's immune.

No one is to blame for his complexion –
his sunburnt face: his sun-scarred portmanteau:
his lack of missionary zeal: no one
is at fault. Opened, stopped, hypnotic blue:

his feverish eyes latch onto passers-by,
each man a reoccurrence of the last.
The sea insists that in the customs shed

the wanted paperwork get done. Today,
good names mean little. That's all in the past:
shitting ink for books unwritten. And unread.

2

From chansons to gunnysacks of coffee beans.
From *Les Illuminations* to re-flogging
obsolete rifles and more modern guns
to balding desperados. He dined with King

Menelik in Ethiopia, then, having kept
a hot black mistress, left his small estate
to steadfast Djami, whom he may have slept
with, too, and yet who didn't hesitate

to tender his goodbyes behind closed doors.
Time trafficking in uncertain precision,
precise things otherwise – closed in his fist,

baroque excess and dimmed self-satisfaction:
pipe-dreams of marital bliss and civil wars,
of appetites and visions to resist.

3

Grey-haired, loose-limbed, a sort of hooligan
transformed into a type of stumbling wreck,
he heads a thousand-camel caravan
inland from the Red Sea (a verified fact),

avoiding thieves, with whom he finds no fault:
making his living "stupid and stupefying."
To be illuminatingly plain: he'd assault
the senses with brute necessity, stifling

dull imperial urges. His devotee,
a loyal body-servant outlasting eight
years, proved deficient grist to his dark mill,

to the perplexing port of memory,
to Aden. Yet the 'blacks' – Djibouti, Labutat,
Makonnen – bent their backs to whim or will.

4

Legends manufacture facts: a mixture
of pig-headed pride and flatulent rage,
talents unearthed to burn on a bonfire
along with yellowed manuscripts. To verge

on genius, to teeter on the brink
of total absolution: only anger
changes us. He didn't wash. He stank
contemptibly. An amputee (since cancer

had its way with him) no other way
was needed. 37. Only. Did temperance
get the best of him? His slipknot halo

still asphyxiates. A heavy price to pay:
a lead-lined coffin and no audience.
O such terrible thunder: *Odi et Amo*.

5

If taken as you're found (intense, vain, bitter
and deeply human; arrant and absolutely
careworn; lent vision just to look at her:
Africa as seen by an indecent eye

that pierces skin yet rouses no suspicion;
the faint but constant lavender; the black
preserves; your old self ageless), you belong
with us. A capitalist unsympathetic

to your vain career, I hear the sound
of voices in song and know I am myself
singing while I wonder what our home
means to us now. Where I cry, where you laughed,

all night has gone into morning, as one
might realize the dying of the sun.

6

A mercantile wizard; a passionate
goods-trader; a devotee of commerce;
an honest business man; an expatriate
with knowledge of affairs back home – what's worse,

you had attained, just by ending your journey,
a kind of luminous ordinariness.
Your circuit of friends becomes a company
of strangers, who must remain our witnesses.

At last we have become somebody else:
a much more pressing problem, since we left
in such a rush your century of Hell,

its urbane aperçus and countless years
to waste. Now property's no longer theft.
I see the passing years have served you well.

7

Shipwrecked there with us, where we were making
of you what we chose to make, you deserved
all that you got: the terror of dogs, and aching
to be exited at once. Once lime-preserved

in spiky shells, you've donned a tribal mask.
Saturnine, so far as we knew you:
most cordially ours, our preferred hard task-
master, protector of possessions new

and used, thus worthy of your reputation,
as when excavations warn us of our
forthcoming wars. By morning, you are gone,
as is your custom. In the early hours,

when unattended by blind circumstance,
you plot your distance from our pride of place.

8

In the flush and tremor of beginning,
everything gets badly overdone: *Lord, we
need fresh-minted francs; new songs to sing;
brilliant re-descriptions; fresh ministries*

*bristling with more-than-necessary laws
expounded to define deliciousness! –*
it's likely that you seem ambiguous
because we lack your taste. Amid our kindness,

dereliction: you made the past secure,
locked in long-standing ruinousness of nerve
within the human. You will have been the future
perfect – informalities preserve

the dead. But they are only passing through.
Dear boy, I only have eyes for you.

Et tu?

FACSIMILIE CHRISTI,

I testify to
your fiercely confiscatory impulse,
to your unexpected

concatenation
of conceit, and to all clowning sonorous
and stately; succinct

yet painstaking notes
detailing revisions, corrections, variants,
and surfeits in sin –

full-throated sublime
against the enshrinement of the dry-mouthed
quotidian. No more

petulant whining
of gears and wheels; rather, a single
multifoliate

image, a petalled
word, yet of a wide-world in transit, to
clasp and conjoin once

irreconcilable
strands of life, while signifying common
impasses, even

while articulating
a voice radiantly affirmative,
rediscovering

the true vastness of
the world, astonishing oneself along
the way, confronting

modes of expression
fully commensurate with incandescent
approximations,

between solemn discourse
and subway chat, the tertium quid upon which
analogy relies.

It depends upon
a privileged point of view, but it is not
supposed to define

with apodictic
assurance an unremitting truth in
the thing it evokes –

obliquely, it will
disclose and elicit public states of
feeling, a queer virtue

most often felt when
we first fall deeply in love, a profoundly
meaningful musical

order underlying
our being, abolishing coincidence –
vatic antics invoking

the Pythagorean
dance of a shipboard orchestra, the bold
reverie of song,

poor and sultry
in the frothy wake of sweaty bodies.
Yet you were only

ever an ostensive
Olympian: a few stray vulvas lurked
in the leanest shadows,

cast by bygone brides
or Carmelites, and for your sake such strange
and effulgent trappings

they assumed. Hart, yours was
to be the innocence of the prophetic,
a hammer tooled to crack

liberty's bell,
as freedom and foresight consummated
their unfortunate

union, dying too
soon, as did you, almost unapologetic
but an utter disgrace.

ALLEGIANCES REVISITED

A communist with writer's block?
or just due reticence to pose in verse
what must be tendered in the stock
and trade of journalism? Terse
yet deeply-felt, precocious, few
from which to choose: some kind of new,

his vintage doled-out in a measure
imported from the British Isles,
a handful took astringent pleasure
from his endeavors, but remaindered piles
of unread chapbooks ('printed matter')
fluttered into the Waitemata

Harbor. He penned lines due to Christ,
Judas Iscariot, and the lot
of the Kiwi male. His next books, priced
affordably, did sell, just not
in great quantities. He was done
and dusted around '41,

and would subsequently drift
from job to job, write a few plays –
a courageous man who lost his gift
and urgently saw out his days.
George Oppen made a similar
decision, but left the door ajar:

except for some occasional
stuff, which didn't add too much to
his slim oeuvre, Mason heeded the call
of the working man and others whom
we'd marginalized. A Robert Burns
fellowship to one who spurns

the Word? No doubt! A sole exception:
a sonnet on General MacArthur.
By then, he'd altered the complexion
of New Zealand's fledgling scene. No other
hand to play, he hinted how
with humble toil, here-and-now,

poetry can 'make it real',
though most things matter more than verse,
no matter what some people feel.
Our situation's gotten worse
with passing time. Allegiances
now matter even more than his.

MEMOIRS OF A PIG HUNTING MAN

1

A sound, somebody breathing, seeps clean through a whitewashed wall. A thin lattice of bones enounces the elision of passing years, constricting the sum total of long held divisions. Each breath flakes into stammers of ice, tonsils dowsed with alcohol: slate-settled, heart and lungs haltingly shudder. He assumes the crash position and is blown face down.

2

Lamb-shanks and cringe-worthy effluence: his scrotum aches uncomfortably. Cue flashes of light, canvas tarps, flayed flax, pink skin and de-flowerings. An ounce or so of gold passes through his hands. An unlatched door. Mismatched socks. On bent knees. Having been dragged across a cobbled russet of stone, he proudly wears the bruises on his shins.

3

An iris flecked (think cornstalks and topaz). Floodlights then shotguns and then dilated pupils. Bent rules hasten fractured wrists and broken hearts. His excesses augmented her loneliness. His shadow has been blent into her shadow. Flat pints are drunk on terraced lawns. Therefore, he smoulders: flecks of rust scattered in fields of corn.

4

Bill and Byrne were before his time. He sprang fully formed from the riverhead, springing naked from its gaping mouth. He gave his heart to the pigs, only to develop an inexplicable and exclusive interest in ornithology. Even so, he and she still moved from violence to partnership, though violence remained and predominates. He alliterates her circumstance.

5

He is hard at work: hard at work on Sunday morning. A hawk or handsaw buzzes – a smell of burnt toast and coffee distempers the sweet stench of dung. It all comes rushing back to him: merciless gibes of boys; quinine barbs of girls. Laughter and self-pity commingling into another sticky afternoon spent in solitude. Another afternoon spent hand over fist.

6

The mandatory pub-brawl: bare-knuckled furious, he doles out correction, overturns usurper's tables, stamps through the brown glass littering the floor, a skeptic dragged over hot-coals – a reflection of his trials. Again, cue scandal, public outcry, feigned shock, a blown whistle, a split pea rattling against polished metal.

7

A citrus blossom – first-fruit of an orchard's worth of lemon trees. He walked the lavender walk, plodding up hill in half-light and persistent rain. Release the safety – aim and fire. The pig fell in his tracks. Needles prick the back of his tonsured nonce. No more teasing. Aim. Squeeze. Click. Squeeze again. Don't give up. You Haven't Lived Unless You've Been Hunted At Night.

8

And on and on and on he goes: over hills, over plains. . .the knags tell tales of bullyrag blood, cerate, and sap – winter resumes its watch. His politics are inherited: he proffers such kernels as ‘empty our prisons’ so as we might ‘accommodate instead our bleating stock.’ But ensure ruminants are thoroughly masticated; facts are well and truly mulled over.

9

A spore case rattles, a sabre refitted. The sky splits into shining: above us only stars, as when she succumbed to his advances. He is a Scapegrace. He is a Deadeye. An avid reader and writer of sonnets. Her buds will bloom into a slick mofetta. Ragouts cloy his knotted hunger; surf-sound rises into a pitch of wake. Heavy odours weigh stale – he is spun into silence.

10

In an almost empty room in a provincial backwater he lapsed into coherence. He remembers it, as always, as it was at night: doors open to the breathless night, pitch-black skies hanging motionless in thickened autumn air, spent wax of two candles dripping onto the floor – sheep bells disturbed his reading.

11

Re-educated in popular Classics, he was exchanged for the fierce currency of the gospels. He proved to be a difficult pupil: sucking down boiled sweets and whiskey sours, salivating over raw kumara and steamed hogget. He peels back folds of belly-flap and promptly vomits in a rose garden. Old women, wise and wrinkled, offer him a cigarette.

12

More green tea and cigarettes: curtains and a bath are drawn – prodigal to the last, a halo of dirt left in his wake: spendthrift of humour, dizziness takes hold of him: sodden clouds flash electric ribbons; the sky rubbed raw – yellow and tasteless: sun-dried straw.

13

And in the end it ends with Mother: all arched back and compromise. In the end all men are the same: haunted to the last by female forms. Remember: it was all for love – all she did, she did for love.

SPRINGTIME IN AMERICA

Then, in the springtime, fields of flowers
began to reappear – yellow poppies
blanketed the steep upper slopes
that had been covered by chemise,
and, looking south before
the rain, there, along the fire line,

milk thistles had re-established
themselves in startling time –
once more rattlesnakes rattled, voles
and rabbit runways turned
and twisted between dense stands
of armoured spines:
although organic, they'd refused to burn.

You said you'd seen it all before.

Still, we sat
and watched cool evening light
floating just above the ridge –
thin plumes of pink smoke drifted to the west
as the sun began to flag
behind the hills –
thick blue smoke from distant fires
scarcely touched upon the sky and water.

BLACK LOVE

Now light dies
and darkness
masks my face,

a blind thing
shadowing
us too long.

What happens
to words when
unspoken?

They die. Light
dies, each soft
breath a gift

for His work.
He shall speak
as I speak

and sing as
I sing. Praise
the dark stars,

for they have
no need of
your black love.

**AT THE SIGN OF THE PACKHORSE
I STAND LIKE A TREE
AND SING MY SONG OF JOY**

You have said you will not grant us any thing;
For we have nothing else to ask, but that
Which you deny already; yet we will ask –
SHAKESPEARE, *Coriolanus*: Act V, Scene III

Almost unnoticed (as legend has it)
Ngai Tahu lent a name to this place,
O-kete-upoko, (for non-speakers
"place of the baskets of heads"),
to an outcrop peppered with decapitated dead
until tussock and tea-tree
scrub reoccupied the headlands,
lacebark, ribbonwood and kowhai,
broadleaf and horopito up above
what has been lost to fire
(where necessary, what can be
has been judiciously replanted),
saxatile epiphytes clinging for dear life
to naturally indifferent hosts

such as Poor Harry Ell,
who ghosts our walks on afternoons,
an eidolon lurking in manicured
undergrowth, a public-spirited man
and a lover of this
and every other nature,
who cut short a career in politics
to devote his life to pursuing a dream,
laying firm foundations
wreathed with an "ornate
baronial late-gothic,"
an anachronism or incidental error,
less frequently frequented now,
given that there is "no country upon earth
with a more rugged and barren
aspect than this doth,"
an opinion shared in letter and spirit
by the incumbent populace

for whom, on August 2nd, 1838, Jean Langlois,
commander of the "Cachalot",
a whaling ship, purchased what he believed
to be the entire Peninsula
for goods worth in the region of 1000 francs,
signed a "deed of purchase"
and sailed home to France
to begin settlement proceedings,
his countrymen cooped in cramped confines
en route to a "new land"
only to be stymied by the now
inestimable Captain William Hobson
and his haphazard Leviathan,
oily tresses and Lilliputian coat of armour,
beaten to the punch by
a little less than two months,
deposited where silvered braids
are clotted with plastic,
bald patches combed-over
with regimental stands of pine,
albeit scurfy and scuffed-up,

Akaroa being somewhere in the distance
as a soft signature skyline provides
the scenic backdrop for the city,
its spires snagged in sheets of smog,
public and private reserves running
in *almost* a continuous line
from Godley Head to Coopers Knob,
Quail Island squatting foursquare
in the foreground of my field of vision,
where a skittish schnauzer tugs at the leash
of its sciatica-ridden mistress,
unsteady on her swollen feet,
stirring sympathy for the overlord
for whom this place hums
with provisional beauty or provincial history,

if one is prepared to closely examine
the limits of consolation
which out-strip the sum total of its parts
(GOD being commensurate
with an absolute circumference),
and, of course, blood will flow every now and then
to prove it, given that what surrounds
this vantage point is littered
with landmarks and collateral,
scaffolds and picnic-spots,
though soon, in turn, these associations
must give ground
to Hall's totara and broadleaf,
to other names and places,
each little more than a hint of what will be –
but never mind all that: the view
is spectacular, bordering on sublime,
and as light glances across these hills
I realise at last that now is the time
for us to close this book. And open our eyes.

NOTES

REX NUNQUAM MORITUR. If translated as “The King never dies,” this legalism calls into question the notion of regicide. And, in effect, there can be no interregnum. Rene Girard’s theory of the Scapegoat, if extended as I have done to a homosexual Regent, informs my reading – who else could be more convenient source of blood-letting for a privileged and constant mob? According to Isaiah 63:1-6, the Lord will come from Bozrah on the day of vengeance and the year of redemption (cf. Revelation 19:13). According to one Christian interpretation of Micah 2:12-13, Bozrah, (or a place the Bible cryptically refers to as Bozrah), will also be the scene of a

magnificent "break-out" of God's covenant people, who admittedly are most likely not queers, four of whose voices and misapprehensions clash and clamour for attention in the body of the poem: Edward's, Marlowe's, Derek Jarman's, and my own.

NIGHT THOUGHTS. I had thought that the (repeated) description of the mind in this poem was quoting C.K. Stead on Allen Curnow; to my chagrin I later discovered it had been embedded in some dark quarter of my mind from a hitherto forgotten teenaged reading of Yeats' characterisation of 'Whiggery' in his poem "The Seven Sages." When re-read into the poem, my objects of misattribution and my actual source only increase in pertinence in light of this lapse of memory.

WHERE DARKNESS SHINES. The persona in question is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was born into a family of seven children in Breslau, Germany. He grew up in Berlin, where his father worked as a physician. At 16 he began his study of theology at Tübingen and presented his doctoral thesis at the age of 21. He then spent one year on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he became acquainted with American Christianity. His popularity as a teacher and writer grew when he returned to Germany, but in 1933 he delivered a radio broadcast denouncing the German public for its blind obsequiousness to a leader whom he saw as perilous. When Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer reluctantly left for England where he served as pastor of two churches. While preparing for a trip to visit Mahatma Gandhi, he received a call to go back to Germany and serve as head of a seminary to train young pastors. In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and sent to prison and later implicated in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. On April 8, 1945 he was hanged in Flossenbürg.

MATHEW 14:25 (SLIGHT RETURN). *And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea* (King James Version).

ALLEGIANCES REVISITED. The best part of the line "a *courageous man who lost his gift*" is lifted from a blurb provided by Bill Manhire for *Mason: The Life of R.A.K Mason* by Rachel Barrowman (2003).

ESSAY

I have no wish to bump into meaning or cultivate my ignorance or to surprise myself; rather, I have an agenda, which I hope has been clearly argued in these poems. They have been written with the conviction that they should be about something important to start with; socially or philosophically, it should have an important impersonal theme in it irrespective of the ostensibly personal subject. Poets seem unusually fearful of thinking, especially since the practice of Dr Williams. Given poets deal with language, and words are thoughts, and a sentence is an idea, and sometimes even a JUDGEMENT, this seems a little strange – these are poems in which much thinking has been done and exclusions have been made, especially before writing has been begun. Furthermore, such a poem has nothing to do with “exalted feelings of being moved by the spirit.” It is simply a piece of craftsmanship, “an intelligible or cognitive object” (Lowell 59). In terms of method, whilst the Symbolists proceeded by accruing an association of images purposefully meant to elude intellectual analysis, later ‘post-Symbolist’ poets, to whom I consider myself kin, incorporate the associative method into structures as rational and consecutive as those of Renaissance poetry. Such poems, though paraphrasable, are enriched by sensuous detail and musicality. Adopting such techniques will, I hope, have warded off hagiographic or narcissistic tendencies in these admittedly self-reflexive poems: elegies written in a kind of fine, hard, quiet

style, drawing in the first instance from the example of writers like Ben Jonson and his successors of the so-called plain school. Especially important to me has been the need to move, as one might say, from outside to inside: that is, from matter-of-fact rendering of place, or, as Edgar Bowers puts it, a description of setting utilising “specific notation,” to deeper modes of thinking: memory, imagination, meditation, speculation, and judgment. All this occurs within a radically desacralised fragment of the universe, key-noted by the first poem.

In these ‘person poems’, particulars are posited first and the archetype coalesces from them, often ending in a Larkin-like ‘lift-off.’ Its contrary is the ‘persona poem’, in which the generality or archetype is announced at the outset, and extrapolations and variations, aspects of adherence and/or divergence, are subsequently explored. The persona poem, though a wonderful vehicle for meditative exposition, as in Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” is anti-narrative – it involves a pre-established context, and it requires the poet to speak in the first person. I have wanted to tell part of an ongoing story, partially my own, but generalised, insofar as a depth of being underwrites it, and it partakes of larger patterns of hope and intelligence.

I take my bearings from English poetry, which is maligned for historical-sociological reasons, not literary ones, and is derived from selective reading. Where are all the 21st century Georgians prowling the glens and dales? Ann Dart? The American scene is clearly in decline, if Slams and Poets against the War are anything to go by. Although I am ethnically exclusively Lithuanian and Scottish, have lived in New Zealand all my life with nary a pang of wanderlust, have mythologized France as all left-wing literary intellectuals do, and consider myself an anti-essentialist internationalist if not a cosmopolitan, England is home; to deny this is to act in bad faith: my home is that of English, where the language was made by makers in committees, especially by queer King James, a repository of dialects and imperialism and plagues and gibbets and blazing roads; it is home, if only and as much as my mind, in which Hobbes and Jonson slug it out (with Prynne and Forest-Thompson looking on). And New Zealand allows me to take delight in *belles lettres* and Critical Theory, particularly of the unapologetically Neo-Marxist kind; the concern to address in poems a series of contradictory reflections of cultural assumptions about race or gender or class; but not a debunking and an ethical denunciation performed by those convicted of historicism (the belief that all knowledge is historically conditioned and not reflective of some actual Truth) and voluntarist amoralism (that is, the belief that ethical judgment can never be more than the expression of a historically conditioned drive for power). However, I increasingly hope to tear down this fence, one side of which cordons off poets categorized according to subject-matter, poets who expatiate upon the gentle numinosity of things or their lurid bankruptcy, all of which returns to one persistent subject—*the subject*, the Cartesian “I” (or the Lutheran “I”, which comes to the same thing), and on the other side are those corralled primarily by the “form” in which they write. Even so, failures in the conventions of poetic content cannot be fully compensated for by ingenuity with form. Nor for that matter can formal inadequacies be *fully* healed by turning to interesting subjects. Between the two, however, the latter is more excusable. Everyone at one time or another has said a poem, a novel, a film, or a painting had an interesting subject that merited one’s attention, even if its formal execution were egregious.

Obviously these poems are political; a politics, I mean, on a par with, and indeed related to, a poetics; in other words, something much more substantial and respectable than the class-determined or vocationally determined prejudices which pass muster as the politics many of my comrades of the Left. And despite my

being a Marxist, a queer, a formalist, committed to syntax as the source of meaning and morality, and deeply suspicious of poetry, even to the point of traumatizing myself more than is necessary, it is clear to me that Ezra Pound is the most significant political poet of the Modern era, and not just as a figure of reproach. The procession to Rapallo by writers of all stripes and parties, both before and after Pound's incarceration, is symptomatic, but not ultimately persuasive in itself. The *Pisan Cantos* have been rightly praised for their unflinching honesty and self-revelation (and should we be surprised that this 'unfolding of the lie' reaches its zenith at the end of canto 82 in hammering iambs for which Pound offered neither explanation nor apology?). I have seen it written that on his re-arrival in Italy after imprisonment in America, after the Bollingen prize winning book mentioned above and its penitential though not unqualified renunciation, after his generous midwifery of the almost exclusively Jewish Objectivists, having been declared sane by the relevant Civil authorities, Pound signaled his triumphant return by stepping off the boat and unhesitatingly and flourishingly throwing his body into a Fascist salute.

Now, that's commitment for you, and it's a commitment I hope to have approached, though in the knowledge that it is most unfortunate that the mass though not unqualified enfranchisement by the literary gatekeepers of English speaking and writing ethnic-minorities, non-heterosexuals, and females has come at such an impoverished neo-Augustan time – the shriveled quotidian reigns supreme; readers are more often than not offered easily digestible servings of political-correctness, and post-modern comedies of manners; form has been standardized; radicalism and dynamism are beyond the pale. The strongest female and minority voices in the history of the practice were heard in the Modernist period, as were queer ones (which were often also minority or female, too!), which were also heard in the English Renaissance (I think here of Marlowe, though there were others, too, such as no less than Shakespeare). One result of this is that there is an astoundingly consistent and predictable uniformity of response to whatever datum may present itself to the poet. The tediousness of the Romantic swoon to everything, be it an urn or a Nightingale, an opium induced reverie or a Cornish Landscape, is well-known enough. In contrast, the ennui and boredom of the Modernists seems to be at least adult and humane. In recent New Zealand poetry, though the same is probably true elsewhere, what is articulated as a considered determination uniformly is a kind of droll indifference or toleration, which shouldn't be confused with Kantian disinterestedness. Occasionally, pressure rises and steam escapes i.e. anti-American diatribes, but this rare. If the reader knows that the poet's judgment of the birth of a child or of the death of a parent, or of a landscape at Menton or of an Antarctic tundra, will be exactly the same in all instances, why read the next poem? This homogeneity may be the result of liberal notions of toleration or Pluralism, or the closure to the poet of a nuanced emotional and philosophical lexicon which has been deemed to be 'abstraction', an anti-qualifier bias (Pound's GIFOA in purple ink, etc). Whatever its cause, it is apparent nonetheless. Everything is strange in the same way. Given that my poems are occasional in the old sense and informed by the belief that discourse ethics, especially as argued for by Jurgen Habermas, is a way out of post-modern uncertainty, and that a politics is necessary to make actual the conditions required for this to take place, I am sure these poems are particular and various in an intelligent manner, in the sense of maintaining fidelity with a stated and clearly defined process.

However, in my own experience of submitting poems to journals, the ones that have been accepted are those that can be fitted into this flattened paradigm, whatever their ostensible subject or theme may be. It is all very well suggesting that there is openness to different life-forms, which is undoubtedly true enough, but this

openness is only made available with the caveat that the poet accede to current notions of propriety in judgment i.e. make none. This is what we Political Scientists call Conservatism. I find the paucity of our emotional vocabulary of discernment, evaluation, and, dare I say, discrimination, is terribly concerning. Children learn that the only feelings are happy, sad, angry, and 'whatever'; love and hate; or that they like and dislike; clearly, learning of poetry at school will do nothing to remedy this frightening situation. That this inarticulateness leads to violence is evident. This shrinkage is also evident grammatically: no possessive apostrophes (instead the free standing potentially possessed noun); no perfect or future tenses, especially the future-perfect (instead it's present and simple past, indicative of an ignoring of historical processes and mutability). Accordingly, I have quietly broken these rules, though not so explicitly as to alienate myself from the discourse of poetry as it is practiced, and its practitioners are interpellated and legitimised or otherwise here and now.

One of the most obvious differences between these poems and most others is that they are all formal, usually in a metrical manner: most often accentual-syllabic, sometimes purely syllabic, or otherwise determined by genre or other conventions. Obsessed with here and now, most poets write in a fashion that cuts them off from all the poetry of the past and, indeed, from any meaningful understanding of poetry as an art form. Memory and remembering, the Homeric justification for poetry and its patterning of sound, are practically disregarded. I won't say too much about what in my view is the least interesting aspect of these poems, as I don't wish to posit a justification that should be self-evident in each text. I have no wish to be original and I think the models of my versification are apparent: along with Daryush, Momaday, Gunn, and Justice for the number-counting poems, Stevens, Ransom, Tate, and early Geoffrey Hill are the most obvious (though with occasional nods to the Stanford-School), with fairly liberal substitutions and deliberate 'roughening,' including Larkinesque catalexis on the first foot, though never to the extent of Crane's Websterian excesses. Most current practitioners or critics of metrical verse seem to think that iambic pentameter is necessarily decasyllabic after the 18th Century model of correctness: I don't – the melding or clash of Romance and Germanic prosodies in Wyatt resulted in a line that is far more open to manipulation than such a view accounts for, though I never have the 'ideal' far from my mind. And whilst I don't assent to the idea of imitative form, many of these poems do move from relatively metrically irregular lines and stanzas to conclude in a state of regularity with which Yvor Winters or even J. V. Cunningham would be comfortable, as in the case with "An Envoy to Devotions", in which this movement has a purposive function to confirm the progression from ugly want to Weil's idea of disinterested love.

To me, versification is a branch of grammar. To ancient grammarians we owe our knowledge of classical prosody; Dante referred to poetic composition as grammar *per se*. Of course, I do not confuse form and content; but they do condition each other's existence. I know from experience at least these two things: a) poetic form can and does add to the "content" of a work; by giving it shape it helps determine its quality; and b) apart from this entrance of form into content, poetic form is of its own intrinsic interest. I hope the hard discipline of writing verse punctured my spirit before it could malignantly swell, and has made me a more intelligent and sane poet for the deflation. Grammar, or close attention to syntax, is essential to my poetry because it offers one freedom, in the same way our speech offers us more freedom of communication than

the grunts of a hog or the barks of a dog. The Calvinist in me knows that formal verse offers us the only kind of freedom that actually exists: the freedom to be determined.

And yet I have found that metrical verse-composition is no place for an absolutist, as formalists (most notably Yvor Winters) are often held to be. Nothing is more indicative of the relativity of the aural qualities of language than determining and resting on stress-patterns and, to a lesser extent, rhyme. Even in Classical Latin prosody, determinations of the length of syllables, whether they are categorized as short or long in scansion, are only meaningful in adjacency.

The difference between formal and free verse may be likened to the difference between carving and modeling; the formal poet...thinks of the poem he is writing as something latent in the language which he has to reveal, while the free verse poet thinks of language as a plastic passive medium upon which he imposes his artistic conception (Auden 287).

Again, this returns to my political conviction as to the necessity of an artifice of relativity. If there is any future worth contemplating for us Homo Sapiens, it will have to be realised in opposition to all that's natural about us at present, to all the Pleistocene spitefulness and scapegoating that manifests itself in homophobia, racism, and so on – all of which are perfectly natural and entirely unsustainable given the firepower with which we have equipped ourselves. Insofar as the sorts of English versification I've used in writing these poems are unnatural, against the breath and arbitrary, then it to me justifies itself in each instance as a capsule utopia in which relativity can be ordered, autonomy and solidarity reconciled, and in which artifice is a source of hope – if not the only hope we have.

Even so, I must admit that many of these poems were written as technical challenges – the single sentence of “Sign of the Packhorse,” the nonuse of the word snow in “Mathew 14:25,” the rhyme scheme of “Instead of an Elegy,” the Marianne Moore-style syllabics of “A Postscript to the Death of Virgil,” and elsewhere, too – I make no apologies for this. There is a gorgeous convention in most ancient and medieval verse of noting in the poem the “difficult meter” into which the poet has fashioned his matter. These poets did not mean that this difficulty was the only one to be surmounted before one achieved great poetry, but they did want to insist upon the minimum of craft that ensured the identity of the work and their role at once. I find this especially touching in the Irish bardic verse, where the file is merely confirming that his prominent office in clan society is well deserved and stands alongside those of the warriors whose deeds he is charged with recounting. Again, I contrast this artifice to the fact that one cannot avoid running across praise of properly executed “numbers” in Augustan poetry, which suggests just how scientific and precise the poets of that irrationally scientific age meant to be about their versifying, a view oddly shared by that unapologetic Romantic and my fellow South Island ‘formalist’ Dr Richard Reeve.

As to subject matter, I think these poems are clear enough for this to be self-evident in each poem. They are about what T.S. Eliot called "the permanent things" – love, death, religion, history, nature, war, and politics. The relationship between violence and homosexuality opened-up in "Rex Nunquam Moritur" is an important exception to these. Of the former, however, death is the most constant. Some writers, in my view perversely, choose to construct an illusion of having overcome this unnerving fact of finitude: the circuitousness of *Finnegan's Wake* is certainly not the only example, but it is a high-water mark in the self-enclosed and self-referential mode of writing that a slice of the literati finds so worthy of attention – a better world, a world-in-of-for-itself, and Joyce's undeniable lyricism in his ultimate novel surely makes it pertinent to any discussion of poetry. Although I don't want to raise the spectre of Social Realism, writing in *Mimesis*, after comparing Stendhal's contingencies and soiling to Flaubert's refinement and incorruptibility, Auerbach goes on to write that writers of the later kind suffer from the fact that

The purely literary, even on the highest level of artistic acumen, limits the power of judgment, reduces the wealth of life, and at times distorts the outlook upon the world of phenomena (506).

So, despite my political commitments, or perhaps because of them, I have no wish to escape or elide the 'bourgeois I' when speaking of these concerns. By allowing myself to speak in it, I can more sharply make apparent its limitations and provisional conclusiveness, and the limitations and provisional conclusiveness of structures in and by which it is formed and reformed, especially when accounting for death, especially of those whom we love. And, when occasionally reaching the limit of the efficacy of this preposterous self, my essential themes coalesce in a number of these poems which address figures who were suspicious of the possibility of truthfulness in poetry – Rimbaud, Crane, Mason, and Broch – even though they had invested so much of themselves into their work. Erich Heller noted that although Broch's *The Death of Virgil*

is his masterpiece... it is a very problematical one, for it attempts to give literary shape to the author's growing aversion to literature. In the very year the novel appeared, Broch confessed to 'a deep revulsion' from literature as such – 'the domain of vanity and mendacity'. Written with a paradoxical, lyrical exuberance, it is the imaginary record of the poet's last day and his renunciation of poetry. He commands the manuscript of the *Aeneid* to be destroyed, not because it is incomplete or imperfect, but because it is poetry and not 'knowledge'. He even says his *Georgics* are useless, inferior to any expert treatise on agriculture (1987).

More than any other, this question – to write or not to write – stands behind all these poems.

In closing, I'd like to cite the late John Finlay, who, at the beginning of his poetic career, curtailed by his death from AIDS at 49, listed in a journal those qualities by which any poet attempting to write a great poem should be guided.

- (1.) It must be about the truth. It must give truth.
- (2.) It must be literal, very literal.
- (3.) It must be symbolic, very symbolic, but symbolic only in terms of its literal "base" or narrative, not in terms not growing out of this literal whatever you may call it.
- (4.) It must be literal, very literal.
- (5.) It must be clean and lean and have the supple, yet firm movement, of pure muscle.
- (6.) It must be of the physical world, have winter mornings, summer nights, creeks, smoke, smells, the reflection of a star in a bucket of water, etc. in it so that the reader will say, "Oh yes, this is just the way it really is."
- (7.) Yet it must also be abstract.
- (8.) It must come from a man who is mature and has mastered himself so that he is calm in the good knowledge he has of our mystery, our language and history.
- (9.) It must be rooted in a particular place.
- (10.) It must be whole in its beautifully compelling demand that the reader engage his wholeness, both his intellect and his emotion.
- (11.) It must be moral and cause the reader to make one of the three following statements: "I should and want to lead that kind of life." "I should not and do not want to lead that kind of life." "I should and want to have the patience to resign myself to these unavoidable facts about life."
- (12.) It must have both the intensity of engagement and the detachment of judgement.
- (13.) It must be fully realized in language.
- (14.) It must be plain.

While no one, beginning with John Finlay, believes that such a perfect poem can ever be written, his notes stand as benchmarks for the kind of poetry I hope to have come a little closer to having written.

Bibliography

Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Random House, 1962.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Heller, Erich. "Hitler in a very Small Town." *New York Times* January 25, 1987.

Lowell, Robert. *Collected Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.

