

LIFEBLOOD

A Book of Poems

Joel Hayward

Lifeblood: A Book of Poems

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For my "girls"

Kathy, Shoshana, Rachel and Michaela

With all my love and gratitude

Gold coins  
falling  
as tears from above  
can only be counted  
as my given love  
A treasure chest full  
I offer to give,  
enriching you,  
sweethearts  
for ever I live

## **About the Author**

Dr. Joel Hayward is a former Senior Lecturer who abandoned the political correctness and creative constraints of academia to pursue his goal of living a rewarding, creative and less stressful life. Author of several successful, internationally praised works of biography, history and analysis, and scores of specialist journal articles, Joel now concentrates on poetry and fiction. His efforts in these genres have, along with some of his non-fiction, been translated into many languages including German, Russian, Spanish and Serbian.

Joel lives in Palmerston North with his wife Kathy and their daughters.

His other books include:

*Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe's Defeat in the East 1942-1943*

*A Joint Future? The Move to Jointness and its Implications for the New Zealand Defence Force* (editor)

*For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and His Way of War*

*Born to Lead: Portraits of New Zealand Commanders* (with Dr. Glyn Harper)

*Jenny Green Teeth and Other Short Stories*

*Tears in the Mind's Eye* (forthcoming)

**LIFEBLOOD**  
**A Book of Poems**



### Oakville, Alabama\*

For a stranger he unwrapped lace cloth from treasure:  
a scrapbook of oversized newsprint.  
Its yellow sellotaped newspaper clippings  
were his life-savings. Photographs, stories  
of his dead uncle and the stranger's hero: Jesse Owens.

The stranger listened,  
aware that the apostle's explanations  
did not always match the newspaper stories  
he ran his finger over with exaggerated motion.  
Illiteracy?

"Ain't just then, suh, that they hated  
us," he said, hunting but kindly the stranger's eyes.  
Blue, embarrassingly.  
"It's only a while back I couldn't get a burger  
in the fron' of M'Donald's. Had ta go round back  
afore that."

The nephew walked him down  
to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.  
A local authority granted the family this land. Reluctantly?  
It could have been beautiful. With quality grass,  
and children. And life.  
None. The birds conveyed disappointment.

"We had a bronze statue here, but very first week  
white boys come and put chains round unca Jesse's feet,  
pulled him down with a pick-up."

The stranger saw a well-formed concrete base,  
crowned with two bent rusting bolts  
and anyone's drink can,  
but not with a bronze athletic god.

They walked back for iced tea and talked  
more about their hero.

The stranger noticed the beauty  
of utter poverty's luxury:  
photographs of smiles everywhere.  
On tables, fridge, walls, mirror, doors.  
Children loved by parents.  
Parents loved by children.  
Some came in as the two sat close and shared.  
They said 'hi,' heard a strange accent,  
shook hands (except the girls, who still said 'hi')  
and asked where he came from.  
With those photographed smiles.

The stranger left America carrying new luggage:  
greater respect for a hero  
and memories of a day  
spent with fine people.  
He still wonders  
whether the council's promised replacement statue  
stands, or did for a while,  
in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

\* In memory of Jesse Owens: history's greatest track athlete, a fine man, and a deserving hero.





### **This Dialogue**

**Poetry is style  
over content,  
mystery over meaning.  
It's as much for the reader  
as for the writer.**

*Editor or stylist?  
Is a poem clever and empty? And its writer?  
Who, then, quietly murdered the muses?  
Can poets not pour out their hearts, or  
heal the scars on their souls?*

**Clichés! They've all been said before.  
Hearts don't pour, and, as for souls ...  
Readers want the fresh. They want new idioms,  
and to read clever, cutting things.**

*Clever? That worst of words.  
Does it mean the ordinary dressed up in f-words,  
bitterness and the vernacular of adolescence?  
Has beauty also perished? Has the magic of a moment  
been banned? Have our souls and hearts  
really become clichés?*

**Who wants to publish beauty,  
or the magic of a moment?  
Who cares for a poet's thoughts, if a reader  
can't also own them?**

*I do. My name is poet.*

**My name is editor.**

**Emily**

Vast natural cavern stretching,  
brilliantly lit in some places. Shadows  
stare out with few blinks  
and black eyes  
from where they dwell  
behind stalagmites  
caused by the dripping of rocks.  
Wounds of unfulfilled dreams?

Helmet-lit cavers  
– “intruders!” the shadows hiss –  
explore each twisting, tight  
tunnel and cavity,  
searching for anything.  
They see leering shadows  
gesturing and  
mocking their pale weakness.

They ignore them, as best they can.  
Is it the dread, or an unwillingness  
to see themselves  
among the uncouth brutes?

They cannot ignore one: larger than all,  
unwilling to let them enter  
further into this echoing mind.

They may hate him love him envy him curse him  
but they greet him cautiously, with deference: Heathcliff!  
Which of his creator’s secrets does he guard?

### **Wampires in the Lounge**

They sat and talked on chairs that moved closer  
as she pressed him for more on wampires.  
He, giant from the Balkans, couldn't sound the V and  
made the watching children's hands and squints hide smiles.  
Goth finally facing the real thing, she lusted for his  
culture and grey eyes. Did he notice? What did he see?  
A wolf's willing victim? A weird westerner  
writing herself into Stoker's story.

An intruder asked if he knew Stoker.  
No, but Coppola's film  
lacked any Slavic royalty. The truth?  
The Turks; it was all about the Turks.  
Her excitement and lust for the wolf  
enchanted her chair,  
which pulled itself towards his  
with the power of four hours' conversation.  
She offered her throat,  
but was he reading her thoughts?  
Could mundane conversation around them  
penetrate the Carpathian mist?  
Could coffee and biscuits  
exercise greater spell-breaking power?  
As evening came the pull of his lair grew stronger,  
and he offered her a ride.  
She entered his lustrous black stagecoach  
– a Mirage – for a journey home.

### Castlepoint

Low-tide walking at Castlepoint  
she, free spirit with brat's  
eyes and concealed fires  
singeing her heart,  
left deep-toed footprints in the sand  
and waded, proud of  
water-adoration and her  
ability to babble. Was this a mediocre  
or an excellent demonstration of  
both?

He, far freer spirit with sad eyes  
and scarred psyche,  
imprinted his boot soles as he walked  
with her and heavy thoughts,  
not all of her, so deep  
that scuba-divers wouldn't find them.

Sand on both lips made kisses  
dry and their intertwined  
fingers gritty. Sand  
couldn't deny them  
the silkiness of a brief moment  
of what they considered some kind of love.  
It seemed an eternal split-second.  
The intensity of heaven's or hell's blessing.  
Would it survive long after that gash in time?

He sat high on cliff's edge above  
waves of fury and  
salt-wind that held his cropped hair  
to attention, and felt it wouldn't last.  
He hoped, and maybe she hoped,  
that no harm would come to the other.

### Triumph Bonneville 750

Newly rebuilt top-end and re-sprung suspension.  
An oily maestro's work; not mine.  
I can write, but I lack his brilliance. A trade?

It barked with neighbour-punishing volume  
and savagery. Black, flashing sunlight in my eyes  
after hours of tender massaging  
with a soft cloth and scratch-resistant liquid.  
Gold pinstripes signalled British regality.

Joined as one – horse and rider –  
we raced crescent moon  
on Saturday night down that long straight  
between Massey and the Manawatu Gorge.  
We chased and ran down, crushed,  
any visibility cast thin by the headlight.  
A victim every blink to my mount's adrenalin.

No cars front and back. I, we, ruled the road.  
The death of insects on my visor  
revealed my supremacy.

Incomplete! *A movement!*  
In my mind? In the nothing ahead of our light?  
Black as the fields on either side I couldn't see,  
the cow crowded my vision and our pitiful beam.

Hooves I couldn't hear clomped  
to escape something  
descending with a roar of murder.

Beast without road rules.  
Cow humped right; not left.  
Not that way! Left! Left!  
My steed panicked  
and swerved at that thumping brute.  
I panicked and pulled it back.

We panicked together, swerving this way, that.  
We slow-motioned past the cow  
at 100 miles per hour,  
Death asking, "What, you made it?"

We stopped in flattened grass on the verge  
and waited. For me to find me.  
We abdicated royalty and putted back. Home  
by another road.

### **This Man's Life**

Erred decisions that tear heart in twain  
The fruit of searching for meaning's mystery  
Ever occur but result in cruel pain  
Seem the cursed part of this man's history

Ne'er till after will some sense be made  
Of going back whence mistake crept in  
Apology given but harshly repaid  
Let no guilt be felt; for 'twas no sin

### When the Light Goes Out

She listened  
for any rattle  
in the light-bulb.  
The tell-tale sign  
of death.  
He heard his  
grandfather.  
The tell-tale sign  
of death.  
She replaced the bulb.  
Light  
returned.  
He held his grandfather's hand.  
Darkness  
dripped.

### Her Journal

Through her summer dress  
sunrays warm her. Between cloud gaps only.

She picks three fragile blue flowers  
from her wild-weed garden  
to dry – in flat foreverness – between the pages of the  
journal that only she and her fears know she keeps.

Her pages hold truth: the oily transparent petal stains from  
tears that slipped from her cheeks onto her delicate  
creations before the pages closed.



### **You Know Who**

You bury the living and feed the dead  
with equal effort. And pleasure? You buried me,  
with lying tears,  
and from the grave I watch you feed promotions  
and fat compliments  
to an overfed body with no hunger but clumsy hands.  
A mortal ghost who pays you well.  
Eyes twinkling, in darkness,  
you take his payment of deference  
and pretended diligence  
and fold those proudly into a bulging wallet.

I live away from your view, but not you from mine.  
From the unimagined freedom  
of the grave I watch  
and laugh at your sincere cruelty. When I arise  
where will you be? What will you see? A haunting?

### **Situations Vacant**

The situations vacant advert said your  
boss urgently needed a temporary secretary  
due to maternity leave.  
I would talk with you  
and wish you well, and  
encourage you to give your child  
a name with one syllable,  
but I don't know you.  
You're a memory lying cold  
under no headstone.  
Where are you?  
How can I bring flowers?

### **I bought a Second-hand Book**

I bought a second-  
hand book with yellowed  
pages and a dying spine.  
The cover won me.  
A cold lake without ripples or shimmers  
before dark mist hills. No sun.  
Next to the elegant title in lazy script,  
"Scottish Love Poems," a brooch hung.  
Encircled in silver rope a golden-haired  
woman with blue eyes and  
thick lashes (or thick mascara) smiled.  
Not at me.  
Not at any reader.  
But at her name on the cover,  
in the same lazy script:  
Antonia Fraser.

I had often read her poems. I knew them.  
But right then I couldn't recall one.  
The chilly mirror disappeared.  
Her smile remained.  
I opened the cover,  
noted the publication date  
and the passing of twenty-five years.  
I tried to lament,  
imagining her old.  
My mind said no and told my hands  
to return the book-cover to my eyes.  
She remained there – still does –  
timeless,  
without ageing.

### **A lecturer's Pen**

The ink bottle on his desk's edge,  
near full to its top covered in dust,  
reminds him to search for his favourite pen.  
It's probably suffocating under a pile of papers.

That gold-nibbed fountain pen came as a gift  
from one class. Students who enjoyed.  
Seeing him hurting they wanted him to know  
that his efforts  
had enriched their learning.

He seldom uses that beautiful thing.  
Its ink flows slickly.  
It gives his words luxury  
when dedicating copies of books  
to friends and strangers who enjoy  
seeing an author write their names across his title page.

Refilling it leaves inky fingers  
that soap hates to battle.  
He prefers everyday the simplicity  
of chewable buck-twenty bios.  
He throws them casually into his bag before he goes home.  
His pilfering kids use them for their homework.

That gold-tipped beauty, wherever it is,  
contains a perfect inscription  
from a group of young people who chose words  
that he likes to feel with his fingertips,  
but mostly, eyes closed, with his heart.  
They remind him  
that pain passes and  
the pleasure of teaching  
never does.

### **The First Casualty of War**

Truth

scorches forth, back

pulling spectators' eyes this way, that.

Grunted serves and backhands keep

truth

spinning

and the players hoping

to win the crowd

while scoring points.

Fifteen-love? Thirty-love?

Impossible.

These matches have no love.

Crowds care nothing for the ball; only the score.

**Absence makes ...**

Separated by oceans,  
lovers poles apart  
suffer knowing  
that they live in different days.  
One sleeps while the other gains  
pleasure from differences.

Stoic resignation and Xs on calendars  
are armour often worn when time's  
arrows streak in to slay.  
Each lover dons an iron helmet,  
though some forsake the breastplate.

Can time be defeated, or merely  
kept from ravaging love when  
unprotected hearts do not grow fonder?  
Can phone voices, lacking the power of eyes,  
persuade imaginations to sit quietly?

Visitations in dreams are sought  
and desires sometimes rewarded.  
They fade with dawn and leave  
wisps of anxiety that only  
the meeting of eyes,  
pressing of lips  
and holding of hands  
can blow distant.

### Our Lady

Fear one Goddess above all!

Her name is Sleep.

Her power is frightful.

Who else can  
inflict paralysis  
steal sight  
numb the senses  
madden the mind  
or banish all thought?

Unequaled magic!  
Our Lady leaves no wounds or scars  
and few memories of her visits  
when she enslaves  
the servants of *all* religions.

Unequaled power!  
Our Lady's seduction is so irresistible  
that none can pull away from her tender caresses  
keep open their eyes when she bends down to kiss  
or drive her away before she has gained satisfaction.

### Belgrade, 1999\*

Why do you hate us  
 And rain down your bombs  
 From aircraft we cannot see or hear?  
 Most bombs are smart, *you boast*,  
     as if they don't kill us like those dropped on Coventry  
     with shrapnel and air blasts ripping souls from bodies.

Why do you hate us  
 And rain down your bombs  
 And claim we are enemies of freedom?  
 Serbs are the butchers of the Balkans, *you lie*,  
     forgetting that we served as your allies in two world wars  
     and suffered genocide from peoples you now favour.

Why do you hate us  
 And rain down your bombs  
 Without trying to get peace through dialogue?  
 We never listen anyway, *you claim*,  
     even though your "deals" were one-sided and cruel  
     and backed up with a bully's threat of violence.

Why do you hate us  
 And rain down your bombs  
 Which destroy bridges, buildings, homes and people?  
 The world needs leadership, *you insist*,  
     ignoring the irony  
     that we have suffered these horrors before,  
     inflicted then by Nazi devils,  
     who also claimed the moral high ground.

\* For Lazar, Vesna, Dušan and Miloš Dražeta





### **The Black Forest**

The roof-top of the forest  
robs day of intruding light.  
Strangers get increasingly stressed  
when Indian inkiness comes with night.

Poking fires they huddle round  
and whisper, talk though seldom yell.  
They startle at every unknown sound  
as if they came direct from hell.

The noise of creatures adds more fear,  
worse because they can't be seen,  
even when they're seemingly near,  
with only blackness in between.

When morning rays finally filter through  
courage returns within men's chests,  
warming, along with steaming brew,  
removing the chill of dew-damp vests.

Some place chainsaws upon their knees,  
saw-teeth of which they file and hone  
so they can do with greater ease  
what trees' old age always did alone.

When an ancient giant crashes and dies,  
his legs hewn at the heel,  
do forest spirits utter anguished cries  
that woodsmen never hear or feel?

Oh grieving spirits! Dry your tears.  
Your realm will shrink but stay alive.  
The gods must know about your fears,  
and ensure some loved ones do survive.

Humans aren't aware of your fright.

They can't help what they need.  
Torment them all you want at night  
but don't break your peaceful creed.

Moan and creak and dry branches break,  
deny them sleep as you do.  
Yet remember as they fret awake  
that they're the gods' creation too.

### **Parting**

Ah, mystery, leave me not yet!  
Give me an embrace that I'll never forget.

Let me breathe deep the scent of your hair.  
Make my cheek moist with your glistening tear.

Let my fingertips trace gentle paths on your cheek  
And over your closed eyes, wet lashes I seek.

Let me hold you near in manner sublime  
As my lips on yours I place one last time.

Let me whisper with wrenched emotion.  
"God I love you!" I'll swear with devotion.

Oh mystery, though I see you will leave  
It won't be for ever, so I will not long grieve.

### The Massey Auditorium

Tatty gilt lecture room  
doubles as a drama club's theatre.  
Screen whirrs down,  
hangs like a man-of-war's mainsail.

It's the can't-miss target of projected sight,  
not a whiteboard that one should ever write on.

Someone did.

For God-knows it's carried the pox  
of a permanent felt-tip pen,  
not a whiteboard marker.

Who did it?

Did the class laugh  
when the lecturer realised  
and tried to rub off the grand truths  
intended for a whiteboard?

Or did the class not let on  
that they'd seen his face flush?  
Did they disclose respect, or embarrassment,  
and afterwards joke among themselves:  
"Academics! Hopeless, eh?"

Does that lecturer still redden  
each time he uses that theatre  
and sees the marks  
that cleaning fluids haven't removed  
despite elbow efforts  
that have only left smudges?

**Artwork**

Gleefully you score pictures  
on my white bones  
with a sharp nail  
and wipe Indian ink  
into the minute  
scratches.  
I watch your scrimshaw emerge  
with disinterest  
until I see your artwork capture the  
moment when an upturned hull  
slips beneath the waves  
to begin its long descent.  
I recognise the ship  
as that of which I had proudly  
proclaimed myself captain.

## Drama

Beneath pale flesh  
and short dark curls

The ultimate?

*Slit*

With flesh on flesh  
and moans

A release

*Slit*

Throat pulled back  
Knife crosses

*SLIT*

*Poet's note:* I wrote this poem in disgusted response to a popular television police drama which depicted a woman's violation and execution with, in my view, wanton explicitness, glamour and drama. As a dad to beautiful daughters, I find any sexual sadism – indeed, even any “commonplace” sexism – inexplicable and repugnant.

### Strasbourg Cathedral

Watched by seven hundred  
towering red-brick years  
and a father or brother  
unseen by tourist eyes,  
she sits on a camp stool and plays.  
Dignity rides on the fragrant notes  
that her accordion releases  
like the aroma from a happy oven.  
Polished too-big boots,  
perfect pleats  
and radiant complexion  
also tell a tale.

Alone,  
among strangers who camera chatter  
at the intricate portals  
and shadow-making spires,  
she plays Lorelei's seductions in a gypsy scarf.  
This siren aged seven wants to unite  
no boats and rocks; but coins and a box.  
What is sitting on the mat with hand reaching  
for a teacher's attention when the  
greatest classroom has been hers from birth?  
What is borrowing from a library  
when all books lie open before her?



### **Birds of the Battlefield**

Bullets speak differently  
when they meet someone new.  
They scream “thwack!”  
when they strike bone.  
They shout “pthumpff!”  
when they slap into thick muscle.  
They squeal “pffit!”  
when they pass through emptier flesh.  
Best of all, they hiss “pzinnggg!” to themselves  
when they find  
no-one to talk with.

What do they say

when they introduce

a new friend

to

death?



## Scars

You create unseen walls  
believing that absolutely no-one  
will be able to break in,  
cause you hurt  
or thief some of your treasure:  
your self-important independence

Maybe you really created walls  
to confine yourself  
and prevent unplanned  
contact with the realities  
and risks of rejection or heartache

Yet you added to your defences  
coils of barbed wire –  
short fuse, vicious tongue  
and sarcasm –  
which stab and hurt  
all who seek intimacy,  
even that of simple friendship

If you ever regret seeing  
the bleeding fingertips  
of those who reached  
to touch and reassure you  
will it be too late to dab them  
gently, soothingly  
with the cotton-wool of true affection?

Will they instead pull back  
with an "ouch!"  
and lament that they failed to see  
your personality's rusting barbs  
and swear never to make that mistake twice,  
and leave you, strongly fortified, safe but alone?

### Welsh Maiden

I know you, Jenny.  
Your beauty betrays you.  
What other woman has hair of  
fine-spun gold thread  
and long-lashed eyes of sapphire perfection?

Visible through white silk, your breasts and hips  
lure me towards golden-freckled alabaster arms.

I've known your name all my life.  
Now I meet you, smiling shyly as you bathe.

You'll not get me, water spirit.

They say you wait  
in wind-wild streams and lonely pools  
for weaker souls than I  
to surrender to your enchantment.  
You beckon lovers in  
to greet your body; to love you.

They say you  
coil weeds around hopeful lovers' ankles and pull them  
down, white cold, into black depths.  
You show their drowning eyes  
the hideous crone you really are: Jenny Green Teeth.

But I see no crone, only youthful perfection  
radiant in high sun's glory.

Oh Jenny, your beauty and smile draw me.  
Will you take me? Love me? Drown me?  
Let us speak in whispers. Touch our fingers. Lips?

I cannot believe what they say. I cannot. I do not.

The water ... so cold.

**Hands**

Albrecht Dürer's  
brush and ink  
on tinted blue

Gently touching  
long-fingered  
"Praying Hands"

Stirring religious  
veneration and piety  
since he drew them in 1508

My pale  
imitation  
performed each night

Freckled hands  
stubby fingers  
chewed fingernails

Stirring divine  
forgiveness and love  
each time I bow my head.

### **A Cunning Idea**

He crafted a clever voodoo doll  
to hurt someone he really loathed.  
He gained hair from his intended victim, three strands,  
and wove them into his doll's head  
in a small braided circle  
which he stitched down with a curse.

He gained some nail clippings  
and slid them into his doll's hands  
beneath the fabric  
so they wouldn't fall loose,  
and he uttered another curse.

He even got specks of blood,  
not an easy task but one of great potency,  
and smeared it, black, across the rag-doll's chest  
as he looked heavenward and muttered.

He placed that deadly model in a sacred place  
until, well ... the time was exactly right.

Then, strange thing,  
his loathing began to disappear.  
He looked again at his devilish handiwork

and pondered

what pain he would have felt within his own chest  
when he stuck that first pin into the doll's cloth body.  
Would he have died,  
or merely crumpled in a passing agony?

and wondered

what pain he would have felt within his tired brain  
when he pierced his creation's brow with another sharp pin.  
Would it be a migraine, a seizure, a tumour?

and worried

where his wounded soul would have journeyed  
when he cast the doll into a bright clear petrol flame.  
Would the gods receive him,  
or banish him into outer darkness?

### **Balkan Wanderers, 1.**

Gorgeous muscled horses,  
their great eyes down and necks stretched out,  
haul a quiet convoy of multi-hued Romany wagons,  
many of them paint-flaking,  
some chimney-smoking.

All creak with relaxed movement,  
along dirty not dusty car-few roads  
winding softly  
between  
dark pine-forested hills  
which permit the lurking dangers  
of wolves, spirits and other frights.

Further back great mountain peaks rise,  
darker,  
half escaping the cloaking powers  
of wet clinging mists,  
containing mysteries  
of which road-bound wanderers  
seldom think and never dare to explore.

**Beauty Beheld I Your**

Sat we on branch an old fallen  
Dripped rain from above tree branches spread  
And hair faces and soaked our

Held I hand cold your  
Deep looked into eyes dark your  
Beauty saw I  
Beauty great oh saw I!

Kisses wet rain heavy from  
But noticed never we  
As a union tight became we  
With nature nothing but

Noticed I breath warm your  
Deep looked into eyes dark your  
Love felt I  
Love great oh love great felt I

### Marvels of Petra

Sun-baked  
 bird-featured  
 Bedouin of Petra  
 charging  
     between tight-lipped drags  
     on bent cigarette  
     held between  
     nicotine fingers  
 eager, gullible tourists  
 “ten dollar!”  
     *very fair price, they whisper to each other*  
 to mount and  
 ride his camels  
 along stony paths  
 among ancient  
 carved rock  
 palaces, temples, houses  
 of that golden pink  
 part-ruined city  
 then,  
 upon their return  
 at journey’s end,  
 unexpectedly  
 demanding from those  
 suddenly shocked  
 strangers  
 who had  
 until that moment  
 delighted in having done  
 something local  
 “ten more dollar!”  
     *damned cunning bastard, they tell each other aloud*  
 to dismount  
 his dung-smelling brutes.

**Today**

I saw a man die with fear in his eyes  
and wish I hadn't seen it.  
He knew he'd been inadequate  
and wished he hadn't been it.

I saw him searching around for love,  
exhaling long-drawn sighs.  
None of those present could show it to him.  
All wished he'd shut his eyes.

I saw the lamp in those eyes grow dim.  
We hadn't long at all  
before the light went out altogether  
and he'd have to answer the devil's call.

Then he turned and looked at me.  
His eyes had surprising contrition.  
He tried to stretch out his withered hand,  
from which I withdrew – I'm just his physician.

I saw his family's look of contempt  
that he'd wanted a last human touch.  
Appalled that they hated him so intensely  
I reached back to accept his bony clutch.

His family saw him enter eternity  
holding the hand of a white-coated stranger.  
They shook their heads as they left the room,  
muttering something about the funeral arranger.

My second wife picked me up from work  
and she and her kid replayed their day.  
Irritated, I couldn't help feeling some sadness.  
Not everyone's life turns out the right way.



**Poison**

She often slips  
poison  
into our mailbox.  
Simple white envelopes  
fail to disguise their oozing menace.  
Do the senders  
put no names above their  
Private Bag addresses  
because they think we're witless?  
Their recurring failures –  
designed to leave us feeling immune? –  
prove compelling and  
we eventually succumb  
to the pressures of ignorance.  
Despite trying not  
to inhale or allow  
the contagion  
to spill on our self-respect  
we always end up paying a price.

### **Dream of this Age**

Westward I saw you silhouetting a red sun.  
Mighty oak, near old as the earth below you,  
King of surrounding trees, guardian of mysteries,  
Your branches and leaves wild winds blow through.

Powerful oak, I'm pulled to your presence.  
Walking to reach you through tangles of growth,  
Fingers and forearms scratch on dry brambles.  
Though wiping off blood, to quit now I'm loath.

I finally place hands with dry blood on your trunk  
And feel ancient skin textured like a grandfather's chin.  
Autumn's mud-stuck leaves on the soles of my boots  
Remind me that harsh winter will shortly begin.

Ice winds and snow would take life from me  
If I remained your companion, exposed without heat.  
Yet you will stand against nature's strong warriors  
Who'll rage without malice, and won't gain your defeat.

And in spring you'll hide any soreness or wounds  
With a great burst of beauty, branches, and green.  
You'll become stronger and reach even higher,  
Knowing your tenacity the gods have seen.

You have witnessed the passing of forty generations  
Of those who respected your vast strength and size.  
Long before them lived others who knew  
The oak as healer, guide, and source of things wise.

Cut off from them by a tragic gap of time  
I nonetheless know that, aside from your might,  
Your roots reach as deep into the heart of the earth  
As your branches rise up into the world of sunlight.

Astute observer of kingdoms below and above  
And drawing in secrets and knowledge from them,

You, beloved oak, friend of earth and air spirits,  
Possess power and energy impossible to stem.

I squeeze my humanity into a hollow in your roots,  
Feeling you close around, like a wondrous womb.  
Ah, great master oak, I could rest inside you forever,  
But you're here to offer life, not serve as a man's tomb.

I climb into your branches and smile at old nests,  
At their number, and at the birds' variety.  
Oh great sustainer, they sing their merry thanks.  
I also utter mine, with unfeigned piety.

Pulling myself higher as sun god readies to sleep  
I sit where your strongest limbs widely spread  
And reflect on druids and other tree-friends,  
Who departed long ago to the whispering world of the dead.

They used to revere the oak and other sacred trees,  
Gather mistletoe, fungi, bark, leaf and bud,  
Use them for the health of the people,  
And to ward off anger, violence, fire and flood.

Like those wise ones, I think of earth's sacred objects:  
Forests, groves, rivers, bubbling springs and great stones.  
Like them, I feel thankful for the gods' close attention  
To us in completeness: needs, souls, natures, flesh, bones.

Oh creator above all, I make a sincere request:  
Let me ascend to the top of my friend this great tree  
So that I can kiss with my lips that sacred loftiest twig.  
I want only to give, and to take nothing for me.

Along with a kiss may I shed a drop of my blood?  
A sacrifice, neither fatal nor asked for, but offered freely  
In thanks for the abundance of peace in my life,  
And for all true knowledge that comes only from thee.

A humble sparrow's, oh creator, is the body I now want

So that I can gently alight on that thin projecting sprig,  
Rub my tiny-feathered face on that object of true power,  
And dab a droplet of blood onto that fragile twig.

Oh, oh, words cannot convey what I feel taking place.  
My human shape's shrinking, my hands have become claws.  
I've developed wings of brown feathers  
And become a frail bird – without any flaws.

Oh Majesty, how it feels to flit in the breeze.  
I cannot bear the pleasure of feeling so light.  
Grant me a few minutes to fly over the forest,  
Then I'll wing my way back with the quickest flight.

I'm darting madly but gladly through the winds  
With rushing cold air giving my bright eyes a sting.  
Nothing, nothing can rob me of joy  
Except Terror! Terror! for that large swooping thing.

The sky god – bless him – caused the falcon to overshoot.  
Pain in my left wing that screeching bird caused,  
But I managed somehow to survive  
The horror and pain of his razor sharp claws.

I fluttered madly behind and around trees to the ground  
And escaped, bleeding, into a hole in the base of a trunk.  
It was the one in which I'd earlier curled up,  
Only now I palpitated with trauma, as the sun god sunk.

But then the delicate tree spirits came and tended to me.  
It was not luck that had saved me, they lovingly said,  
But the gods had favoured my reverent mission,  
And to another target, a stoat, the falcon they led.

Now, bless our great oak, the spirits encouraged.  
Anoint it with the lifeblood flowing from your wing.  
Smear it sweetly on that loftiest twig of great magic,  
Then return to us here and we'll restore everything.

The kind tree spirits gave me the boldness to fly  
To the top of my oak where I saw the twig swaying.  
I alighted in pain, and caressed that stick with my beak,  
Wiped blood where I should; against death began praying.

Then in lady moon's light I fell unknowing to the ground.  
A twisted creature I lay cold for ages,  
While the sweet tree spirits hovered and worked  
Until my body changed, spellbound by ethereal sages.

Tears splashed on my cheek and soft sobs I heard  
As the all-powerful one breathed life back into my chest,  
Which rose and fell like calm sea swells.  
Then under silver moon goddess I arose from my rest.

I felt relieved that I lived again, as a man,  
But grieved that a true world had again disappeared:  
The world of nature's souls and the gods' touch,  
That the forest spirits had kindly with an outsider shared.

As I walked away from the trees, scratched and bruised,  
Thrashing leaves and creaking made me turn for the sign.  
"Oh druid-heart, *friend*, thank you," I swear I heard,  
Whispered by my oak grown larger, in a voice unlike mine.

Watching night gain its power I see a bee on the curtain.  
Sweet messenger of the gods, what news do you bring?  
I'll tell you a story in return of the forest's loving kindness.  
Come, omen of good days, I'll tell the whole blessed thing.

**You whisper**

You whisper  
at night  
beneath my hearing,  
above my imagination,  
outside both dreams and  
nightmares.  
You frighten me  
by telling me  
you still love me.  
I cannot answer.  
I cannot.

**My Soul Waits for Her**

Tormented loving soul  
Unbound deep in my chest  
Feeling pain and fatigue  
And craving for rest

Reaches out to awaken Its  
Only true friend.  
Rejected, It returns,  
Near eternity to spend  
Impatient distress of waiting until  
Finally she remembers  
And fear becomes still.

### **Baddest Man on the Planet?**

Vincent Van Gogh  
Anguished genius of the canvas

The canvas?

Not for painting on, demented, with swirling brushstrokes,  
but for adorning with opponents' fallen twisted torsos  
and flecks of blood red from the palette of their faces

Our Vincent Van Gogh – in black shorts –  
has inner torments forever associated with that lacerated ear

That famous lacerated ear?

Not the result of a self-inflicted wound of unanswered love,  
but a bitten piece of flesh spat out with disgust on the canvas  
next to him who answered punches  
with elbows and head butts

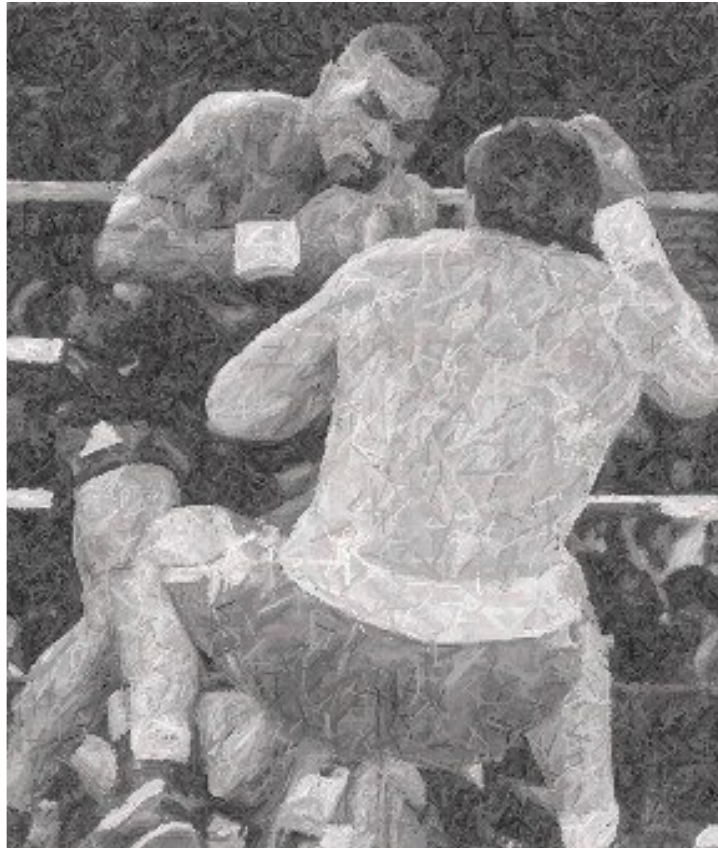
Our Vincent Van Gogh alone with his thoughts  
and his demons

Hypnotic with his raw and uncontrolled emotions

Uncontrolled emotions?

Not the flood of pigmented images flowing from mad mind,  
but the flood of curses flowing from the saddest mind  
in order to meet the expectations of those who want  
to see a walking devil

Our Vincent Van Gogh, immortal casualty of his art,  
afflicted virtuoso of the canvas





### The Battle of Love

After our touching fingertips part I know  
 we'll never be close to each other again  
 Yet I'll not regret our first kiss years ago  
 or find a salve for my torn heart's pain

True sweetheart

Find a salve for my torn heart's pain

I'll miss brushing your hair from my cheek  
 when you rested your head on my chest  
 and breathing as one without needing to speak  
 In darkness our minds, bodies, spirits found rest

True sweetheart

In darkness our minds, bodies, spirits found rest

I had never loved a woman with eyes of your hue  
 yet your sadness and longing that couldn't be veiled  
 drew me like a victim of a crone's spell to you  
 And against you, I discovered, all other women paled

True sweetheart

Against you, I discovered, all other women paled

Your wonderful smile – joy bringing – a gleam  
 Happy gentleness of a skippedy calf  
 I adored you, broke rules for you, and let my mind dream  
 But against the tide of reality drown-gulping I swam

True sweetheart

Against the tide of reality drown-gulping I swam

I could not with clear conscience make choices other  
 I swear that you'll be in my thoughts for all time  
 I know you lost patience, chose "security" with another, but  
 though I lost the battle I committed no war crime

True sweetheart

Though I lost the battle I committed no war crime

## Guilt

I really wonder who you are, lady,  
 and what you look like  
 You, who stare so intently at me  
     I can't see your eyes, but I sure can feel them!  
 and at the others standing equally worried  
     (All hiding their own fears?  
     No-one wanting to look guilty?)  
 in a tall-fat-short-thin row on my right and left

What instructions have you received?  
 I hope they told you to be sure,  
 to be absolutely, damned POSITIVE  
 before you point and say "him!"

I know you're there, lady, attempting to recall  
 those events, whatever they were  
 and struggling to bring back to your mind  
 the face of your attacker, whoever he was

I can't try to look any less like that bastard  
     God I wish I could  
 I haven't got a clue who he is,  
 or whatever it was (and where and why) he did to you

And although I'm sorry, yes I am,  
 that whatever happened was really bad  
     I know you wouldn't be here otherwise  
 I gotta confess that my thoughts  
 are only for me!  
     I'm scared, lady! Really scared!

I can't even see where you are behind that  
 one-way deaf-mute glass window.  
 Am I seeing shadows? Movements?  
 Oh shit, I'm looking guilty again!  
 Must look away, but where? Up? At my feet?  
 At the glass? Is that confident? Confrontational?

I can go? *What?* No. 5? That's me, right?  
Ah thank you, thank you God, ol' mate!  
Ah ha! We six are leaving, but two are staying.  
Evil bastard, whichever you are.  
I'm sure it's you, No. 6, 'cause you sure do look guilty.

### **Vessels**

Best to sip exquisite wine from beautiful vessels

Drinking a luxurious, velvety red  
from a thick-glass, practical family tumbler  
doesn't change the taste,  
just the experience

Best to listen to Elvis Costello  
without ever seeing an album cover

Best to read Robert Graves  
without ever seeing his photo

But best to read Hemingway  
while studying his!

### Highland Eden

Sandpaper rough winds strip life  
 from treeless hills of thistle and irritated soil  
 with locust efficiency,  
 leaving only resilient grasses, some surprisingly green,  
 to show that dead soil still lives.

Abrasion dries, etches lines of prematurity,  
 and breaks blood cells in cheeks and noses  
 which develop a ruddy grain  
 on the squinting faces of those who shepherd sheep  
 or watch shaggy cattle  
 which manage to find adequate life to chew  
 across the wild grasses divided, rarely, by rectangles  
 framed by piled stone walls.

Dawn's light groans to swim through  
 the haze of dripping mists  
 which hug the valleys and obscure neighbours' views.  
 The shifting greyness:  
 earth mother's petulance and wind-hatred?  
 An inevitable consequence of her failure to keep trees alive  
 where no more than grass, thistles and brambles  
 scratch and catch?

Yet hearts do beat, not on the slopes or heights,  
 but in the damp gullies  
 where tiny streams grow from silent gaps  
 between mossy rocks  
 before whispering, then burbling,  
 then babbling with excitement  
 as they wash over slimed rocks in swift rushes of joy  
 while the mother goddess clusters living things,  
 seen and unseen, in and alongside  
 those flowing arteries of life  
 where the sky's foul breath can't reach.

Revel in your freedom, you who sip the crystalline blood

that flows from springs deep inside the mother.  
 How bewitching is your ethereal activity:  
     boisterous and energetic  
 unseen and unheard except by a very few who sit  
     with eyes closed and ears blocked  
 until you give them delights of glimpsed manifestation.

Others think that the songs they hear  
 are the chill water's sweet caress of rocks  
     and saturated tree roots  
     Whereas your chatter,  
     although from sanctified incorporeality,  
 is something so jubilant that it would sweep  
 hatred from hearts and malice from minds,  
     But, alas, sweet spirits and nymphs,  
     you must perform dragonfly dances  
 and sing bird songs to an audience of your own kinds,  
     as well as to a few straying, happy poets

### Self-reflection

Boy, did folk misunderestimate me  
 and my destiny and  
 inherited legacy!

I always knew Dad was right:  
 Doin' *anythin's* sure better  
 than doing nothin'.

And, ya see, it doesn't matter  
 after all if *I* don't know  
 who the world leaders are.  
 My generals do.

### Twisted Tales

The Brothers Grimm must sleep poorly  
 knowing the violence Walt Disney and his  
 doodling disciples have done and keep doing  
 to wondrous tales  
 once told for their lessons and morality  
 to children, though not babes,  
 back in the age of forest and field  
 by peasants and artisans.

Why commit such a vicious crime, Walt,  
 by leaving out all the blood?  
 Why kill the meaning of the stories  
 by taking out the deaths?

Why gloss over infanticide?  
 Shouldn't children know that the tale of  
 Hansel and Gretel reflects a bygone reality:  
 that when families couldn't keep everyone fed  
 they couldn't keep everyone!

Oh, but it's entertainment.  
 You think that? Really?  
 Isn't the raw stuff of your family films  
 priceless cultural property  
 stolen from the Germans, French and others?

We live in more enlightened times.  
 Really? So taking Maori or Native American  
 or Aboriginal folk tales, stripping *them* of all morality  
 (or putting in your own),  
 sanitising them and robbing them of all didactic value  
 would be ok?

Entertainment? Enlightened times? Hah!  
 Tell that to Maori, Native Americans and others.  
 Their answers will be swift, deftly delivered and painful,  
 especially to what you think of most: your profits.

## Liberty

Free Speech  
is by no means free.

It comes with a price tag – an outrageous designer label.

A person must pay dearly,  
maybe a fortune,

if he or she wants to

write

say

*think*

something different from the majority's views

or, if a gutsy person is prepared to suffer the utmost loss,

something different from a minority's views.

Even being intellectually curious  
about some taboo topic or other,

benignly, may prove too expensive.

Critics,

never admitting they are

(they say they're the opposite),

claim free speech must be guarded  
in case someone abuses it

when what they really want is to  
lock it away in case someone *uses* it.

**Forgiveness?**

If I were a llama I'd spit at you,  
and watch you futilely try to wash off the icky stink.

If I were an elephant I'd kneel on you, but not *too* heavily,  
slowly forcing out breath and cracking a few ribs.

If I were a magpie I'd swoop down and peck your head,  
again and again and again as you run.

If I were a tarantula I'd give you the creeps,  
hairy-walking across your bare arm in bed then  
disappearing beneath it.

If I were a mosquito I'd itchy-bite the back of your neck,  
then buzz around, just out of swatting distance.

If I were a monkey I'd spring down onto you,  
screeching to deafen your ears that I'd also pull.

If I were a shark I'd tear just one leg off,  
then circle as you struggle to reach the shore.

If I were a komodo dragon I'd nip you,  
and infect you with my dripping septic saliva.

But I'm not.

I'm a man.

And I *choose*,

well, ...



**Napoleon's Retreat from Moscow, 1812**

We trudge, Great Emperor, in sodden peeling boots,  
while in a sealed carriage you ride

We trudge, in ice-ragged uniforms exposed,  
while warm blanket-wrapped you hide

We trudge, with few thoughts, and frozen feelings,  
while you plan your next grand acts

We trudge, knowing we've got nothing, and lost,  
while you scheme deception about the facts

We trudge, countless falling mutely every mile,  
while you complain about our pace

We trudge, and helplessly suffer attacks,  
while you idiotically order: "give chase!"

I trudge, little emperor, to my rigid death approaching,  
while you drink cups of steaming tea

I trudge, waiting and wanting to fall,  
while you dwell on fame's immortality

I drop, upon this road of frozen mud and slush,  
and see with unclosed eyes my final frosted breath

I arise – triumph! – and walk spiritedly,  
through an honour guard to mark  
my righteous soldier's death

### **Anu, Danu, Donau, Danube**

Life, I stand on your bank's edge, frightened of a  
 slip that might bring a struggle I could not win.  
 You flow by with no effort. I envy you.  
 You swirl as if some magic occurs within your darkest green  
 – the colour of the elm's fullness during twilight.  
 You flow forever, past. I have little to offer but  
 three silver coins and my hope that you will accept them  
 with my anguished prayers.  
 Let them sink through your swiftness to your stillness.  
 Let them join others' gifts  
 to clothe your bed in a radiant coverlet you have earned.

### **Thunderstorm**

I sit with Sylvia Plath  
 open.

Thunder tears my ideas  
 with the rip sound of newspaper.  
 It rains a cold shower  
 lit only by Hollywood B-grade lightning flashes.

Old spouting overflows. Waters spill;  
 a forgotten bath with taps left on.

Winds tug at washing that's pegged tight. They  
 tangle soaked sheets around the line with  
 noisy bluster.

I sit with Sylvia Plath  
 open.  
 Listening to her voice?

## The Centre of Our Universe

Pondering  
the nature of the godhead  
or the size of the universe  
                    challenges most minds,  
                    but  
pondering most minds challenges them even more.

Ah, read it again.

Perhaps an explanation:

It's impossibly hard for any human,  
and especially  
the very bright (the egocentric hardest of all),  
to imagine with clarity  
                    that is, truly visualise  
that all other individuals  
                    all six billion  
hear their own voices inside their heads – not yours – and  
hear them as vividly as you do inside yours.

Think about it.

Better still, close your eyes and  
think of your closest loved one's inner voice.

Are you not right now hearing *that* inner voice  
within that person's mind  
by imagining it with *your own* inner voice?

Tough to get your head around, huh?

**Your Suppliant**

Mistress Sleep,  
Dear Goddess!  
Hear my prayer:

Last night when you began to  
embrace me

I barely felt your touch

I was darkness-drawing a poem  
that I planned to write after breakfast.

It contained (if you'll forgive me for saying so)  
a fine idea; maybe even a little originality.

Our Lady, forgive me again.  
I don't want to sound accusatory,  
but you seem not to have returned that poem  
when you gave me back my thoughts this morning.

I have tidied my mind's clutter  
and searched it several times,  
thoroughly,  
but the poem's nowhere.

Might I ask, therefore, for your kindness?  
Please return to me the poem,  
or at least the idea that lay at its heart.

I don't mind waiting until you come tonight, Mistress.  
Return it to me as I reflect in darkness upon my day  
or, better yet, place it in one of the vivid dreams  
with which you have lately rewarded me.

**Young Missy**

Eleven climbs from her top bunk  
in a gap between dreams

Bunks red during day

Without colour, like everything, at night

Walks sleepy-stepping  
to the toilet with hands outstretched

Turns no lights on

Tinkles

Returns to bed

Bangs nothing

Climbs up and in.

What a skilful manoeuvre!

Eleven's father gave her a torch  
he no longer needed

small, red, with two AA-batteries  
visible through the plastic tube

Eleven walks sleepy-stepping to the toilet

One hand outstretched  
projecting unneeded light

Squinting  
Banging

What a waste of natural talent!

**Balkan Wanderers, 2.**

A local council placed them  
far from neighbours,  
but, without subtlety, near the bad-breath smile  
of a labour-hungry plastics factory.  
It gave them land  
invisible to all  
who don't search or stray.  
No-one does.

Their only road forgets it once wore gravel.  
Now it lets a half-flattened line of grass  
divide earth tyre-trails  
that wind through rust-protrusions  
way beyond the railway yards.

The beautiful chaos of a community –  
shanties, wagons, caravans,  
trucks, horses, pigs,  
more horses,  
and pencil-sharp unschooled children –  
laughs.  
Romanies belong to all lands  
and none.

Blackened by smoke  
from endless cigarettes,  
their lungs with every breath  
inhale a different source of cancer:  
their exclusion from the world of "gadzé,"  
the outsiders who never taste  
the sweetness  
of real freedom  
but often spit on them bilious ignorance.

### Faith

God have mercy on this  
 monotheist who  
 believes in other gods!  
 He throws himself  
 prostrate before You                      and Them!

### Daughter of the Rom

Neck                      smooth  
 Jaw                      strong  
 Lips    *mmm, soft to kiss?*  
 Nose                      strong and long  
 Lashes                      long and dark  
 Brows                      dark and thick  
 Tresses                      thick and wild  
                                  *Wild?*  
 Oh, her eyes!    Her eyes!  
                          *wild*  
                          **black**  
                                  *shining*  
                          **black**  
                                  *deep*  
                          **black**  
                                  *mysterious*  
                          **black**  
                                  *frightening*  
                          **black**  
                                  *loving*  
                          **black**  
                                  *beautiful!*

**Lifeblood**

Whenever we get  
little  
cuts we always  
suckorlick  
the blood

Whenever  
we bleed more  
werushtostemtheflow

but no longer with our lips

Whenever  
someone bleeds publicly  
in a crash or an act of  
violence  
we even  
scrub or  
hose away  
all traces of life

Mustn't we drink more than

a

few

drops?

Mustn't we even see more than

a

few

drops?



### Cumbrian Fisherman

Tidal mudflats glisten  
with cockle bumps and holes.  
They look firm enough for careful footsteps  
but will swallow to the shin, knees, thighs,  
then wait  
for returning sea  
to take the glued intruder.

Ah, Cumbrian fisherman,  
you know how to defy the mud.  
You, with your impossibly flimsy sled,  
over which you lean,  
belly and chest resting, weight dissipated,  
so you can propel yourself  
with your quick-moving weightless gumbooted feet  
that won't stick.

You gather cockles as your forebears always did,  
raking the wet brown paint  
for the hidden gems  
that soon fill the flax basket on your sled  
as you vanquish mud and tide;

easily

enjoyably

with grinning reward.

### **Marriage**

I have loved you for eighteen years  
And have never heard you sing.

I've heard you hum, and through the bathroom door  
I've caught notes, low and sweet.

You have loved me for the same eighteen years  
And have never seen me dance.

You haven't seen me even sway to a melody,  
Let alone hold you tight to music  
or take you up on a dance floor.

Yet I've seen you dance, and you've heard me sing.

What magic is this thing called marriage?

**Parenthood**

*That,*  
I instructed my  
grossed-out little daughters,  
making them peer from closer  
than they wanted to be  
at a dry-decaying  
squashed tabby  
in the gutter  
near our home,  
*is Death.*

Death!

*That,*  
I explained,  
between turned-away breaths,  
which they copied  
while also pinching their noses  
and, for some reason,  
squinting,  
is what happens  
to living things hit by cars.

*That,*  
I added,  
is quite different to merely  
drifting asleep  
and never waking up.

They grimaced  
at the smell of decay,  
and they saliva-swallowed  
at the cat's  
unnaturally distorted shape:  
flattened here, missing there.

They hated the spilled guts

that smelled bad  
and looked worse,  
but most of all they hated  
the bulging eyes  
and the strangely red  
protruding tongue.

My daughters have never played on the street,  
nor once – not even once –  
chased a ball that rolled out onto it,  
and now they ride their bikes super-safely.

*That,*  
I tell my friends with young children,  
who screw up their faces  
as if I'd committed an act of brutality,  
was one of the most valuable five minutes  
I've ever spent with my kids.



**East Harris**

Ice-scoured, flat, ignored land  
of rocks and waterlogged hollows  
extending as far as imaginations.

Winds rule unopposed, howling without pause.  
Did mighty earth mother surrender this melancholy land?  
With feigned sadness?

The harsh masters permit a few people  
– hard as the ground – to live  
in their ever-wet wilderness.

Don't the winds like the clatter of hoofs on hard stones  
that only they would hear?  
There's no grazing-beast food.

Dead stones lie so tightly together  
that only the strongest weeds,  
grasses and bogland plants  
can fight their way through overlooked grey gaps  
here and there  
to reach up  
into the despair  
of this treeless land.

They don't escape punishment for living.  
Winds eventually sense their presence  
and slay them.  
Their corpses reincarnate,  
after an eternity,  
as life-enabling peat  
for the few humans  
who love or hate this hard land.

### **Your Cruelty Scored**

Stretched wide atop thermals  
and circling in great sweeps  
you watch my demise with one eye  
unblinking at any time  
and wait for that one moment.  
You spiral down when it comes.

It hasn't! You must wait. Feather-flap up again  
and circle and circle. Watch.



You, a vulture called dove, shall not triumph.  
I don't want your sharp beak tearing my flesh  
or your talons digging deep to give you balance and  
leverage on my corpse. I don't want to smell  
your reeking breath. I shall not have to.  
Age is on my side.

### Crucifixion

My ear itched – deep inside.

My gold crucifix necklace  
lay on my desk  
where my proudly “pre-teen”  
daughter had left it.

A good kid. She likes catholic school  
and wanted to wear the crucifix.

I let her.

My teeth gritted when she said after school  
that she couldn’t find it.

She’d taken it off for gym  
And stuffed it  
into her bag.

It had gone.

You go check right through that bag, I said far too angrily.  
You go find it!

She did. And cried.

It soon shone on my desk,  
Christ-side down,  
chain bunched.

I hugged her tight and told her I loved her.  
She went to get her doll  
with “real” collagen lips.

My ear itched.

Thank God my daughter couldn’t see me.



I stuck the end of the crucifix – with Christ's feet –  
into my ear  
and twisted it around  
trying to kill the itch.

Even Christ's feet couldn't stop my ear itching.

My daughter returned.

She saw.

"Oh Pop," she said, shocked as if

she'd witnessed sin.

Maybe she had.

### Unwanted Perfection

Sky without clouds  
and life  
in all directions  
left a wanderer,  
    awed by crumbling pyramids,  
    isolated Bedouin tents  
    and corrugated desert sands,  
detesting that dry hot blue.  
It pressed upon his mind.

After eight days he noticed something.  
A promise of relief?  
Fifty miles away?  
Sitting low on the horizon,  
shadowy,  
threatening rain.  
At least coolness.

A dirty mirage? Two hours later his bus  
entered the cloud – Cairo's foul smog –  
above which stretched  
that same blue.

## Neo-Pagans

Neo-Pagans throng  
Stonehenge and lesser circles.  
Each solstice. Midsummer mainly. White-robed mobs  
looking like cousins in Alabama.  
Druids don't wear eye-slit white steeples and don't cuss  
Jews and Blacks. Only Christianity,  
capitalism, consumerism, free trade.

Pieces forced  
or forcing  
into a freshly painted Celtic jigsaw.  
Proclaiming an old age. Embracing the New.  
Beliefs chosen like supermarket lollies,  
taking what tastes good. A lolly mixture.

Vegetarians – mainly – unwilling to acknowledge,  
let alone swallow, the blood and flesh  
culture of their ancients. Remaining deaf  
to moans from peat-bogs.

Performing their  
Celtic rituals. Decorated often with  
symbols of post-Celtic medieval Wicca,  
at pre-Celtic sites, including  
that greatest of all circles. Its stones  
entered Salisbury earth a thousand years  
before any Celts arrived and the first Druids  
touched British oaks.

### Three-foot Christmas Tree

Our three-foot green-silver Christmas tree  
came from any department store.  
Eyes at home widened  
during “oh wow”-ing construction of its wire  
trunk and boughs  
and tinsel  
pine needles.  
Excited competitors squabbled  
as they adorned it with more tinsel. And more.  
Necklaces. Pearls of shining purple.  
They hung lolly-chains  
and candy canes.

Our sweet teeth overpowered our willpower.  
The smiling guilty.  
We ate. Devouring our tree’s beauty.  
Replacing it each day.  
We spiralled it with on-off-on-off lights.  
Can we turn them off  
altogether  
during The Simpsons?  
they asked.  
I weighed up their point:  
that nothing  
should  
distract the mind  
from what’s  
important.

### The Black Danube

Since April 1999 our ears have missed Strauss's  
 Blue Danube. They didn't like hearing it  
 in the White House,  
 and rewrote it as The black Danube.  
 It flows slick, thick,  
 with colour spectrums in the oil  
 that poured from shattered refineries  
 at Pancevo and Novi Sad.  
 Mercury – the element, not the god  
 (The only god involved  
 in this was a very happy Mars) –  
 will poison Strauss's love  
 for a thousand years,  
 long after it regains its colour.

Oh Strauss. They rewrote your river  
 deliberately  
 to hurt those  
 who lived with your music each day: Serbs.  
 The spoiling by bombs  
 now hurts *all* peoples  
 who live with it each day  
 as it flows eastward into the Black Sea.

The White House didn't like Milosevic's music.  
 Neither did most Serbs.  
 That gangster composed criminal symphonies.  
 He conducted them himself  
 from a tyrant's podium in Dedinje.  
 But in silencing him  
 flames and great spills  
 brought tears of oil to those who  
 mourn Strauss's silence  
 and still wait to waltz.

### The Battle

He  
sat at his desk trying to write words  
baring beauty.  
His mind roamed, far, in another of his forests? Eyes  
changing mysteries to  
words. Many unwritten and some on paper.

She  
took a phone call and argued with her boss. "Thirty cents  
more an hour? That's an insult. I'm worth more than that. I've  
worked hard for two years. Thirty cents? Thirty cents!"

He couldn't hear the telephone's raised voice.  
He knew it was justifying.  
He heard his wife's, justifying.

His poem vanished in a dissolving aspirin  
of disconnected images,  
for thirty cents more,  
and he returned from absence with the jerk of domesticity.

"Tell her that today's your last day there," he said.  
"If you don't feel valued, resign!"  
He left them to mutual annoyed justifications. No anger.  
Theirs or his; yet. It was building.

He sat in his lounge chair near his kids. A door muffled  
round two, and three. Who was winning?  
They watched anything  
on TV and didn't know.

Round four, and five. Then silence. A knockout?

Whose?

**Thus Fell Zarathustra!**

What if the West's hermit of  
muddy clarity,  
Zarathustra,  
left his sacred cave in  
the mountain  
to take his  
wisdom down  
to the village of fools who  
carried lanterns during daytime

then tripped over the s-gliding  
body of his beloved snake,  
frightening his dear eagle  
into frenetic flight, and  
crashed  
down,  
bleeding,  
head over heads,  
until his neck  
snapped  
on a tree root?

Who  
would then have  
informed the village fools  
(*us*, Nietzsche chided)  
that God was dead and they  
(no, *we*) had killed him?

Who would have told them,  
and vile Nazis (who sought to fly  
like Zarathustra's eagle but slithered  
on their bellies like his cold-blooded snake),  
that this was the age  
of the *Übermenschen*?

A pity he didn't trip.

**Gaia**

Your breathed life  
is cold this morning.  
I see your children,  
there ... there ... no, there!

Those who outlive me move least  
and frighten me.  
They caress and woo me into  
supplication.

I kneel on blue Levi knees  
that sink into the pine needles  
you shower me with.  
This baptism washes  
city sin from my conscience.

The spirit brushes dirt from my face,  
pulls at my untucked shirt,  
and asks me,  
too often, Mother,  
for what You told it to forget.  
Is my prayer for its death really so wrong?



**Kaikoura**

Eye and mouth-open excitement  
and a high-five-ish “Yesss!!”

Caught!

He flip-flapping flopped  
on the salt-dried wharf.  
Oh, the sight of frantic gasping!

Couldn't even look him in the eye.  
Drowning in air  
no-one had tasted.

Fumbling,  
unhooked his lip  
which hadn't stained my barb.

I thought it would,  
and “ouched” twice.  
Drops of red sneaked  
from my thumb.

Tried to return him  
but that spiny back fin  
and flip-flapping  
made him high voltage.

With him and me near the ends of our wits,  
I managed to squeeze hold.  
He plopped with no splash  
in water so murky I couldn't even see  
if he swam.

Damn!

### **Willows by the Bridge**

Joy-breathing kids pull your hair  
and swing like Tarzan  
or climb, though not as far as Rapunzel's prince.  
Young ones notice and like you  
more than any others.  
Is this why each primary school  
makes room for your sisters?  
Some end up alone and "out of bounds"  
but still children risk all to share their company.

O willows by the river,  
your dreadlocks create a soft shadow  
of shining frog-green tranquillity  
for dreamers, lovers and readers.  
Would mighty Caesar succumb  
to your beauty as he did to Cleopatra's?  
Would he write that he came,  
he saw and was conquered?

O willows by the river,  
you have truly conquered at least one heart:  
that of a poet who dreams, loves and read.  
He jealously asks, How many others?

## Swimming

Dad took us swimming  
at the pool in Takaka. He could swim.  
So could my brother. So could my sister.  
So could the man who hopped to the pool's edge  
on his only leg.  
I couldn't. But I watched that man's stump.  
A thigh, a scar. No knee.  
His plastic thing stood  
on the concrete near his wife.  
Wearing a sock and a black shoe. It balanced well.  
So did its owner, who teetered at the edge  
waiting for kids in the way to move  
so he could dive.  
His wink shattered my long stare. Mum  
did that elbow in the side thing  
that mums do when their kids embarrass them.  
She did it again. And, I think, again.  
Maybe his wink hadn't worked after all. His dive did!

And boy, could he swim! Like Johnny Weismuller  
(Dad was a fan of the "original" Tarzan), but didn't  
the king of the jungle have two legs?  
He swam and swam, and I watched and watched.  
His stump made no splash as it moved up and down  
next to his kicking leg. I couldn't wait to see how Johnny,  
king of the jungle, would get out of the pool. Would he hop  
up the steps in the deep end? Or pull himself up  
anywhere along the edge with his mighty arms,  
muscled from vine-swinging? Would his wife bring his leg?  
Dripping wet and in swimming togs only,  
would he put on a dry leg  
with a sock and shoe?  
I never saw.  
Mum sent me off to get ice-blocks.  
She knew what she was doing. When I returned  
Tarzan and Jane were gone.

**City**

City breathes in, out  
each January, November.  
Minds come, go home,  
giving energy, stealing it.  
Winds blow, rain annoys  
all year. Even in the  
neither-hot-nor-cold summer, winter.

Trees compete for dominance, and win.  
Leaves in fall are this city's gold  
but even Highbury's celebrities  
don't see value. Blind as moles  
they battle against themselves and  
dig deeper holes to crawl into. Our main  
media attraction; them and court cases.

Old people, young. The Plaza their beehive.  
Tuesday five-dollar nights create queues.  
Movies remove them  
from home for two hours,  
then let them go. Only The Warehouse  
has such power. And bars, every second step.

Teenagers swing and drink in the Gardens on  
Friday, Saturday evenings. On kids' things.  
Their tale of boredom falls on trees  
and dark sawdust and bark paths.  
Who else listens?

### **The Intruder on Grey Street**

Secured to an iron perch  
by same-colour  
painted bolts and welding,  
– looking like a washing machine,  
I heard children say – you tell us  
that freedom is not absolute.  
Sanctioned paparazzi, your flashbulb  
intrudes, but we can't  
lash out with Sean Penn's anger  
and smash you in the face  
(Christ cleansing the temple).  
You impose  
from the safety of loftiness.  
Whose conscience whispered?  
The city's?  
Whose mind decided?  
The mayor's?  
When? Why were we not asked?

## Boy Racers

Pallid fighter aces  
in arrogant beanies  
and baggy jeans  
fly faster than their tattoos  
through irreplaceable youth  
and around their square.  
A white cross quivers, high,  
without Christ's sagging body  
in heavy air that echoes snarls  
of savage gear changes.

Suburban eyes see only  
melanoma spots  
on an old man's ears.  
Danger and noise  
in lowered seats and  
fat exhausts conceal the joy  
and triumph of power  
with few limits. Teenage girls  
with piercings notice. Admiring,  
they masquerade. Cool and lethal  
they drink and join.

Thumping bass beats inflict  
stress fractures on welding,  
eardrums and upholstery.  
Without mercy they torment  
others idling at lights.

Heroes of their mirrors,  
they zigzag through Fitzherbert's  
lanes and traffic  
like slalom skiers,  
breaking hard for the camera,  
then not.

They swerve left  
well before the university  
to snake up to a car park  
where true life is taught.



### **The View from Anzac Park**

Who cares about the golden orange panorama  
of night-time street lights that separate  
lines and squares of ink black where houses  
with curtained windows are?

Ask the moths.

They ignore houses to love street lights.  
No-one at Anzac Park sees any lights for  
more than ten minutes – except, maybe,  
a glimmer of agreement  
reflecting from lovers' eyes.

Cursed by heavy fogs that dampen  
only the inside of car windows, this sacred site  
of flat asphalt and infinite view pulsates  
to more racing heartbeats  
than ever found on a basketball court.  
But dead seriousness pervades Pork Chop Hill  
like the spirit of a UCOL exam room.  
This is a solemn business.

Elbows become constrained  
by door handles and window winders,  
and knees by gear sticks  
and other knees.

Discomfort surrenders  
momentarily  
to delirium for many,  
disappointment for some  
and the start of  
life-time regrets for others.

Discomfort returns  
a night later.



### **Cathedral of the Holy Spirit**

The Mother of God  
sings lullabies to no-one but  
everyone as birds and car fumes  
slowly corrupt the glory of her paint.  
Gazing down on a dull stretch of Broadway  
away from the commotion of Downtown, She  
presides over masses  
with unblinking focus  
and whispers of delicious reassurance.

Sundays bring a smile. A throng  
equal to that of a hazy pub the night before  
walk through doors she can't bend to see.  
Songs float up, mixed with the smells  
of perfume, after-shave and carbon dioxide.

She savours life and raises a delicate eyebrow.  
Above her a spire stretches to the height  
of Jack's beanstalk. White for forty kilometres  
it beacons and beckons. A lighthouse  
for voyagers seeking a point of reference,  
it guides them – home.

**Morris Street**

Pizza and  
Tui beer boxes  
add warm-smelling colour  
to Morris Street's peeling verandas.  
Spring-spilling couches laze.  
Cars held together by faded stickers collapse  
everywhere, dead and dying,  
on grass that grows around their rust.  
Mud also grows,  
spreading from tyre tracks  
as quickly as it can  
before summer turns it  
into arid desert.  
Narrowed by parking, often crooked,  
the street has shrunk to a single lane  
flanked by crumpled, decaying letter boxes  
broken off their poles.  
The street burps with alcohol and  
fish'n'chip breath  
and babbles  
with never-ending rugby idolatry.  
Old residents, living like dissidents,  
emerge, stretch and relax in summers.  
The young wander as nomads  
to other hunting grounds,  
returning,  
with pizza and beer,  
when semester starts.

**Massey Bridge**

Scarfies and boys  
accelerate with adrenal pleasure.  
All others claim normality.  
They touch breaks and slow,  
distrusting the narrow lanes  
squeezed on by a council  
that gulped at the cost of a brother bridge.  
Wincing claustrophobia  
confounds efforts to steer perfectly straight.  
Drivers make a vibrantly conscious  
left-right-left-right series  
of tiny steering corrections  
that keep them from cars alongside,  
all suffering the same flu shivers  
and trucking close enough  
for hairy, wind-blown spiders to step  
from one car's side mirror to another's.  
Spiders and drivers seldom weep for  
lost lovers, but now and then they do –  
Evening Standard pages blotting their tears –  
for those with cut-down seats and cigar exhausts.

### The Heart of the Place

Hail, Te Peeti Te Awe Awe.  
What has become of your legacy?

You have stood guard  
over duck ponds for a century

since your great heart ceased  
and Italians cast you in marble

as cold as winter sleet and placed you  
lamppost high above a new domain:

seventeen pretty acres of manicured European pomp  
that now reeks with dread of night violence and

public toilets that few without a quest dare visit.  
Alphabet flowers and Lewis Carroll lawns

give work to gardeners and pleasure to those  
who buy postcards at Bennets. Who else?

A few children taking their mothers for walks  
throw bread at The Square's residents.

Retail workers venture in as far as the food caravans  
and the brave or hurried cut across.

Great Rangitane prince, when did we forget,  
or cease to learn

that Te Marae O Hine, the Daughter of Peace,  
came as a gift, intended as a meeting place

vibrant with humanity? Prescience abounding,  
you wanted Maori and Pakeha together. You birthed a city.

Your unblinking gaze is seldom mirrored and your name

now means little to most. Yet some, prince,  
see your vision and share and smile. They know  
you watch over ducks – and far more.

### Love

I breathe in perfect darkness without a clue,  
but I feel your throat  
with my thumb and fingers  
and notice you swallow.  
Your heart beats, and I copy.

I hear nothing in the black,  
and your soft lips meet mine and I know  
your eyes are closed. Gently.  
I smell your shampoo and guess the fragrance.

Long lashes blink unseen in the vacuum  
of that gift. You cannot know you possess  
it until you have given it away.  
Yearning I wake.

### Terrace End Cemetery

Green gates open  
 as a silent, yawning mouth  
 to a world of old cracked concrete  
 and weedy shingle paths  
 and a council sign that brightly proclaims  
 – with rusting indelicacy –  
 that our forebears' sacred site of sleep  
 is part of the city's clomping Heritage Trail.

Headstones once as white as the bones they name  
 grow intolerant of their grey-green lichen life  
 and the stains of weather-washed lettering paint.  
 Humiliated by grubbiness,  
 many stones have chosen to end it all.  
 Their broken remains lie as a testament to their shame.

Mary's gorgeous legs of marble  
 stand next to her separated torso  
 and a pretty head that rolled a pace away.  
 Baby Christ never woke within her cradling arms.  
 He smiles asleep.  
 O Mother, blessed be, you kept him safe.

In street-side lawns  
 evergreen trees glorify the immortality of souls.  
 Yet inside the cemetery's low-slung mossy boundary  
 all trees weep.  
 Their skeletal limbs and decomposed leaves  
 sigh "we are sorry".  
 Sparrows pecking worms hear their whispers and ask  
 who it was that planted deciduous trees in a graveyard.

An eight-sided chapel, too small for human use,  
 stands glum and locked with a giant's padlock.  
 Spiders' webs, birds' nests  
 and fresh white paint hold together  
 this café for lonely spectres. It's far cosier than the two or

three rotting concrete crypts  
with doors of paint-peeling steel and scratched graffiti  
that look like bank vaults  
or solitary confinement cells.

### **Baghdad Downpour**

My house is a hole

I hold a photograph  
and cry for you

How can I live  
alone?

My house is a hole

I climb in to search  
and find fragments

I hold your hand  
which seeps

**Ellan Vannin Veg Veen, 839 AD\***

I was straying on the beach as warships glided in  
but no-one took notice of a no-one like me;  
a knot-haired ragged girl with a dirty face,  
a wild daughter of winds that rage free.

The strangers waded through feet-freezing shallows,  
bent, stretched their backs and laughed with great bellows.

Those large hairy men with swords, axes and spears  
threw nothing worse than cruel eyes my way  
as I slipped out of sight, then raced home to warn  
my gentle people of the brutes in the bay.

Sprinting, heart pounding, feet tripping I fell,  
terrified of them who by ships came from hell.

I shouted with strong curse-filled cries  
to make the village heed my frightened warning  
but my thirteen-year-old voice made no noise  
in the market hubbub of that bright winter morning.

Bleeding sore-footed I hopped in torn shoes  
to my family who'd listen to a scared daughter's news.

Father jumped up from repairing his nets  
and, studying my expression, believed.  
He pulled me to tell the old ones and headman  
of the death threat that he grimly perceived.

Heart beating swiftly I talked tongue-tripping  
of the giants who strode from the sea, evil dripping.

Our headman had us all flee to the stronghold  
that served green-mossed as our sanctuary;  
ancient beyond knowledge and often repaired,  
doors barred, it would offer at least some safety.



Praying we all cowered inside the stone walls  
awaiting the attackers' frightening horn calls.

Soon we saw them pass by in the distance.  
They took little notice of wealth-less fisher-folk,  
who hid safe in a thick-walled squat tower.  
They mocked us, baring arses, as a humiliating joke.

After two days of silence we dared to go out  
to no sign of them who'd have killed us no doubt.

Yet father lamented several days later,  
While standing forlorn with tears beside me,  
that the next over village, far richer, had suffered,  
all men cut down without a shadow of mercy.

And our safe, grieving village will never forget  
what they owe to a girl who outran a death threat.

\* This poem is based on a purportedly true story told to me three decades ago by one of my uncles, whose heart still yearns for his homeland, the wondrous Isle of Man ("Ellan Vannin Veg Veen"). I have used a Manx verse structure to express its simple magic.

**Winning First**

Can you swing temptation  
like a priest's gold incense burner  
with wafts of pungent purity?

Can you stitch the martyr's hole I tore  
in my grey shirt above my heart  
with cotton of the same hue?

Can you flick a penny from your thumb  
so that it casts sunbeams in my eyes  
before landing head-up in triumph?

Will you lie down on train tracks  
and rest with eyes shut  
while I drop pebbles from a bridge?

Will you hold your breath in the bath  
while you wash off shampoo  
and think of tomorrow?

**Algiers**

Heaven here  
and happiness

Faces like coffee  
Hearts of chocolate

I remember and hum

Sleeping on pillows  
not walking through fire

You remember and sing