



The Pop Artist's Garland

Selected Poems 1952-2009

F W N Wright

edited by Mark Pirie

The celebrated poet Eileen Duggan and the influential editor J H E Schroder were among the early appreciators of Niel Wright's verse. This selection draws on six decades of writing, 120 Books of Wright's epic poem *The Alexandrians* as well as his *Post-Alexandrian* work, and displays an extraordinary and wide-ranging talent.

Avoiding the narrow constraints of a regionalist poetry or the bohemian outlook of the Wellington group of poets, Wright has consistently forged his own path and poetic style since the 1950s often at odds with contemporary fashion and modernist/postmodernist tendencies. As with the English poet Robert Bridges, he has sought above all to renew the prosody.

Skilled in many traditional forms such as the triolet, the epigram, the ballad, the ode, the sonnet and the lyric as well as classical and epic narrative verse, the selection presents for the first time a generous sampling of his prolific output and reveals his original and remarkable voice in New Zealand poetry.

... a delight to see the classics revived in a comparatively new land and in an age alien to them. – Eileen Duggan, personal correspondence

... a witty turn of phrase ... – James K Baxter, *New Zealand Listener*

... a poet of unusual range ... Mr Wright's use of prosody and his use of half-rhymes and assonances often recall those of Wilfred Owen.
– Peter Dronke, *Landfall*

... a pot-pourri of astonishing richness, lyrical in its presentation but with a strong narrative thread. – Michael Gifkins, *New Zealand Listener*

THE POP ARTIST'S GARLAND

Frank William Nielsen Wright was born in Sydenham, Christchurch, in 1933 and educated at Christchurch Boys' High School and Canterbury University and Victoria University of Wellington (where he was awarded his PhD in 1974). His major literary work is the epic poem, *The Alexandrians*, published in 120 Books from 1961–2007. In 1966 he received international recognition with the publication of his collection, *The Imaginings of the Heart* (Book 7 of *The Alexandrians*), through The Chiron Press, Kansas, USA. His awards include the Bevan Brown Memorial Prize for Classics, 1951, and the W E Collins Prize in English Literature, 1965. As a publisher, writer, and critic, Wright has authored and published since the 1970s a wide range of books/pamphlets on literature, mostly focusing on New Zealand literature. Father of two children, he lives in the Wellington suburb of Northland with his wife. He is currently involved in running the Poetry Archive of New Zealand Aotearoa, with Michael O'Leary.

Mark Pirie is a Wellington poet, publisher, anthologist, critic and writer.

Also by F W N Wright

(select list)

Poetry

The Alexandrians (Books 1-120, in 40 volumes), various editions
Post Alexandrian Poems, ongoing, various editions

Novels

Underprivileged Lovers
Strangers in the Blood

Plays

A Man of Conscience

Anthologies

Wellington Panorama, with Allan Potter
Canterbury Prospect: Memoirs of a Landscape

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Ruth Gilbert: An Account of Her Poetry
The Unlikeliest Litterateur: Mary E Richmond
A Reading of the Poetry of Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk
A Reading (in Part) of the Poetry of Louis Johnson
Theories of Style in the Schroder-Marris School of
Poets in Aotearoa
Wellington Poetry in the 1960s, a memoir
Of Critics and Teachers of Poetry in Aotearoa
Blood in Her Cup: A History of the Muse in Aotearoa
A R D Fairburn and the Women Poets of 1948 in Aotearoa
Two Wellington Poets: W H Oliver and Vincent O'Sullivan
Karl Wolfskehl Among the Kiwis, a memoir
Putting Stead to the Question
Further Readings in the Poetry of Louis Johnson

As editor

The Street by J H E Schroder
Heine Poems translated by John Liddell Kelly
Con Art: Selected Poems by Michael O'Leary
John Pine Snadden's World War II Poems
Complete Poems by M. L. Nicholls, 2 vols.

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HEADWORX
WELLINGTON

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Many of these poems were previously collected in varying form in published Books of *The Alexandrians*, published by Pegasus Press, Christchurch, from the 1960s and thereafter from Original Books/Cultural and Political Booklets, Tè Aro, Wellington.

More information on Niel Wright at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niel_Wright

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

At the completion of Niel Wright's epic (or anti-epic) poem, *The Alexandrians*, in 2007, I felt it would become necessary to make a fresh selection from Wright's 3,000 extant poems to renew public interest.

Niel Wright's poetry has of course been published in selections by the author previously at various stages, but this is the first time an edition covering the whole of his oeuvre has been attempted.

In presenting Wright's work for the purposes of this book I have selected primarily work that is readily accessible to the public. As George Barker's editor and biographer Robert Fraser once wrote: 'A *Selected Poems* is an invitation to sample and to appreciate, a significant *mêlée*, a box where sweets compacted lie.'

In doing so I have tried to represent every type of poem Wright has written in *The Alexandrians* and beyond: epigrams, triolets, odes, pop songs, sonnets, epic and classical narrative verse, lyrics, elegies and ballads. Wright is perhaps our foremost trioletteer and epigrammatist and has achieved distinction in many forms.

Wright's influences are mainly traditional: Wordsworth, Wilfred Owen, Robert Bridges, the Elizabethans, Milton, Shelley, the Georgians, the Spasmodicals, the PreRaphaelites, the 1880s in English literature, Dante, Racine, classical Greek and Latin poets, as well as New Zealand's other epic writer Alfred Domett, but he also acknowledges his debt to Pound's *Cantos*.

Versions of the poems I've selected here will vary against recent texts published by the author. Various editions of *The Alexandrians* exist, and in many cases I have reverted back to the earlier, less idiosyncratic punctuation style of the Pegasus Press editions of *The Alexandrians* in the 1960s.

While the poems are presented in chronological order, I have attempted to weave some narrative threads to the selection to give readers a sound introduction to many aspects of *The Alexandrians*.

An expository essay on *The Alexandrians* would seem out of place in a popular presentation of Wright's work such as this. It is hoped readers will be inspired further to seek out, read and scrutinise *The Alexandrians* at a later date.

Mark Pirie

THE YOUNG MEN

O the young men are dumb
At the knowledge of the truth.
But the old men are singing,
“We have lost all our youth.”

O the young men are mad
At the emptiness of life.
But the old men are singing,
“We are too old for a wife.”

O the young men are dead,
And are better so I think.
But the old men are singing,
“Let us eat. Let us drink.”

1952

THE FETTERS

Though fetters of iron are like cobweb
And stone walls like fog,
I'll fetter my spirit with words
And wall up my mind in a sentence.

1952

THE WORLD'S ALWAYS IN RUINS

The world's always in ruins.
We did the best we could.
There's no way through the woods.
We'll keep on going.

We're always at the bottom,
Always against the wall.
We'll stand and just keep calm.
We've simply got to.

1953

HELL AND HIGH WATER

(song)

A man has got to live
The best way that he can.
Ain't no alternative,
A man must be a man.

Then love me, baby,
Then love me all you can.
If you don't love me, baby,
I ain't a man.

The world is pretty rough.
So what? I ain't afraid.
A man must do his stuff.
It's just the way he's made.

Then love me, baby,
Then love me unafraid,
Coz when you love me, baby,
I've got it made.

Hell and high water,
Come what may be,
I'll love my baby
Like I oughta.

1959

IN PORIRUA EAST

In Porirua East
The image of the Beast
Is voiced like Walter Nash.
He gives his people cash.
His number on their necks
Is Sex and Sex and Sex.
“Eden regained,” the voice
Declares, “is yours. Rejoice.
We give to every beast
Food, clothes, and house at least.”
It makes me melancholy
To hear this blatant folly.
Ah God, let Christ descend
And Mankind’s sickness end.

1963

THE EGOIST

I’m an impersonal egoist,
If such a thing can exist.

1963

ROOM FOR LOVE

i

In a one roomed flat,
On the blue bedspread
Of a bed that furnishes

The place of a settee,
By a table that
Is covered with dishes

A woman lazes.

ii

My beloved blazes
Like a sun blood-red
Setting over water;

Like the imaged avatar
Of an Indian godhead
Dying by suttee;

Like the golden disk
Which Pizarro wrenched
From an obelisk

In the Inca's city.
Yet I gaze against
Her as an eagle gazes.

1963

NIGHT PIECE

The still, dark night without a moon
Takes in its embrace the all of man.
Houses and boats seem to detach
From hill and water at its touch.

The land and sea blend with the ether.
Objects of each now go with either.
Stars into water, clouds into hill
Are changed. Parts are as if the whole.

All being is fused in the miasma
Of night. Now only the dry asthma
Of the still sea breathing hard
On rocks, and the sky on trees is heard.

1963

THE WATERTANK

Alone under the infinite
cycle of night,
I stand beside an indistinct
vast watertank.
I find in its hollow clanging
a sense of belonging,
In its dark, reverberate shape
a companionship.
Nearby, the masts that broadcast
news to the coast,
Lit up, to serve as a beacon,
seem to beckon.
From the harbour waters below,
rustle of flow,
And over it the chugging sound
of a launch, ascend.

1963

ELIOT

He spoke of hollow men. And after,
What is left? but hollow laughter.

1964

DANTE

Why was Dante terse?
Because he wrote in tercets.

1964

THE REGION

We sought the regional
And found the commonplace.
Wishing to be original
We sought the regional.
Wishing to be original
In an uncommon place
We sought the regional
And found the commonplace.

1966

THE VISIONARY

What can it mean?
Blood on the moon,
Death on the sun.
These I have seen.

I saw a sign:
Death on the sun,
Blood on the moon.
What can it mean?

1966

BIOGRAPHY

Worked for the New Zealand Pissed Office.

1966

BYRON

Man's intellectual acuity
Reveals no more than his vacuity.

1966

THE GARDEN

The garden of the rose
No wind shall mar or wither,
If any such arose.
The garden of the rose
Where our contentment grows
Is safe from angry weather.
The garden of the rose
No wind shall mar or wither.

1966

THE PINES

As the day concluded,
I watched the golden disk
Sink in the west unclouded,
And leave me in the dusk.

The land was a dark shape
Under the brilliant stars.
Its silhouette was sharp.
Nearby the ocean stirs.

The moon rose from the range
Of foothills on the left,
Like an enormous orange
That the night held aloft.

Below I hear the pines
Along the hillside brace
Their surf-like sounding spines
Against the wind's embrace.

1966

IN BABYLON

I

In Babylon the people weep.
Where is their consolation?
Here is the proof, God does not sleep.
In Babylon the people weep.
He lays the city in a heap,
And makes a desolation.
In Babylon the people weep.
Where is their consolation?

II

In Babylon the people howl
Over such desolation.
With the wild ass, jackal, and owl,
In Babylon the people howl.
Neither for man nor beast nor fowl
Is any consolation.
In Babylon the people howl
Over such desolation.

1966

THE MAN FROM HIROSHIMA

i

I came to Hiroshima before the war
To preach to the Japanese that all men were
Brothers and so should love one another.
When the war came I changed neither
My address nor my message.
The Japanese received my sage
Counsel with a gentle kindness,
Perhaps in sympathy for my blindness.

Then the event happened which challenged
All my convictions and plunged
Me into despair, though it did not last.
I was in the street when I felt the blast
Of the atomic explosion. A haze as
Of the hottest day enveloped the houses
And businesses of Hiroshima.
The whole landscape seemed to shimmer
In a light so bright the sun was eclipsed.
Then all at once the buildings collapsed.
And looking up from the ground
Where I had been thrown, I saw a grand
Incandescent pillar of fire ascend
From the ruined city with a roaring sound.

ii

Even in my original stunned
Condition I could understand
The significance of what I had witnessed,
At least in part. While I was nursed
Back to some sort of health among the thousands,
Paying as I was for mankind's sins
My understanding increased.
All my hope in that Christ
Whom I had preached to my parish
Had perished, when I saw that parish perish.
In that city reduced to a heap
Of rubble, I saw the end of hope,
So long my mainstay, that there was a God
Somewhere beyond us who had regard
For mankind and would intervene
In human affairs with his divine
Strength and kindness and wisdom
To save erring man from his doom.
But I had been taught to expect no
Such thing in future any more than now.

Man was alone. And upon this fact
My mind was focused with terrible effect.
The thought of man abandoned in the waste
City he had made filled me with the worst
Despair that deepened as I examined
His situation and darkened my mind.

iii

But gradually a better
Realisation, though a very bitter
One to be sure came to be mine
The more I continued to examine
The situation. If there was no God
To shepherd men to their own good,
There was man himself. I saw that he
Sought to be equal with the Most High.
And I saw that he would come to have an
Image like that of God in heaven.
I saw in fact that in the image and
Attributes of God, man had imagined
The model of what he wished to be,
And will be, I doubt not, by and by.
Then for an hour I threw off my despair
At the prospect of seeing man appear
Visibly a god in action and power.
I could even disregard
The suffering needed to make a god,
Even the destruction, which I had seen
At Hiroshima and still saw in the scene
Of ruin about me. But then I recalled
That our ideal God is to be equalled,
Not just in action and power but just as
Fully in rectitude and justice.
Man shall have the power to do good
To himself, as if he was a god.

But he shall have the power to condemn
Himself to, though perhaps not to redeem
Himself from a justified doom.

iv

I have looked on the works of man and declare
The evidence against him full and clear.
Man by his own ideal of justice deserves
Condemnation. He who denies this deceives
Himself, and by his own stubbornness prolongs
The time till the consummation for which he longs.
In the atomic bomb mankind has the means
To execute the sentence which the law demands:
The end of his species. Then let him not delay
To make use of the means. I saw the bomb lay
Hiroshima flat. I saw man send his deliverance
From turpitude, inanity and ignorance.
Man has evolved highly enough to realise
That human existence is evil. His good lies
Simply in using the means that he has to abolish
Himself and his world. It is no good to embellish
A coffin, however attractively, or to medicate
An animal for whom life is death. Let us dedicate
Our lives then to the supreme task which is to erase
And extirpate every vestige of the human race.

v

Accept this truth. And take it to heart.
Man is a failure and exists only to the hurt
Of his own species and of the others and the planet.
This is the simple truth. Accept it. And learn it.

Man is a destroyer. Then at the earliest date
Let man destroy himself, himself liquidate.
Then at least the ruins of the world will remain
Intact for the successors of man.

This is the simple truth. Attend to it. And hear it.
The rat will succeed. The rodent will inherit.
It is time for mankind formally to invest
The rats with the deeds to the cities they infest.

The rat will succeed. Already they inhabit
Man's world in great numbers. Then let them have it.
Let the rat have his chance. Let him not be deprived
Chance to prove the success that man has not proved.

Accept this truth. And take it to heart.
The rat is our better whom we should not hate.
Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life
For the betterment of rodents. Such is my belief.

1968

FLOWERS

Flowers of autumn, flowers of spring
To your graveside I will bring.
This seasonal tribute I
Will offer to your fallen beauty.
While you lived I overlooked it.
I found it only when I lacked it.
Not at all could I have guessed
At that time that to your ghost
At your graveside I would bring
Flowers of autumn, flowers of spring.

1968

THE REMEMBRANCE

Far from the vast landscape where I was born
These fifteen odd years have I been
Living as if in a cosy prison
Among hills and harbours with confined horizons.

But often of late I find that at memory's beck
And call my mind is summoned back
Bodily to the Canterbury Plains
And I approach them again as if by aeroplane.

Once more I see, or at least fancy
I see, as in my infancy,
The Alps maintain their stance
White, sharp, cold as ice in the close distance.

Once more I see the tussock strewn landscape
Where the rivers have riven many a scarp,
And the land as it grows balder
Reveals a white rash of shingle and boulders.

I have experienced that landscape often,
Felt its heat on a day like an oven,
Alone with neither water
Nor shade in a terrain where a man might well ask quarter.

I have seen the trees that tattoo the terrain
Beaten with wind and torrential rain
Likewise fighting back under
The immense onslaught of hail and heavy thunder.

Through this landscape I have also travelled
Along a ribbon that night unravelled,
Borne by an insane train
Through the phantasmagoria of the terrain.

How often have I seen as once more I see
The short curve of the bounding sea
Weave headlands each to each
Securely by means of a nearly invisible arch.

It is surprising to me, surprising and strange,
That my mind in this way should range
Over this bizarre landscape,
From which I in body have made my escape.

There are doubtless reasons which explain
Why my mind goes back to the plain.
But to me cause and effect
Are of little concern. What matters is the fact.

1968

THE TOWER ON THE BOSPHORUS

i

So lovely and so dear
To him was Hero that he would dare
The ocean, even an ocean on fire.
Not at all would he fear
The billows, whatever their size.
But he would attempt those seas,
And heedless what winds or tides forbid,
Swim to his Hero's bed.

Not rhetoric this, for the lovers lived
Each on a shore that the Hellespont laved,
He at Abydos, at Sestos she.

Then let but his beloved show
A torch by night in her tower on high
To be his guide. And thereby he
Would swim the straits and reach his haven.

He would not regard any star in heaven,
Bootes' car or fell Orion.
Her star alone would he keep his eye on.

ii

"Dear Hero, you must make
That light which serves as my landmark
Your constant care. Your guard
Must most of all be good
When winter's ruinous weather casts
Tumult over the straits and coasts.
Then must you keep best watch
Over that single torch upon which
My life depends that the storm not doubt
It. Or I am dead sans doubt."

iii

Alone on the shore with the waves leaping,
And tumbling before him, as lacking in rest
As his love-agitated breast,
Leander, when all the world is sleeping,
Ready and all too eager to leave
The safety of the shore, keeps watch
Across the waves for the torch light which
Is to summon him, so he thinks, to love.
Little he thinks that the light will deprive
Him of his life, but so it will prove.

iv

The lovely Hero has made her ascent
Into the tower and set the lamp.
The young Leander is quick to glimpse
The signal over the water sent.
A fire to match the one he sees,
Suddenly Leander feels.
Then on his aghast ears there falls
The gigantic roar of the surging seas.

Love is cruel. For see, love urges
 Leander into the ocean's surges.
 The man is on fire. Then how can water
 And fire together quarter?

Yet Leander is strong in courage
 And dares to trust the waves for carriage.
 He does not let the threats of winter
 Make him afraid to enter.

Did not the lovely Venus safely
 Rise from the ocean's troubled surf?
 Leander from both may she deliver,
 The sea and the pangs of a lover.

"I saw it all. And so I know
 All that befell," said Ino.

Leander cast
 His vesture off. Then with it tied
 About his head he leapt into the tide
 And struck out boldly from the coast,
 Himself the pilot and the ship.
 By that bright light he sailed,
 That beacon over which
 Hero kept constant watch
 Against the sharp
 Night winds that assailed.
 Against each blast that blows
 She screened the torch's blaze,
 Until at last on to that coast
 She saw the surges cast
 Leander safe from the sea's harms.
 Then she ran to him with open arms.

vii

Home through the dim
 Landscape she led the boy, both dumb
 With joy, and brought him to her bed, high
 In the tower. There from his body,
 Still panting with its strenuous
 Exercise,
 She cleansed the ooze
 Of the rough seas.
 Then smiling an ingenuous
 Smile, to her white breast
 The youth she pressed
 And bade him take his ease.

“Too long, lover and bridegroom,
 Have you suffered on the grim
 Bosom of the sea.
 Now let sweet joy succeed.
 And after your hard labours rest
 On my white breast.”

viii

There were no guests. There were not any
 Witnesses to that ceremony.
 No wide spread invitation brought
 The dancers out to celebrate.
 There was no music, hymn or anthem,
 To sound congratulations on them.
 There was no priest with prayers and chants
 Invoking heaven against mischance.
 No well-wishers were there. No parents,
 Friends or relatives made an appearance.
 A dark and silent night concealed
 The service where their love was sealed.

ix

Now winter bursts out of the north
 And ravages all that lies beneath.
 On all below his agent's seize:
 The frosts on forests, the storm on seas.

At his bidding the wild winds rise.
 They in turn the whirlpools raise.
 They in turn the deep storms rouse.

The lightning flashes. The thunder rumbles.
 Then even the able sailor trembles
 And no more dares to sail the waters,
 But drags his boat to winter quarters.

x

But the bold youth little esteems
 The dangers of the winter storms.
 For love has made Leander blind
 To everything on sea and land,
 To everything within his sight
 Except the headland opposite
 To which his ever eager gaze
 In constant expectation goes,
 Whose signal he cannot deny,
 Not though a winter storm is nigh,
 Not though the omens of the sky
 Proclaim the crossing to be risky.
 He is too ardent to be sure
 And safe upon a distant shore
 When once that light blazes abroad
 That summons him unto his bride.
 Set that torch light within his ken,
 Not even the furious tempest can
 Keep him at home in his warm bedding.
 But go he will at Hero's bidding
 Once more upon his wild adventure.
 At her signal he will venture.

xi

Ah, Jupiter, behold.
 The light burns in the tower,
 The light that Hero holds
 To bring Leander to her.
 Leander sees it gleam
 Across the stormy gloom.
 Could she not have passed
 The night without her lover?
 Ah, no, the Fates deliver
 Leander to the tempest.

xii

Night. Now angry Aeolus wounds
 The defenceless ocean with rough winds.
 The wind lashed billows, tall and sheer,
 Dash in foam on the open shore.
 Leander led by love-like visions
 Faces the ocean without aversion.
 All fear of the tides is overcome
 For him by the thought of Hero's welcome.
 Without fear he rushes into the abyss
 Of waters and floats out on its bosom.
 Gigantic waves roar and heave in
 The vain ambition of storming heaven.
 Wilder and wilder are the waters driven
 Flattened with blasts with surges riven.
 From every side the blusters assault
 Till the sea is froth and the sky is salt.
 Horrendously the shore rebellows
 The growling thunder of ceaseless billows.
 Amidst this tumult and wild uproar
 Leander sent forth many a prayer.
 The sea-sprung goddess, the ocean's lord,
 Venus and Neptune, he implored.
 To Boreas and the Athenian maid
 Likewise were his petitions made.

Leander begs them to vouchsafe
Him their aid and bring him safe
Out of the storm of surge and surf.
To all he cried in his time of need.
But that was a cry that all denied.
Heedless, helpless, he cried in vain.
Not Venus, not Neptune, would intervene.
Nor would Boreas his blasts withhold,
But rather more and fiercer hurled.

xiii

Here I leave off the story.
The rest is history.
Leander will not reach the shore.
Of that you may be sure,
Though manfully he swam on.
Through the angry seas
His Hero's light he sees
That serves him as a guide.
But she, unhappy woman,
Grown weary of delay,
Kept her guard
But negligently.
In fact she drooped. And then she slept.
And from her hand
The bright torch slipped
And was extinguished
In the angry waves that washed
Below. In the darkness left behind
Leander lost
Struggled on to the last
Against the tide, against the blast.
But he could not beat off their harms
With weary legs and weary arms.
And after many a long meander
In the sea-ways drowned Leander.

The morning came. And Hero stands
 High in her tower, whose view extends
 Widely along the open coast.
 Just at that time the waters cast
 Leander's body before her tower
 As if once more he had come to her.
 Not at once did she comprehend
 That he was held by death's rough hand.
 But when he rose not from the sand,
 Nor looked about, nor uttered sound,
 Too well she understood what had befallen,
 How from her hand the torch had fallen,
 When negligently she had slept.
 Out of her tower has Hero leapt
 In retribution for that deed.
 Now with Leander she lies dead.

1968

JASON AND MEDEA

I

Through the angry ocean, wind-blasted surge,
 I have gone my journey, horrific passage.

Now at length to this shore I have come,
 To this green, afforested shore of long presage,
 To a land, after much labour, level and calm.

Hither I came, whether for warfare or in peace
 Knowing not well, in accordance with a madcap scheme,
 Conceived by another man to a dark purpose.

Among a strange people, in a strange city I tread,
 Doubtful how to act and what might come to pass,
 But assuming a mask of courtesy or trade.

Lady, what do you see, you in whose gaze
My hesitant appearance so well is tried?
Do you perceive my features under this disguise?

II

Medea, lovely wench, led on by her gaze,
Through her father's house to Jason's chamber goes.

There she finds Jason sleepless but in bed,
Cap-a-pe acoutred all in martial guise:
Armour on legs and limbs, armour on head and body.

Upon that dragon he turns his restless mind,
That on the morrow he is set down to combat,
Not of his own choosing, but by regal command.

Upon that treasure also he turns his thought
Whose value by no means is to be determined,
Which he came to win and will not leave without.

But when fair Medea, lovely in every regard,
He saw standing there, need you wonder that
Armour and thought shortly lay in the discard?

III

I come, led on by the dream of a supposed visage,
Whose fulfilment not at all did I envisage.

A greater treasure to be brought into arms' reach
Either by negotiation, asking or siege,
That is than a golden fleece in which a king is rich.

A fiercer dragon, a serpent of more horrid size,
Had not prevented me else miserable wretch
From such a possession as this which I now seize.

O dream, o vision, o sight remotely glimpsed
While yet I navigated oceans, stormy seas,
You led me on by fitful and faint gleams.

Woman, such potency is yours, thus to bewitch
With lovely face, bosom, and lips, and limbs,
The dream alone sustained me through the long watch.

IV

In the death that comes from the loss of heart I live,
Sustained by despair itself and your love.

From this source do I derive the hardihood,
The strength of heart and fortitude required to cleave
The dragon through and through, to sever body and head.

As for that treasure hoard that the dragon guarded,
Great as it is, I count it little to be had,
But, as lightly won, to be lightly regarded.

All petty desires of having and fears of loss
No less from my heart have been discarded,
And the thought of you implanted in their place.

Lady, in your embrace I find that despair
Turns into a world of joy and solace,
Such is your love's effect on me, such is its power.

1968

THE WIND

The wind is roaring through the suburb
Shaking the houses with its hubbub.
Once more it is the summer season
When the winds of heaven seize on
The flowers, their prey, and rack and rend them
As they madly rip around them.

For seven seasons I resided
Beside the seaward harbourside
Where the winds off sea and land
Alike were violent and blind.
Every year I tried to guard
The iris that grew in the garden
Against their force but never won
In confrontation with the wind.
I cannot say what made me leave
The seashore where I used to live.
Perhaps I had hoped to escape
The wind in a less open landscape.
One would hardly think I have done so
To hear the wind making a din so
Obstreperous; yet it may be
That uninjuriously it goes by.
In the gardens along this valley
There grow in sight of street and alley
More lilies than I have ever seen,
Erect and white, coolly obscene.
So many lilies that I will have to
Call this the suburb of lilies ever after.
The odd iris too I glimpse,
Lovely as ever, but bruised and limp.
Far too often have I observed
Flowers destroyed that I would have saved
Had I been able, for me to hope
That these lilies will escape mishap.
Yet as the days follow one by one
The lilies persist in the face of the wind,
Unblemished in bloom, unbroken in leaf,
So that I almost form the belief
That the flowers will survive. Oh that
They might. How lovely were the thought.

1968

SPORT

Love an indoor
Sport?
No.
It is not so
Despite
What people say.
All poets know
(Or if they do not know they should)
That love seeks shelter under
No ceiling
But the sky, and shade
From no wall but a tree
Or hedge, and concealing
Behind no window
But the wind.
Go read any poetry.
You will find ample proof
Love needs no roof.
Where did the Greeks make love's
Divan, upon a bed of silk, or leaves?
On carpet or on grass?
Surely it was on grass and leaf.
Why make fable and lies
Out of straight forward belief?
 Love needs no hearth
 Except the earth
 To set his fire ablaze.
The Elizabethans made no progress
On this arrangement either,
For are not the lovers in Donne
Seen
Each in the eyes of the other,
And that can only be done
Outdoors in the sun.

1969

THE IRON HORSE

The horse with the livid
Eye has borne my beloved
Away through the dark forest;
And on without stop for rest
Or refreshment all night maintains
His headlong course through misty mountains.
Only when the confident dawn
Rises and casts the shadows down
And discloses the twin expanse
Of the ocean will he pause,
Stationary at last, though short pants
Still shake him, and his iron still paws.

1969

THE DAWN

Just as the dawn at sea breaks by slow
Stages, first a faint glow,

Then a crown of rays
Reflecting in the waves below,
Till at last it is full sunrise,

Just so upon the heart
There breaks quite to its surprise
Slowly a joy in the place of hurt.

Slowly at first, but soon
It bursts forth in a blaze of heat
And light to match the sun.

When such a joy bursts in your eye,
You will have seen what I have seen,
And been as astonished as I.

1969

THE BAY

The moon stood above the mountain range.
Its light was orange.
The ocean slept on the golden sand
Without a sound.

We followed the shadows that we cast
Along the coast,
And to the waterbird's shrill note
Listened that night.

1970

WATER

Our feet were water and the steps a cascade
Which we descended. The night was scored
With slits of light. The trees and shrubs
Enclosed our runnel in a cage of ribs.
The harbour was a window on our tears
To which we ran. A plunging star
Paralleled our path over a quarter
Of an arc, O light that glints in water.

1970

ON A BIRTHDAY

My daughter, Sarah Elizabeth
On my birthday had her birth.
In the good things, but no further
Let her life be like her father's.

1970

NO BARREN GROUND

You might say, if you spoke without
Giving the matter a second thought,
That the city is barren ground for poetry.
The best of recent poets have been country
Dwellers. But think again. Did not Chaucer,
Shakespeare, Milton and Blake by choice or
Chance live in London? Though a London then
Still garden green, and with open fields within
Easy walking, not the modern city where the only
Animals are men and every tree is lonely.
But there are modern cities as close to countryside
As the London of those poets. As it happens
I have always lived in sight of the open
Fields or the close forest. Even today, although I reside
In an inner suburb, the open hillside
Is covered to my door with shrubs and trees.
Though not the animals of open and farm country,
There are birds at least. They have made a birdbath
Of the gutter of our house roof and splash the path
Below. They perch in the pipe drainage holes
In the high concrete retaining wall, stone porches
From which to watch the world go by, strongholds
Safer for them than any natural perches.
In such circumstances as these, poets can live
As well in the city as the country, so I believe.

1971

PANEL 4

The native bush clad hills are calm,
As calm as I have seen them on a fair,
Clear night when the full moon as bright as fire,
Immensely round, rises above the ranges,
And lays across the harbour water a strange,
Luminous, silver pathway, as if hosts
Of flashing little fishes jammed the coasts.

These hills appear a long, low, level mass.
With ordinary haze the eye can miss
That six or seven ranges really run
Along the coast as parallel terrain.
These ranges do not go above the snowline.
Bush covers them. The eye detects no line
Of hills distinctly short of the horizon.
For this the haze and cover are the reason.
Crest after crest blends with the one behind.
Only the sharp eye learns to comprehend
Fine detail: hillcrest, track, and solo tree.
Plain-seeming turns rich tapestry.

1973

THE OFFICE PARTY

When I was young I had a capacity
For drinking that bordered on rapacity.
I could absorb the stuff like a sponge
With very few after effects
That snoozing it off wouldn't fix,
Not regularly but on the occasional binge.
– Beer, glorious beer.

I particularly remember
The office party one December.
After work my mates and I ate
A restaurant meal, then went for a drink.
I had eight eights under my belt by eight,
Enough to make me merrily drunk.
– I staggered from the bar.

At the party I drank steadily,
No doubt getting much more tiddly
And falling into the various
Silly and hilarious

Escapades that accompany
Such times and such company.
– The details I will spare you.

I had had another twenty-two
Beers by half past one or two
When the party was drawing to
A close. Still feeling frisky
I finished off with four quick whiskies.
– How does that compare?

When I strode forth into the night, the sky
Was overcast, the pavement wet.
I had a four hour wait
Until the morning trains began,
Before I could get home again.
I strolled vigorously without purpose
Across town to make the time pass.
– These waits could be a bore.

Drunk as I might have been, I stayed
On my feet pacing on steadily,
If perhaps unsteadily and came
Soon to a nearby playing field
Where lately I had watched a game
Of women's hockey. And there I folded.
– The thighs flash young and bare.

If I could have found a dry ditch or slope
Or other shelter I would have gone to sleep.
But none offered. The girl I had come
To watch at the hockey game
Lived nearby. And drink made me game
To try her door in the hope of welcome.
– Why should I despair?

I staggered up the small blind side street
Erratically making straight
For her address. How long and frequently
Had I haunted that neighbourhood. Consequently
Even my drunken feet were expert
In the ways to that beloved spot.
– I praise the feet that bore.

The sky though overcast glowed ruddily
As it reflected streetlight muddily.
It lit the outer door at which I crouched.
I rapped repeatedly without response,
Then tried the door. It opened. The beast encroached
Its beery breath expended in hot pants.
– It slobbered like a bear.

Inside were the shared facilities
Of two bed-sitters. I entered on tiptoes.
One doorway served the bottom bed sitter.
The other closed the narrow staircase
To the upper. It was locked of course
And would not open to your knocking, satyr.
– Forbear, satyr. Forbear.

The only heaven is that bed sitter.
So drunk or sober did I consider.
It is hell to find my entry blocked.
It was a vain and drunken dream.
I had hoped to enter that bedroom.
I had hoped to find the door unlocked.
– It is the stars debar.

The two bottom steps shared my exile.
There I lay down and dozed awhile
Till dawn broke in with gentle rays.
Then from my stupor I arose
And stole away through the remaining
Grey shadows of quickly breaking morning.
– The shadows disappear.

This experience shows they err,
Those critics like yourself, dear Fleur,
Who doubt that steps served as mattresses
For lovers such as the old Latin
Poets like Propertius whom their mistresses'
Hard hearted door leaves would not let in.
– What cannot lovers bear?

I am no Propertius, hence
Differences in our experiences.
These I explicitly acknowledge.
While I sheltered where she lived
Already to my certain knowledge
That woman I so passionately loved
Was, ah pity,
On holiday in another city.
– You said you wouldn't be here.

1973

WAHINE

We did think twice whether to face
Such rain and gale force
Winds as inch deep drenched
The pavement and threatened to wrench
The massive steel and concrete building loose
From its base. This was as close
As the car would take us. We plunged into the rain
And staggering in the wind, stumbled, rather than ran
To reach shelter. As we and our colleagues sip
Our morning tea or coffee over desultory gossip
About this atrocious weather that still continues
Unabated, we hear the indifferent news
That the *Wahine* on her voyage across the strait, unable
To enter harbour in such a storm, has been disabled
And is drifting without power or help through the heads
But is in no immediate danger, the broadcast adds.

We had spent the night before wrecking our love
On one another's bones. We believed
Too readily that all was well, all shipshape,
Regardless of the storm whose vehemence and sharp
Onset intermittently we felt
Through concrete. We joked about the geological fault,
Rumoured to lie below the hillslope,
Which one day carrying building and all could slip
Catastrophically. We had awakened at six,
Two naked bodies in a single bed, had sex
Anew to the lash splash of the storm, with no thought
Beyond. Hours later we learnt with shock that
The *Wahine*, overwhelmed by an exceptional wave
Had sunk in the harbour. Just as conclusively we've
Become strangers. Fifty lives were lost
Within sight of the city viewers. The last
Of the wreckage was salvaged the other day.
That's how we watched our love die,
Uncomprehendingly, though in full view
It happened. Tell me, what became of you?

1973

ODE TO LANGUAGE

i

When Michelangelo began to brush
His masterpiece, no brash
Young journeyman, no old past master
Had pushed beyond the edge an
Inch, had left his splotches on the plaster.
The surface yet was virgin.

Just so when I began to execute
My task, the language lay in acute
Unuse. Neither any poetaster
Had marked my language's words with
His sign manual, nor a past master,
No Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth.

As Michelangelo found the Sistine
Chapel roof still in a pristine
State, so when I began to meditate
My epic poem I found the British
Lingua franca likewise in a state
As pristine, still uncouth and brutish.

Tell, language, where you have been hidden
These ages since you were heard in Eden.
You yield, unmammocked and unchewed,
Words that like gold lovingly I fondle,
Sole poet of a dialect eschewed:
The English Mistral, the English Vondel.

I take them up as natives in innocence
Did beads and string them into sense,
Those vocables which time has smoothed
To jewels with a loving hand.
Why poets leave then yet unmouthed,
Unused, I cannot comprehend.

The miser who must reassure
Himself incessantly about his treasure
Is in exactly my position
And has exactly my sentiments
Of having found in his possession
New issues from a golden mint.

Hail language laid so long in deep neglect,
Unvalued, almost derelict,
You seem to me so bright and wondrous
As stars above, so luxuriant
And fertile as the green earth under us.
You make the muse parturient.

Each word a seed that breeds a second,
How could inspiration not be fecund?
Then well might I ejaculate
As the artist at sight of such a surface,
Unspotted and immaculate;
My God, I'll do you a good service.

ii

I wonder if my predecessors: Chaucer
And Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, and the choicer
Lesser lights, likewise had this sense
Of pristine novelty that I experience
With the English language. Surely they did.
They may have said as much indeed
Somewhere or other. I come to the conclusion
That for them as me it is not an illusion,
But fact. The evidence is plain,
That potentialities that had lain
Latent in language came to fruition
In them. And not by brilliant intuition
So much as earnest labour that lasted
For years or decades in those I've listed
As they developed their mastery
Of new arts. There is no mystery,
No genius in art at all, I hold,
But this: to find a new thing in the old.
And necessarily the artist
Who finds it will as I attest
That the medium in which he works had never
Been consummated prior to his endeavour.

1973

PARODIES

A good poem parodies
An original in paradise.

1973

From DIARY TO A CRITIC

XXIX *Renewing the Prosody*

In nineteen forty-nine
I had concluded that none
Of the technical devices
Of standard English verse
Had any life left in them:
Not rhyme, not iambic rhythm,
Not syllabic lines, not couplets,
Not stanza forms. Then let's
Develop a new prosody
In my impetuosity,
Said I. And since then slowly
I have, however lowly.
Some of my devices
Are as obvious as vices.
I have written reams
Of consonantal rhymes.
I am among the very
Few who do not vary
From this practice since Owen.
In fact I know of no one
Else. Note that all my verse
Rhymes. If not obviously
So, then make a closer search.
But only an aspect is such
Rhyme in this prosody of mine.
Linguists can determine.
But it seems to me that the speech
Of New Zealanders in pitch
And stress is acoustically
Harsher characteristically
Than the old style notional
Sort of international
English that literary authors
Supposedly preferred to others

And so calls for a softer
Prosody. Such I seek after,
As the prosody I labour at
Grows more and more elaborate.

1974

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

One moved amidst the shadows.
“Who goes? Declare your name.” “An-
onymous, an author.”
“Advance.” The stranger hid his
Face beneath his hood, as
We eyed him, so only shade is
Where normally the head is.
“Uncover.” Would he heed us?
He looked as if he heard us
Not. Suddenly, he shed his
Head coverings, and showed us
Nothing. “I am No Man.
I am an unknown author.
I wrote *The Epic of Hades*.”
“God help us, not another.”

1974

IN MEMORIAM *Auden, Pound, Eliot,*
Bethell, Fairburn, Mason, Baxter, Brasch,
Day Lewis, Duggan

All have died
In recent years, those men* I resented
As a boy for their
High standing on fortune's hill.

– The yews stand foursquare round
The graveyard where the muses grieve.

I have tended
To dismiss most** of
Their verse as careless or sham – a fierce
Judgement. But the
Finality of death lays bare banality
As cuttingly.

– The soggy ground groans underfoot
To bear the burden of the bier.

It maddens me to hear of Auden's
Lifelong damnation.
Cain, would be slayer of his kin,
Becomes their grave tender.

– Long pilgrimages we have come
To lay our fellow's corse in clay.

Pound knew better. Tender-
tough nightingale,
Your throat was proof to every threat
Till silence cut it.
Now silence rules the doge's island
City. The palaces
Collapse. The dunces' apocalypse
Arrives. The old
Canal is silted with banal
Effluvia. Today's
Tasso has married the Sargasso.

– I shall not let him go forever,
The earth swears with a mighty oath.

D'Annunzio
Was right. Age should keep separate.
Old soldiers, statesmen,
Magnates are left to terminate
Their days on earth
In private. Why do the media pry
In poets' cases?
Rude photographers intrude.
The slow old man
Must drag his carcass puffed with drugs
On TV round
The nation. This was profanation.
Poet, live out
Your life decorously aloof.

– Enough if you set up a large
White boulder, mausoleum builder.

When death retorts
Its humph, we who survive triumph.
So now. But no
Hilarity attaches. Familiarity
Has put its ingrained
Stamp on me too deeply for contempt
To slough. To the fire
That purges the dross from iron pages
I readily
Had cursed their works. This holocaust
Of lives however...

– Here once a year will we assemble,
The ritual of grief become habitual.

Successors hazard like success or
Failure. They were
Poor wretches to whom trivia was riches.

I rummage through
The litter of the times, seeking the letter
To the eye crooked
In shape, but to the hearing sharp.

– The mourning sun till now dark and
Rain sodden breaks out on a sudden.

*Note: I except the women.

**Save an excerpt or so.

1973

THE GRAIN SHIPMENTS

We must smash the armed revolt
Of the Albanian working people.

So ordered Roosevelt,
Rage turning his face purple.

Don't let the Albanian nation
Escape our domination,
Said that abomination, Roosevelt.

Those monsters of reaction,
The US imperialists

Applaud his every action
As serving their power lust.

He was – nothing is plainer,
Their strategist and planner
in chief was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The leader of the British
Imperialists agreed.

Churchill, the pig eyed brutish
Embodiment of greed.

He sent the Mediterranean
Fleet to frighten Tirana in-
to submitting to tyranny and to Roosevelt.

They tried intimidation
To make Albanians submit
To imperialist dictation,
And foreign troops admit.
To make Albanians consent
To occupation, they sent
The fleets in. The representatives of Roosevelt,

The military missions
Of the imperialist command,
Demanded prompt admission
For their forces vain demand.
Within Albania's borders,
The people give the orders,
Not such missions, or does Roosevelt.

This people though not many,
Administered defeat
To the fascist force of Germany
And Italy by fight.
Such people are not frightened
By battle fleets that threatened
What? They scorned both fright and Roosevelt.

Then Roosevelt imposes
An economic blockade.
Thereby so he supposes
Effectively to block aid
And reduce in this fashion
Albania to starvation.
Such was the motivation of Roosevelt.

Past feudal and fascist plunder
Left the backward nation
Desperately under-
developed, near ruination.
Without supplies of foodstuffs:
Grain most of all, to stave
Off famine, they would starve thanks to Roosevelt.

The Titoites to the north,
To bring the Albanian resistance
Movement underneath
Their sway, withheld assistance.
They practised Trotskyism,
Secretly sowing schism
In the camp of socialism for Roosevelt.

It was not character flaws
That brought this envelopment
Of Albania, but the laws
Of capitalist development.
These make the capitalist class
Slaves to their profit and loss
Accounts. No more, no less was Roosevelt.

When the Russian people heard
That the Albanians so completely
Cut off in so hard
And desperate a plight lay,
Though their own needs were likewise
Great, they didn't lack ways
To help, unlike the lackeys of Roosevelt.

The people's leadership
Then set a great example.
Said Stalin: Load our ships.
Send grain. Let it be ample.
The Russians without stalling
Or stinting did as bid Stalin.
That deed deserves extolling, not Roosevelt.

Stalin was the beloved
Leader of the people.
But Churchill's face was livid.
And Roosevelt's was purple.
The grain ships were arriving
Safely for all the grievings,
The hot and cold war ravings of Roosevelt.

1973

CHILDHOOD

My earliest childhood had been spent
Inside the inner city pent.
But later we shifted residence.
It was a happy circumstance
That then the open country lay
Within an easy walking distance
Of our state house. There I would play.

At that time the state housing block
Had not yet put a tight headlock
On that neck of the city. The residents
Who lived in streets adjoining
Looked on us kids as dunces,
Urchins and aliens sojourning
In their midst. Prejudice daunts.

We were sent to Coventry,
We brothers. We had no right of entry
To homes except for our relations.
Cut off in consequence
From normal interrelations,
We lived in social isolation.
We were shunned as if delinquents.

Till I was seven years of age
I grew up like a savage,
Illiterate, ignorant not merely
Of books, but ignorant of ignorance.
Bliss to play where water runs
In gutters, creeks and torrents.
Who needs a universal library, Morley?

I never knew the name of poetry
When skyhigh in a willow tree,
Or roaming fields where horses roam,
Of following cattle homeward from

Saleyards on cold wet afternoons.
Poems I had none
But pop songs, nursery rhymes.

1974

AT HESHBON

There is a garden where each man dwells,
Enclosed by the horizon as if by walls.
The crazy pavement sidesteps through the bushes,
That give way as the interloper pushes.
The flagstones with a mazy pull
Lure the wayfarer to a spacious pool.
Wind loiters on a listless pinion.
Sunshine is shade's companion.
A step high parapet constricts
The pool to spreading but contorted tracts.
Water loving flowers and reeds
Cram its quiet bays in crowds.
A host of little fishes steer
Through the stalks the eddies stir.
Long, shiny insects flit.
Birds flutter, suddenly sunlit.
Slug tracks bestar the ooze.
This pool reminds me of your eyes.

1975

THE KNIGHT II

So the knight stood, in view,
 holding his steed in tightly.
His headgear blooms with nodding
 waving plumes horrifically.
His visage is masked in iron.

He wears damasked breastplates,
Held with bolts and rivets.
An iron belt girds his waist.
His armour reflects the sun's rays
as the wearer flexes his sinews –
Consciously, for he delights to set
the flashing highlights in motion.
Thin circlets of plated iron
for the rest complete his armour,
Which is made so featly, that however
his limbs move it fits him still.
It is a question even to some
if man or oven the horse carries,
So angular a shape his steel
clothes give, so sharp an outline.
The supple scales of armour
with such skill however
From the hidden limbs within
take real, though lumbering life.
It fills the beholder with fears
of living to be older, to see it.
The man seemed cast in iron,
not just encased in metal.
Men are abolished. This is
a statue polished to life,
An iron statue that moved,
not a man that you might meet.
His horse is likewise armed
and has a look as terrible.
Tightly held in, a pleasure,
yet a dread to behold, he stands.
Threatening iron encases
his head, high on forequarters.
He moves beneath steel plates, guard
against wounds, stallion or statue?
As the wind drops, the knight's
bright banner droops and draggles.

The dragon, red beast with which
his banner is embossed, sinks low,
Its coils unwound, that just
before in the wind were writhing.

1975

KING ARTHUR AT LYONNESSE

I walk amid unquiet winds
That blow cold on my wounds.

1975

SINBAD

Abandoned on this shoal of time
Am I of all my lovers,
A shipwreck in my self-esteem.
Abandoned on this shoal of time,
Yet would I still venture the storm
That shatters or delivers.
Abandoned on this shoal of time
Am I of all my lovers.

1975

THE ENTRY

Why do you cry "Who goes?"
As if encased in metal,
A solitary sentry
On guard against my entry.

"Uncover to my gaze."
I was but looking at you.
Why do you cry "Who goes?"
Unyielding as a statue.

Oh, wrap in filmy gauze
So tender a love petal
As blossoms in your flesh,
Or naked let it flash.

Why do you cry "Who goes?"
As if encased in metal,
A solitary sentry
On guard against my entry.

1976

ROMAN ATTITUDES

In countryside, servility:
In towns, civility.

1977

A COLONIST'S GARDEN REVISITED

Dream, gardener at ease
In your Antipodes,
That Europe is revealed
In every grove and field.

What is it but an idle
Fantasy, this idyll
Of life in the South Seas,
That Reeves' colonist sees?

A harsher situation
Ours midst the southern ocean,
On a landmass that lies
Athwart wild westerlies.

High winds buffet the highlands
And hollows of our islands,
And hurtle through the strait
At a terrifying rate.

Without break east and west
Stretches a watery waste,
That never bird can cross
Except the albatross.

This is the hemisphere
Where birds alone can fare,
By evolution strange
In habitat and range.

On these last islands breed
The bird of wingspan broad,
That flies the world around
Without once touching ground.

But laughable penguins,
Abandoning the winds,
Like fish through water fly
From this to that ice floe.

These islands lie beneath
Weathers from south and north,
That alternate and keep
Equable the landscape.

Offshore there is an area
Where storms create a barrier,
To bird and ship so fierce
That few did it traverse.

1978

MORE LEAR THAN LOVER

i

Upon a bluff still green, mid trees
Still bright as in my memories,
With costly ruins all around
That relic held its ground
Preserved as if by miracle
The same today as I recall.
Ah, seeing it I could have wept.

I was accommodated in a room,
A small room, merely an old sunporch
That hung upon the harbour's ancient rim.
Just so the dawn cast its cold glow
Over the hotel and the bank below.
It burst into the room upon its perch,
Where for a night or two I slept.

The windows gave the lucky roomer
Prospect of a vast panorama.
Though when first this high room was built,
The foreshore reached the base beneath,
Now warehouses, roads, railways north
And south ran wild in a broad belt
That round the upper harbour swept.

But overhead the view is free,
And vision might range to and fro
Unobstructed, unimpeded from my arbour
To the four corners of the harbour.
Mad engineers had not yet spun
Their concrete web of buttresses and spans
Which would such old sights intercept,

As then I saw: for instance when the moon
In open view with bright enormous mien
At full that night rose from the mountain tops
Beyond the harbour in the eastern quarter,
And laid a path of many million steps,
Shimmering and white, across the silent water;
Brighter the higher the night sky it leapt.

An intricate construct of light and shade
Cast by the waves by the moon shed.
It was as if a transitory bridge,
A chain of little silver pontoons,
Stretched from the bottom of the ridge
On which I watched to those athwart swart mountains
That range on range towards the harbour crept.

It was a bridge the like of that I fancy
Which Xerxes, high conqueror whose hosts
Had overrun the nations of the east
Innumerable, built to march his troops,
His million fighting men and elephants,
From Asia across the Bosphorus to Europe:
A bridge of dreams, no overbridge inept.

ii

Once previously on a different stay
In Wellington, too restless to be house bound
When the heavens were opened on a Christmas Day
I set out in the rain to walk to Eastbourne
Indifferent to the pelting storm
If I had love to keep me warm.
No lover ever was that was so kept.

As I trudged from the suburbs to the north,
Mile after mile, from high hills down the gorge
And along the wave whipped foreshore roads beneath.
How the rain sloshed and splashed, how the storm scourged.
Oh what a turbulence in mist and cloud,
What howling winds, what breakers loud
Occurred, as on still on my way I stepped.

In all this vast inhospitable scene,
Save I wrapped in my greatcoat from the rain,
No other human figure might be seen
Toiling on foot through the deluged terrain.
No animal, no bird ventured from shelter,
But every creature else amid this welter
Of elements kept low, myself except.

Onward I lurched, the archetypal outcast,
More Lear than lover in my injured pride,
Until at length upon the rock bound coast
A seasonable motorist gave me a ride,
A ride which even in my intense mood
Of melancholy I had been mad,
So wet the weather was, not to accept.

True to my own self-image I,
Mere simple Cymon, no fourth among the magi,
Cut short my journey at the last bus stop
Before the ground where lovers meet or bust up.
I thanked the motorist for the lift,
Boarded the bus to town, and so I left
My love to find a lover more adept.

Now might that broken journey be completed,
 Later I thought when on high did I stand
 At the hotel window, and long contemplated
 That moonlit causeway, whose course extends
 Across the water to the shore where lived
 The lady that my fantasy so loved.
 All evening I considered the concept.

There stretched that causeway to your door,
 That moonlit pavement, and that bridge of dreams
 That lovers know to tread, that know and dare,
 So crossing gulfs and marrying extremes.
 He loves not, who lacks the hardiness
 To love, or loses love for tardiness.
 No lover sped who doubted this precept.

Ah, many talents cannot buy the faith
 That lovers need to walk on moonlit water,
 And lacking it I never ventured forth
 But slunk away, perennial self-thwarter.
 Weep with me all you trees that shared with me
 Times that are past, weep with me in dismay.
 What sorrows inwardly have I bewept.

Amid a crush of motorways and ramps
 That have buried the past neath block and blot,
 Structures that overbear, cribwork that cramps,
 I sit in sorrow under my hard lot:
 That no way may attempt to walk on water,
 If not in youth, now after the quarter
 Century has passed, your ancient nympholept.

1978

OUR LOVE

Our love is a relationship
Like Shelley's morning star,
Whose keen lamp narrows to a sharp
Edge in the light of dawn.
Our love is a relationship
Which limits and restraints adorn
Till it seems immaterial,
Without a substance or a shape,
Under the public stare;
And yet we feel that it is real.
Our love is a relationship
Like Shelley's morning star.

1979

WRIT ON WATER

I dropped a pebble in a pool.
The ripple in a trice disperses
Its moving circle to the full...

Then breaks, and dissipates
As soon, or faster.
I dropped a pebble in a pool.

Never anticipate
A vaster
Curriculum, or an equal...

Artist or craftsmen, for your pieces.
I dropped a pebble in a pool.
The ripple in a trice disperses.

1979

THE STORM

And were you murdered, Shelley? Was that your lot,
To be the victim of a cheap complot?

Were certain henchmen of repression –
English or Austrian or Russian,
For fear that word of yours from many a
Distress might free Greece or Romania,
Set to keep you under surveillance?
And menace at need with rough violence?

And did they learn that you had bought
A yacht and meant to sail in sport
The open waters of the bight?
And that night did they offer riches
Undreamt to certain local wretches,
Falucca boatmen in a tavern?

Was it suggested that one might stave in
A free board, or pull out a stern?
Or by mere mischance overturn
Some certain pleasure yacht? if such
One intercepted by luck or search
Sailing out on the wide blue sea
With no observer by to see.

Your boat goes scudding on the sea,
Mere skiff amidst an argosy
Of larger craft that stud the water
Away into the northern quarter.
Had vessels put out in pursuit
From Leghorn and kept yours in sight
Over the miles as it made north?

Then all the ships passed underneath
A sudden thunderstorm off shore
That blackened out the clear azure
Of sea and sky, and when it lifted
Only the larger boats were left,
Only the bigger craft remained,
Not yours, afloat on the bright main.

You drowned. And were you murdered, Shelley?
Tis a fair supposition surely
That while the scene at sea was screened
In squalls your little skiff careened
Under the blow, beneath the push
Of hands that rode in ruffian ambush.

1982

LETTER TO DENNIS LIST

We travelled by vehicle with a group
Of sightseers along this spit
Of sand covered with scrub,
We bounced sickeningly at each spot
Of rough going, slewed as oft
On the beach when the going was soft
Over wet sand.

On the one hand the homing eye reached
Low walls around a quiet sea room,
On the other the open sea stretched
Westward in turbulence to the very rim
Of earth, so that it seemed the utmost range
Beyond which everything grew strange.
Here islands end.

Sand, drifted from the south along the coast
In the swift sea currents, grain by grain extends
The spit into the bight as grain on grain is cast
Ashore. In isolation stands
Up Taranaki, shadow faced beneath
A white top knot, eighty miles north
Across the strait.

Not so many millennia ago
In the ice age this spit laid down a land bridge
Linking the islands whereby did the moa go
And other fauna to and fro. They trudged
On foot where fifty fathom of water
Lies today from isle to isle, no wetter
Than on a street.

Then the sea rose and the spit drowned.
The slow increment of sand has gone only
A short way in turning sea to ground
Anew and linking once again these lonely
Isles. They say that Arctic birds on their long flight
Across the Pacific here first alight,
Here first ascend.

1982

LETTER TO ALBION WRIGHT

They told me, Albion, that you were dead.
I meant to write before, but never did.
Not for the first time let me take in hand a letter
That had been better earlier, now later.

I owe you thanks sufficiently expressed
Not to need repetition – let that rest –
For a dozen books put forth, of mine and of one other,
That won their due for printer and for author.

The hard-nosed businessman worships the market
And his determinant pretends to make it.
You were a shrewder businessman, and harder-nosed,
A use in vanity you recognised.

When first I knew you, Albion, you seemed
To my young eyes aged and weather-seamed.
Decade on decade seemed to take no further toll
Until they told me, Albion, what they told.

1982

FAMILY TRAVELS

Seventy miles of bush they cleared,
And made butter. Here my grandfather spent
His childhood. An engineer by bent,
A home on the Kaiwharawhara's
High bank, domestic Pharos,
He built his wife whose family had
Lived thereabouts for years. She bore
Two daughters there. Home acres
Proved less than home for these home makers,
However, my grandfather transferred
His household to Samoa, made Apia
His home, one year, a second and a third.
So in the islands was my mother
Made acquainted with every myth or
Fable of ocean or lagoon.

My grandfather shifted again
To Hanmer Springs in the Southern Alps.
My mother grown, became a nursing help,
Met my father unemployed,
The would be city slicker,
Who married, funded by my mother, plied
In vegetables and bootlegged liquor.

My father's family had settled first
In a vast harbour lodged in mountains.
A gigantic precipice maintains
The gate against the sea. Inside
In gentle bays the folk pursued
Their livelihood. This cloistered lot
His father by degrees reversed
Advancing from the harbour to the flat.

Since I was born on a great plain,
With chilly mountains in the west,
And in the east the boundless waste
Of waters, the dialectic
By which my life proceeds is plain,
By mere necessity I must select
Some womb-like hill-enclosing harbour
To be my refuge and my arbour.

1982

NOCTURNE

Hills these that I and my kindred
For eighty years have trod and tread.

Here stand the houses that they owned,
This built with his own hand
By my grandfather, a gaunt unhandsome
Box tethered to a windy hill,
That in the sheltered hollow
My greatgrandfather's. Though possession
Has passed to other hands
The houses still stand in position.

The artefacts endure on site,
But not just artefacts remain.
Still in this setting after five,
Six generations we survive,

Descendants of those men,
Myself, my children. Here continue
The same conditions, the same sights
For us that our ancestors knew.

Therefore tonight that self-same scene,
The self-same evening star descendant
Into the shoulder of the hillside which
Looms as a sharper silhouette
The deeper the day sinks below it,
So that the star shines more resplendent
Till it snuffs out, I stand and watch,
As by my forefathers was seen.

1983

THE CIRCUIT

It was a cloudy afternoon,
No wind at all or nearly none.
Just the right sort of day for biking,
I said to Joe, and Joe replied:
It would be too his liking.

And so we set out on a ride
Like none that we had ever tried.
For we intended to go further
Than son of eight had gone before,
Or fifty year old father.

What we intended was to bike
All the way to the sea and back,
All the way round in a great circle,
Thirty or forty kilometres,
No small distance to cycle.

Five valley floors we had to travel
In order to visit sea gravel.
Four saddles had to be traversed
To get from one into the next
And back home to the first.

At one o'clock we hit the street
And headed for the salt sea strait.
From the town of our ancestors
We raced off on our bikes, Joe on
His own, I on his sister's.

We set out following the furrow
Of the obscure Kaiwharawhara,
But left it at the reservoir
And mounting the first saddle had
The whole wide world before us.

We turn off from the Terawhiti
At the point where it leaves the city,
And climbing the next saddle whiz
Downhill at speed to Makara
And there the ocean is.

The slow Ohariu we trace
To Johnsonville and then we race
Along the Ngaio; so arrive
Once more at the Kaiwharawhara
By way of Churchill Drive.

So after five hours on the road
We get to the end of our ride.
Dinner awaits the tired father,
The tired son, and both agree
They could have gone no further.

1983

THE DREAM OF APOLLINAIRE

I am a man lying upon the field of battle,
Broken by war, and a victim of the bottle,
Ruined by life, devoid of former skill,
Smashed by the splinter that shattered my skull.

I am Guillaume Apollinaire, the living dead,
A zombie living in the poet's stead,
Though still alive and even in good heart,
Too wounded to recover from my hurt.

Therefore I walk about and feel the sun of day
Warming my carcass while I wait to die,
For only a few years or months I have
To live, depending on how I behave.

But why should I seek to drag out an empty round
Of shell-shocked consolations above ground?
The sun and flowers, the sky by day or night,
People I meet, all signifying naught.

My youth was glorious, nobody of the time
Could match my talent or my self-esteem.
Poems I wrote, and painters I reviewed,
Fought wittily in journalistic feud.

At once a Frenchman and a foreigner I was
And so I took a place in France's wars.
Upon the western front I kept my trench
And still I keep it with my fellow French.

Discharged from hospital a semi-invalid,
A month or two in Paris my old life I led,
Met old acquaintances, and listened to their talk,
Then realised to stay was a mistake.

I could not do the things that formerly I did,
My day was over, and my talent dead,
I was a miserable dying runt
And so I took a taxi to the front.

On every side I see the patriotic scurry,
These dead and wounded, those ammunition carry.
Over the tops from time to time troops sally,
But I am written off as being silly.

And in the day and in the night I sleep and dream
And then I hear the bugle, or I hear the drum
And then the mighty cannon on its carriage
Rises erect to add fire to the barrage.

And in my dream a penis does this cannon seem in
Discharging from its eye a stream of semen
That arcs across the heaven from the trenches
And Paris is a flood of fluid drenches.

Then I perceive this is no howitzer of metal
That fires these shells whose liquid splotches mottle
The walls and roofs and streets of Paris, but
A gun of flesh that from my loin abuts.

1983

THE CITY AND THE BEACH

i

The same winds that roar through the suburb,
Making a hazard of the street,
A hundred miles across the strait
Bluster along this beach superb.

No less at bottom this remote
Beach over which the batchers saunter
Than is the city is a centre
Where politics and culture meet.

On every bay, by every mount
As witnessed by worksite and midden,
As now long since the people made an
Inhabited environment.
Here Tasman coasting novel shores
Cried massacre at first encounter.

ii

So coastal people seek to counter
Incursion with extreme measures,
Too often fail, too often perish.

Here Europeans early come
Saw a metropolis in scheme,
Achieved a mining farming parish.

I like this neighbourhood by reason
Of being in another world,
Not far, but absolutely walled
About by scale at the horizon.

iii

I grieve for myself first, him second,
Near whose high home I also live
Not far from her I used to love
Till the heart of frustration sickened.

This doctor made a gross mismatch,
Married a woman half his age,
With games of folly they goaded each
Other to outrage much too much.

From penal servitude deliver
Us lord, such as hard love exacts.
She chivvied him with feeble sex,
Took the house painter for her lover.

Libidinous quarrels grew madder
While on the bed she naked lay,
From ranting to firearm display,
From threats of violence to murder.

Though lenient the court convicts.
This doctor owned a little shed
Here at the beach that backs for shade
And shelter on a clump of figs.

At prison tasks I see him drudge,
Dreaming of resting in his bach,
Dreaming of strolling on this beach,
The prison yard I see him trudge.

1984

ELEGY IN THE KAIWHARAWHARA VALLEY

i

So I live upon a hill
That scuttles through the scrub,
Which every now and then
I have to prune, or grub.

Thus the turning season is
An endless generator
Of provender galore
For my incinerator.

ii

And on Saturdays while I
The fire with fodder ply,
I watch the cricketers
Below my eye at play.

For a park stretches along
The valley floor beneath

My vantage point for half
A mile towards the north.

Yes, it is a pleasant site
To spend an afternoon
In wool or flannel when
The weather is benign.

But on days when from the north
The wind keeps up a bluster,
Then chill will freeze the back
And grit the face will blister.

iii

Up above the cricket ground
For years there lay a hinter-
land of turf and bog,
Impassable in winter.

So for thirty years it lay
A derelict reserve,
But prior to that the site
For better uses served.

For on higher ground there stood
Of old a belt of pines
Whose foliage the role
Of screen and shade combines.

There a dozen times at least
I paused and overlooked
A field of folk at play
Ere it fell derelict.

iv

Now once more with some surprise
I view the field of play
To use and grace restored
That long a desert lay.

There anew as once the ball
In gay attack is sped
With vigour that survives
The years that time has spared.

Me no more have thirty years
In body bowed, or bent.
But what has been is past.
And what was ours is spent.

1986

THE SPRING I

I never understood the spring before,
How swift, how brief its period,
Though I have been around
For fifty four.
I never understood the spring before.
How bare the boughs, how waste the walks
And grounds,
Where for
Three weeks
Just days ago were bloom and blossom myriad.
I never understood the spring before,
How swift, how brief its period.

1986

SUMMER WINDS

I never took an interest
Before in your bustline,
Cannot imagine either breast,
If small or pendulous or plump.
But now the summer every neckline drops,
The bosom with a blouse or tee shirt drapes,
The hard winds push up every passing lump,

Give point to every unretiring dug,
At straps and buckles tug.
So I begin to take an interest.
The summer winds do no less for the rest,
Unbuttoning a dress
Lay bare the thigh – yours have I viewed:
A little gaunt, buff hewed,
And fumble at the crotch
Uncertain whether to caress
Or scratch.
Your best point, your best line,
Let summer winds uncover
To a lover.

1986

THE WATERS I

The waters have not ceased
To flow out of a spring
That my imagination
Has steeped in magic,
Has soused
In dreams.
So magically sourced,
The waters have not ceased
To flow and fill the streams.
That flow the years shall not exhaust,
Nor to a trickle bring,
While love a lover's spirit
Elates, leaves desperate.
The waters have not ceased
To flow out of that spring
With copious abundance,
Nor shall till love this heart abandons.

1986

MIDSUMMER IV

Pohutukawa trees in flower
On many just a few, but one ablaze
All over, crimson like a flare
Bursting against the wind.
Pohutukawa trees in flower,
I notice how grey furry buds
Break open at the cap,
Allow the ball
Of stamens to unfold, unwind.
I notice how in readiness for bird
Or fly or
Bee, stamens fence a little cup
Brim full
Of honey, how one hits the bull,
How soon the stamens fall,
How momentary the display is.
Pohutukawa trees in flower
On many just a few, but one ablaze.

1986

DIOSCORIDES: of hippopornae

So drawing Julia across the bed
By buttocks lissom as rosebuds,
I entered upon heaven's bliss
Amid her dew wet blossoms.

For me as if I was a horse
She straddled at the waist on scrawny legs
And never pauses, never lags
In finishing love's course.

As to and fro she rocked
Regarding me with ever duller eyes,
How her thews cracked
And trembled as they rose

Like leaves upon the blast,
Until our white strength was released.
And in a heap with muscles loosed
Lay Julia, my love, at last.

1988

YOUTH AND AGE II

Sex is the rowel.

I put the hard word on Miss Powell.
She sensibly replied:
She didn't find my schoolboy letter
Nice,
And family standards wouldn't let her
Be a sport.

But as a geriatric nurse
She later played
The role of Circe's niece,
Aeetes' daughter,
Dunking old codgers in hot water.

For years she used to sponge
And towel
Down Winston Churchill's palm and bunch
Of nuts. He also liked his port.

1989

ARCHIMAGE TO SYLPH I

This is my kingdom where I please myself,
Said archimage to sylph,
An old man strolling through a wilderness
That covered the low ness
And reached in places down to the sea marge.

So prowled the archimage
A garden none but kings have power and leisure
To lay out for their pleasure.
Below, the harbour opened to the world.
All hereabouts was walled.

So though the sea and sky gave a horizon,
The garden formed a prison.
A prisoner might one have called oneself.
Said archimage to sylph,
Think us while all the world is held without,
Free as a bird or thought.

1991

THE TESTAMENT OF PHYSKON KAKERGETES

A king by birth, in statecraft schooled,
In rule alone have I proved skilled.

For I was good after my kind,
Brutal and cunning, conning but never conned,
Sustained by inner joy
Through a performance of panache, ease,
Energy,
Whose end is only dust and ashes.

I early learnt to love intrigue
And relish violence, a prince, a rogue.

Blood on my hands, slaughter a way of life,
I found it fun, good for a laugh,
To win against the odds, escaping
Disaster by a whisker, keeping
My throne and balance half by luck
And half by flair as an habitual fluke.

Never myself, impersonal in the extreme,
The sport of circumstances, events,
Who circumscribed still circumvents,
I pleased myself sleepwalking through a dream
Of state for fifty years, my destiny
To overcome where I was overcome,
And ride the wave like scum,
Uplifted like a piece of dust on high,
Buoyant as froth that the tide drifts,
Airborne on desultory draughts
Like graceless gracile gulls.
This counts as a success, as high achievement
To analysts who lay out how the chief meant
By shifts and stratagems to come at goals
That serve the culture, shape the future,
Cobbling a seamless suture.

1992

TO PADDY DYING

Going on twenty years
You learnt my plans, I yours.
Now death, the bard's fell sergeant
Sidelines you on the lone sea margent,
As distant as the fields of Sligo.

You shall not hear how others, I go.
But die content in this belief:
There's life yet in the plans you leave.
Inevitably when one dies
Survivors shall fulfil our days.

1992

THE YOUNG MEN FORTY YEARS ON

In youth I knew with old Koholeth
That nothing I could say was new.
As much was true in age I found
When I had searched the library through.

For beauty's sake in youth I sang,
Careless what message were to seek.
But what of old the wise opine
Now likewise aged I uphold.

To social duty should I align
The artist's lifelong quest for beauty?
Only so far as the account,
Coincidence leaves true and fair.
In youth I knew with old Koholeth
That nothing I could say was new.

1992

AT BAN AHONG

The river narrows between giant boulders,
Making an ideal site for builders.
On a broad stone that tilts into the stream
A stupa stands diminished, white as dream.

Here megaliths rising in stages
Give shelter for a sylvan hermitage.
A thatch roof hangs from the ridge pole.
Rough stools were sawn out of palm boles.

The simple lifestyle did not lack for
Such modern conveniences you might look for
As showers, a ute. The hospitable monk
Welcomed all comers for herb tea, kept monkeys,
Had been a CIA agent long since.
But no one counts the sins of youth long sins.

Nearby a visionary kept a guest house,
Too crude as yet to merit a ghost house,
But planned a better building come new year.

Success may well befall this entrepreneur,
A travelled local speaking English, German,
Who saw in a remote spot circumstances germane
To far come tourists, backpacking or carpet.
Such enterprise let no one wiser carp at.

Boulders reach from the bank like groins.
Here villagers have built their garden plots and grown
Fresh vegetables in fine grey silt, fit soil.

On high like Shelley's boat the crescent moon see sail.
White herons on their migratory flight
Topmost as high a tree alight,
While in the west where the dark river spreads,
A looming sunset builds in black on reds.

1995

CAESAR'S AUNT JULIA

i

Caesar's Aunt Julia
Let us not call a liar,
When in old age she told
Her escapades nineteen years old.

I've heard your soldiers chant
What may be true perchance
That in Bithynia, nephew,
You let king Nicodemus eff you.

Once as a tourist full
Of spirit, a young fool
Unchaperoned, I travelled
To Alexandria, there revelled.

ii

Physkon Kakergetes
Was pharaoh in those days:
Aged, obese, unrivalled,
Living the life of power with style,
Taking an interest still
In notable arrivals,
Myself included, hence
To a royal audience
I quickly got an invite.
It proved to be in private,
The pharaoh sheathed in gauze
That opened all his parts to gaze.

iii

Kings as you will recall
By royal protocol
Expect sex with their guests,
However much a practice that disgusts.

Therefore without too much
Delay, a sight to match
His, I lay bare to view.
You see the situation, nephew.

You see the show I made.
Like a good Roman maid
A virgin I remained,
But shaved my pubis of its mane.

This as an open ticket
To mount me Physkon took it
After due fingering
My warm and sticky pubic ring.

So the king broke my hymen
And made of me a woman.
His cock was large and fat.
But I provided a good fit.

We gave and took real pleasure,
From vigour gained full easure,
Not just on this occasion
But during my entire vacation.

iv

So I proved Physkon's last
Partner of a long list.
Me only death displaced
After he shipped me home to Rome
With wealth to fill a room.
Our fortune flows therefrom.
What Marius would not seize her
Hand? who brings Cleopatra Caesar.

1998

GENERATION X

In angst confronting the absurd
Beauty streetwalks, glamour beachcombs.
Youth is the ultimate façade
In angst confronting the absurd
With images as trite as sad.
Thereafter chaos comes again.
In angst confronting the absurd
Beauty streetwalks, glamour beachcombs.

1999

MAHATMA

On Mahatma Gandhi's death I saw
His body ferried as by ship to grave,
Symbolic happenings on symbolic sea.

On Mahatma Gandhi's death I saw
In vision such as poets see:
The quiet waters grieve.

On Mahatma Gandhi's death I saw
His body ferried as by ship to grave.

1999

DUNG BEETLE ISLAND

I

The Staten Island ferry
Runs frequently, is free.
And there you have the Statue
Of Liberty looking at you,
Some three hundred feet in height
From foot to spiky hat.

A little taller stood Pharos
Lighthouse far welcoming seafarers.

II

So built our great commander,
The legendary Alexander,
The city and therewithal a mole,
The Heptastadium by name.

A marvel seven furlong long
Does with another so belong
That ran nearly a mile
Seaward to Pharos isle.

There Ptolemy the Second
Erected,
First of its kind
On Pharos, a lighthouse enorm.

Ships led home free from error,
A fire by night, by day a mirror
That the sun's rays reflected.

III

To later lighthouses a model,
An image most potent of icons,
The structure to a mountain likens
Achille Tatius, that in the middle
Of the sea almost reached the clouds.

So far below the building flowed
The waters that it seemed a shape
Suspended high above the surface,
While on the mountaintop there rose
A second sun whose rays
So to the harbour serve as
Guide for incoming ships.

IV

But tenth century earthquakes
Weakened foundation and stonework,
So that in the twelfth century
The lighthouse fell in ruin.
But later still a fort replaced it,
Reusing rubble to modern times that lasted.

V

Arab geographers in later times
In different, that is legendary terms,
Describe Pharos, a watchtower from
Which might be seen what threats from Rum?
What ships, men? all bent on assailing
Arabia from Byzantium came sailing.

So the vast mirror, used before as
A beacon, turned fantastic spyglass,
By bringing distant prospects close
Did Mussulmen enable
To see as far as
The emperor's palace in Constantinople.

VI

So speculation ran to excess
With these geographers, the myth
They entertained, that Pharos
Had been erected along the axis
Of earth and rode as its foundation
A gigantic crystalline crab,
Zodiacal imitation,
Sculpted by ancient polymaths
After its heavenly counterpart.
But some authorities, not Arab,
No crab, but scarab, it report.

2000

THIS LIGHT WILL DARKEN

Rode horseman west with sea on the right hand,
The light of Pharos burning bright behind
At nightfall. Seven centuries so shone,
By day reflectors turning by machine,
By night a torch of tallow rush and gum,
And so would shine for centuries to come,
Landmark to haven fetching fargone travellers
Of every boon, assuring nightlong revellers;
So shone for a millennium entire
Till earthquake toppled from its base high tower.

Still Pharos casts its beacon light afar,
By day with mirrors and by night with fire,
Still draws to Alexandria all comers:
Fanatic and official merchant schemers
Who hence departing homeward or abroad
To every coast, to every island spread
The statecraft learnt there, shaping on such base
Structures political through time and space,
Byzantium, Islam, the Papacy,
The nation state, empires by land and sea.

But, on that monumental edifice,
The rider turned his back, turned west his face.

2001

SHAKESPEARE'S ADVICE TO HIS SECRETARY THOMAS MIDDLETON AGED 20

If you want to rate significant
With the final arbiter,
Make your words count.

If you want to rate significant,
The commonplaces scant.
Avoid mere patter,
If you want to rate significant
With the final arbiter.

2001

THOMAS MIDDLETON'S
ASSESSMENT OF SHAKESPEARE

Some with conviction preach.
Others in doubt perform.
And there's a place for each.

Some with conviction preach,
As Chapman confident of reach,
But come up short in scope and form.

Some with conviction preach.
Others in doubt perform.

2001

LIBYSSA, BC 183

We are the children of the desert,
A heritage hard to desert,
So deep our roots that seek out water
In the Sahara arid zone
And penetrate to every quarter.

Against the people of the mountains
And plains two centuries maintains
My people war, war without ceasing,
Though never ending in success.

But just as surely they shall fail
Over my people to prevail,
Though for millennia they send
Their ships against a sea of sand.
So God on earth keeps equipoise.

Therefore myself do I resign
To death as coming late or soon.
The time remaining, let us pass
In revelry and dance at peace.

2002

OVID AS SEXAGENARIAN I

This is the first law of romance
Among the Greeks and the Romans.

There is always in any population
An opportunity for copulation.
In men of seventy like me or Goethe
Young women sense a lover or begetter.

Such circumstances may appear bizarre.
But who can put a limit on desire?
What prudence can control the shaft of lust?
Who stops the wind from blowing where it list?

So there has come across my tracks a buxom
Lass, young rather than old and wholly fucksome.
Open enthusiasm she displays
For little services if not for lays.

I do agree it were the height of folly
For this old stud to mount so fine a filly.
Where ardour, opportunity embrace,
Who counts the cost? who shuns to pay the price?

2002

SIGNAGE I

Signs change. Signs never hold.
Mere change of sign unchains.
This observation with the years
Was mine. Signs change.

Mere change of sign enchains.
This observation with the years
Was mine. Was't yours?
People abide, the young the old.

Signs change. Signs never hold.

2003

BAGHDAD 2003

Still cries the man, "Leave me my dreams
Under the missiles and the bombs."
Amid the trumpets and the drums,
Still cries the man, "Leave me my dreams."

While others build a hundred Romes
With bigger bangs and empty booms,
Still cries the man, "Leave me my dreams
Under the missiles and the bombs."

2003

DIALOGUE II

Her heart in simple words she bared.
– I'm bored.

2003

COMPANIONS

How, Mordecai, have we spent eighteen years?
In lyrical profusion I spent mine.
In solitary confinement you spent yours,
Shut up in a narrow cell as you remain.
May my twelve thousand lines of verse
So sound as sounds to you the Voice.

2004

J H E SCHRODER 1896–1980

Old Schroder, I have followed in your steps
Half a lifetime. Nothing stops
The steady march of years
As mine add to the sum of yours.

These twenty-five years with you gone,
Still I frequent Mount Helicon.
Both Modern and both Ancient in our tastes
As equally our work attests.

I at the Muses' fountain sip.
Ambrosia with the gods you sup.

2004

AT NAPLES

Came settlers on a rugged coast
Erecting cities for prestige
And for security stage by stage
At greater and yet greater cost,
Their motivation to impress
Natives and visitors alike,
So on themselves as all the rest
Imposed an age enduring look.

Came conquerors from inland or
Abroad whose rule survives its day,
Every Caesar, Alexander,
Leaving relics of his stay.

Spared all but natural disasters
Secure in local style and verve
The centuries people survive
Regardless how the world mass stirs.
However confident and smug
As first for concrete, brick and dome
All undergo the common doom
As we in traffic jams and smog.

Blood red at dusk
Sinks the sun disk.

2004

A SONNET FOR PATRICK EVANS

How introspective and ferocious
Expressions our local scholars utter,
Books on the inner, on the outer,
Consumed with appetites voracious.

Your understanding of local history
And sociology is sound.
Yet still to you fail to resound
Right strategy, structure, style and story.

I know how difficult a task
You find it to come to terms with mastery,
Moreover intimated mystery,
Manner extreme, topic grotesque.

But to this destiny consigns
You your own passionate concerns.

2005

MEGACHANGE IV

i

In deepest Ethiopia
Sought Rimbaud his Utopia,
As speculated since Plato
Found Eden on a high plateau,
The land of promise and of dream.
Four rivers from the plateau stream.

There in a pleasant hermitage,
An arbour at the steepest edge
On which the sun shone as it westered,
An ancient monk he found, sequestered.

Was this Ahasuerus, the wandering
Jew? Rimbaud was left wondering,
Or John, called the beloved apostle,
Writer of gospel and epistle,
Apocalyptic visionary,
Or just some long lost missionary?

How fares the course of history?
Inquired the ancient seer.
Awaits the finished mystery?
That I did prophesy ere.

The age arrives that shall transform
The world and those who occupy it
Whether for good or ill, inform,
Replied the youthful poet,
Where angels fear to venture,
Gun running at a venture.

Only six years of it would Rimbaud
In such outlandish times survive,
Unlike to a more modern Rambo.
The year was 1885.

The passage of millennia
 But leaves mankind the loonier,
 Say pessimist and cynic.
 Still slays the swordsman arsenic.

What we beheld, that we proclaim,
 The blind to see, to walk the lame.
 Such miracles achieves our science.
 Yet fails each soviet and séance.

Still run the blessing and the curse
 Their unrelenting course
 To ends whatever best beseem,
 A paradise or the abysm.

2005

AMOURS DE VOYAGE II

By candlelight a woman's looks
 Improve by years and years,
 As manners with the taste agree,
 And appetite sees what it likes,
 Blonde hair instead of grey.
 By candlelight a woman's looks
 Acquire the glamour woman lacks
 Mature in manner, staid in style
 By daylight, notwithstanding still
 In undraped thigh and covered bust,
 Her body passes for robust.
 Such was the case with yours.
 By candlelight a woman's looks
 Improve by years and years.

2005

GALLIPOLI: The Ballad

Russia, Dostoyevsky's country of soul,
The German interventionists assail,
With long range cavalry trample its soil,
Its cities besiege with troops hellbent on conquest.

Puts up stiffest resistance, the Nyetcong,
Running though hills and forest supply trails.
Their armoured trains, wood burners, rule the rails
As Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, ply controls.

For Russian independence sounds the knell,
Unless by capturing the Dardanelles
We break a way to ship heavy supplies
To Lenin, staunchest of Britain's allies.

So Churchill. Straight the British high command
To occupy Gallipoli peninsula
Launches a landing force by Anzacs manned,
Warriors from lands remote and insular.

Eight months of battle, unrelieved attacks,
On and by Kemal Ataturk's stout Turks
Still show along the shores and heights entrenched,
Anzacs in blood and sweat and downpour drenched,
No passage won to bring the Russian lion
Supplies, but dupes of destiny rely on
An Alexander or Napoleon.

2005

THE MAP

This map of human grief
The tourist runs lightly once over
Captures on photograph.

A map of human grief,
Of human struggle, human graft,
Is Africa since ever.

This map of human grief
The tourist runs lightly once over.

Yet evidence unearthed in dry humps
Shows out of Africa come triumphs,
As step by step the hominal
Achieves progress phenomenal,
Reaching in Egypt highest stage
During the Ptolemaist Age.

But outside Africa disaster
Forever dogs Homo Ergaster.

In Africa mankind evolved,
One with the landscape where they dwelt,
Only in that domain involved
Uniquely with the natural world
Held in a universal balance
Adjusted with an equal valence.

So evolution works on man in tandem
With all the rest of nature, not at random.

But outside Africa mankind range over
The landscape as an alien and stranger,
Not only foreign but out of kilter,
Disrupting and destroying helter skelter
Flora and fauna at a loss to cope
With change of such a scale and scope.

2005

GARDEN WALK

To walk by day the garden overlooking
The sea was to the aged pharaoh's liking.
With Moschus his court poet stepping by him
Still ready to recite many a poem.
Thoughts of his mother often occupy him.

Acknowledged by Aegeas as his son,
Did Theseus for his mother, Aethra, send,
Who as his housekeeper in Athens lived
In fit estate thereafter, much beloved.

Physkon remarks, his brother, Philometor,
Just so acknowledged their dear mater
By choosing so apt a cognomen
As Mother, lover for his regnal name.
Physkon, the tales of Theseus Moschus recounts.
But pharaoh the hero's good sense and prudence scants.

Mine was a life, Physkon observed,
Through all vicissitudes preserved,
As pharaoh, viceroy, exile, still
I like to think with flair and style.
That Theseus was a foolish fellow.
Such an example who would follow?
Too stubborn wayward and too loyal
For good to ensue to a royal.

I keep my kingdom and avoid
Having my enemies invade.
In hope our dynasty continues
Decades another nine or ten? use
Such policies is my advice.
What matters otherwise, crime or vice?

Moschus, tell me again the tale,
The tally of Theseus's wives.
Woman's the hand that weaves the web of life.
Who says? Physkon or Moschus? poet or politician?
Central these issues to the human condition.

No more, no more the tale relate,
Cries Physkon, cruelly desolate.

Best known of all the classic tales,
So far awash
With grief in its details,
I leave off thus at Physkon's wish.

2008

NOVEMBER WEATHER

i.m. Dennis List

I having lost my task and friend
Life of content engage.
In wind remains the final frond,
I having lost my task and friend.

As blasts do stalk of each leaf rend
With demoniac gorge,
I having lost my task and friend
Life of content engage.

2008

LACRIMA MUSAE

When Kate Roche died by suicide,
I could have died too, Dennis said.

Your grief, friend, then I shared, and share,
Memorialised on a harbour bridge,

The city's backbone skyhigh ridge
Ascendant from the farthest shore.

Now forty livelong years thereafter,
So lifespan years eke out, abridge;
Perhaps with goodwill, even with laughter,
In death rejoins he who so loved her.

2008

WORDS II

Boy with such music in his head,
I match with insight too prophetic.
Was filled with fear for? what he heard,
Boy with such music in his head.

No less in old age than boyhood,
I relish words creative, vatic.
Boy with such music in his head,
I match with insight too prophetic.

2009

CONCLUDING IMAGE

Last of the 1960s men
Lives an incarcerated spectre
Through years whatever there remain.

Last of the 1960s men
So far diminished in domain,
Walls not of sound confine Phil Spector.

Last of the 1960s men
Lives an incarcerated spectre.

2009

RAILWAY TRAVELLER'S CALENDAR

On new laid tracks how smooth
In carriages we move,
Observe a pristine scene
As any to be seen
Of urban open landscape,
Coast views of grandest scope.

So nature speaks to people
In yellows and in purple
A message without sense
To which the heart assents.

And every railway journey
I make becomes a journal,
An intermittent record,
How seasons I regard.

The second of November,
First summer day I number
Out of one hundred twenty,
High sun daylight aplenty.

The opposite of winter,
The first of May we enter
With inbetween two months
To end, and to commence.

*Author's note: The poem is saying we have 120 days of summer
and 120 days of winter; with between them two transition periods
of 60 days each. See my essay on The Reformed Calendar.*

2009

CONTINUUM

We move in a continuum of thought
Across three centuries by recursion,
Events anticipate so much athwart.

We move in a continuum of thought,
Enwound within, no less enmeshed without,
We poets of extreme occasion.

We move in a continuum of thought
Across three centuries by recursion.

2009

LETTERIST'S END

It takes a lifetime to make sense
Of life as we have lived it,
Intuit, what the age presents.

It takes a lifetime to make sense,
What such a message represents.
But who could have believed it?
It takes a lifetime to make sense
Of life as we have lived it.

The knowledge gives me satisfaction
Too late for any hope of action.

2009

HEADWORX

Series Editor: Mark Pirie

New Poetry

- Nothing to Declare* Harry Ricketts
Salamanca Vivienne Plumb
Sweet Banana Wax Peppers Jenny Powell-Chalmers
The Century Tony Beyer
Pingandy Harvey McQueen
Unmanned Stephen Oliver
Earth Colours L E Scott
Talking Pictures Riemke Ensing
Hats Jenny Powell-Chalmers
Rhyme Before Reason Scott Kendrick
abstract internal furniture Helen Rickerby
Night of Warehouses Stephen Oliver
Our Bay of Ensigns Bernard Gadd
The Snow Poems/your self of lost ground Jeanne Bernhardt
Storyteller Simon Williamson
Boat People Tim Jones
Chantal's Book Jack Ross
The Ballad of Fifty-one Bill Sewell
Toku Timihanga (Self Deception) Michael O'Leary
Maketu Terry Locke
How to Occupy Our Selves David Howard & Fiona Pardington
The Year Nothing Paul Hardacre
Summer on the Côte d'Azur Alistair Paterson
Recessional Harvey McQueen
Over the Waters Moshé Liba
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Here and There Basim Furat
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Your Secret Life Harry Ricketts
Daymoon Robin Fry
Suchness Richard von Sturmer
Self-titled Tony Chad
Overnight Downpour Andrew Fagan
Sounds of Sonnets Michael O'Leary & Mark Pirie
Just Poetry Alistair Te Ariki Campbell
All Blacks' Kitchen Gardens Tim Jones
Dream Boat Tony Beyer

Speaking in Tongues L E Scott
It's Love Isn't It: The Love Poems
Alistair Te Ariki Campbell and Meg Campbell
Paneta Street Michael O'Leary
My Iron Spine Helen Rickerby
No Boat May Allow Drowning to Vanish Basim Furat
Goya Rules Harvey McQueen
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