

Nothing
To
Declare

By Harry Ricketts

Poetry

Coming Here (1989)
Coming Under Scrutiny (1989)
How Things Are, with Adrienne Jansen, JC Sturm
and Meg Campbell (1996)
A Brief History of New Zealand Literature (1996)
13 Ways (1997)

Stories

People Like Us (1977)

Edited

One Lady at Wairakei by Rudyard Kipling (1983)
*Talking About Ourselves: Twelve New Zealand Poets
in Conversation with Harry Ricketts* (1986)
Worlds of Katherine Mansfield (1991)
Under Review, with Bill Sewell and Lauris Edmond (1997)

Nothing
To
Declare

(Selected Writings 1977-1997)

Harry Ricketts

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HR

for Jamie

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Publisher's Preface

Since arriving in New Zealand in 1981, Harry Ricketts has been a strong supporter and active promoter of both Wellington and New Zealand poetry. He has been involved in a number of projects, both with students and with fellow poets, including poetry writing workshops at Victoria University's Centre for Continuing Education, a stint as President of the New Zealand Poetry Society, and spells as poetry editor of *Poetry New Zealand* and *New Zealand Books* respectively.

As well as these projects, he has been very supportive of student initiative at Victoria University. In the 1980s he helped initiate the student publication *Writings*, and in the 1990s, he has been one of the supporters of the young writers' journal *JAAM* (Just Another Art Movement).

This book, *Nothing to Declare*, presents a generous selection of his writings from 1977-1997 and is an attempt to, as David Eggleton puts it, 'bring into the sunlight the lumber stored in the attic of [Harry Ricketts'] mind.'

It includes little known stories from his time spent in Hong Kong in the 1970s, a well-turned sonnet sequence of 'found' poems, *Settling In*, which is based on an early New Zealand grammar and phrase book, a 'fugitive' piece 'Reading Between the Lines' (first printed by the late Louis Johnson in his anthology *Antipodes New Writing*), and his best known pieces to date: '13 Ways of Starting a New Zealand Novel Called *Macrocarpa*', and the limerick sequence *A Brief History of New Zealand Literature*, which was named Book of the Week in 1996 by Andrew Johnston (then Books Editor of the *Evening Post*).

Hopefully, this book will not only help to recognise the encouragement and support Ricketts has given to his fellow poets and to his students, but also help to recognise his own talents as an emerging New Zealand writer.

Separation

What you find with separation
is everyone else had been
predicting it for ages; they just
hadn't got around to letting you know.

Michael for instance leading such
a fast life in New York that you
receive a postcard a year if you're
lucky ("Wish you were here. Toujours gai.")

now writes five closely-typed pages
proving conclusively that he'd
realised all along the two of you
were incompatible, having slept

with you both. Thanks Mike, you weren't
so hot yourself. And Zoe, who lives
with her brother, a King Charles spaniel,
two blue Persians and three white gerbils,

now says she read it in the stars
the day Robert Graves died, but didn't
feel it was her place to interfere.
I mean, que sera, sera, n'est-ce pas?

Thirteen Ways of Starting a New Zealand Novel Called Macrocarpa

'Monterey Cypressus (Cupressus Macrocarpa) has a dark blue-green foliage without glandular pits; woody cones 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter. It grows 20 to 78 feet tall and 3 to 4 feet in diameter, with dark-brown to light-grey, scaly, ridged bark. In the Monterey Bay region of California this picturesque tree occurs on rocky headlands where it is often misshapen by the buffeting of high winds. Old trees have broad, flat-topped crowns with stout branches. Crowns of young trees growing in sheltered places are narrower, bushy, and pyramidal. This tree is extensively planted as an ornamental, or for a windbreak.'

A Field Guide to the Major Native and Introduced Species North of Mexico: Trees of North America (New York: Golden Press, [revised edition] 1986) by C. Frank Brockman, Professor of Forestry Emeritus, College of Forest Resources, University of Washington.

1. My earliest memory is of lying in a cot, my mother's bright face bending over me, framed in a black aureole by the ornamental macrocarpa.
2. Morning mist drifted above the broad, flat-topped crowns of the macrocarpas like gunsmoke.
3. That March when Wayne returned to the old homestead, he noticed for the first time how the young macrocarpa cast its narrow, pyramidal shadow across the rotting pink hydrangeas.
4. Wally the Giant Weta was born in a pile of woody cones beside the seventy-eight foot tall macrocarpa.
5. I do not know much about trees; but I think that the macrocarpa has a dark blue-green voice.
6. Hidden in the stout branches of the macrocarpa, buffeted by high winds, sat Cheryl, the rabbit's daughter, biting her knuckles.

7. Beryl clasped the trunk of the macrocarpa, feeling the light-grey, scaly bark press against her breast, and wondered if anyone would ever ask her to find his stick.

8. 'Macrocarpa, Monterey Cypress, Cupressus Macrocarpa,' mused Inspector Motz that afternoon, recalling Prof. Brockman's lectures on arboreal forensics, 'but how to explain the glandular pits in the foliage and could these be connected in any way with the vegemite stains on Cheryl Alabaster's prize-winning budgie?'

9. Leaning against the knotty strength of a young macrocarpa in the shelter of Granny Hohepa's windbreak, Rangi felt the hot noonday sun beat upon his bare limbs and felt that it was good.

10. 'Sheilas!' spat Bill, kicking vehemently at the pile of woody cones, 'at least you know where you are with a macrocarpa.'

11. The hairs on Colin's neck began to rise; alone on the rocky headland, dusk falling all around him, he had distinctly heard someone whisper his name; the old misshapen macrocarpa couldn't have spoken, could it?

12. 'O macrocarpa!' exclaimed Wayne, beating his forehead against the ridged bark, 'what am I going to do about Cheryl?'

13. 'The white budgie!' screamed Ed, as the moon burst over the horizon and he opened the throttle of his 750cc Norton, the wind whipping the long, blond hair across his face and he saw with blinding clarity that the way up and the way down were one and the same, a 6 was merely a 9 reversed and Zen backwards was the French for nose and all at once there he was gazing up at Miss Moir's oval face, trying to remember the first person plural of the imperfect subjunctive of *baiser*, and had he known then as he knew now the colour of the sound made by one hand clapping was a dark-blue green, he might never have read *The Magus* and run away to that *ashram* in Kathmandu and have there been vouchsafed the vision of the white budgie and would not now be rushing towards this consummation with the dark-brown, scaly, ridged bark of the three to four feet in diameter trunk of the rapidly approaching macrocarpa.

Luggage

Forty something, you know
the goods are likely
to be damaged; that's just

how it is. So this battered
suitcase turning up in lost property
with its faded patchwork

of labels from around the world
should come as no surprise.
The lock's rusty; the key sticks.

How much you want to know what's
inside is entirely up to you.

Engagement

Nothing's inevitable;
even light on morning water
never falls the same way twice.

Right now you could be
a born-again chiropractor,
have piles, be living in Karori.

That plane lifting above
Mount Victoria is en route
to a past with different

contradictions. Meanwhile
this baby badly needs changing
and besides you're suddenly starving.

Under the Radar

Wordsworth knew a thing or two
about suffering: how it's
'permanent, dark and obscure
And shares the nature of infinity.'

True enough; though he doesn't
mention how little one can
do for oneself — let alone
for others. Always under your radar

and you under mine, we know
the darker frequencies by heart.
Sometimes we seem two ghosts
obscurely haunting each other's lives.

The Moment

Selection of the moment
should be undertaken with care.
Bear in mind that you will have
total recall in the years to come.

Avoid thunderstorms. Gothic
effects may be spectacular
but the last thing you want is
to end up frozen, alone and wet.

Not in front of the children;
it's cruel and bound to fail.
Don't forget that even great
tragedy neighbours soap opera.

An exotic location
is best. The picturesque backdrop
will neatly complement what
may grow more poignant in memory.

Be sure to write your own script;
then at least you'll know what you said.
Under no circumstances use
the final scene from *Casablanca*.

The Location

You could do a lot worse than Florence:
all those cypresses haunting the hillsides
just like in a Renaissance painting;
those cool churches full of annunciations
and depositions. What could be more apt?

A July afternoon's a good time.
Bound to be hot, and you will be feeling
so cold inside. And when there's nothing
more to be said that afternoon you're never
going to forget, you can turn

another corner, and there will be
three men (one black) and a woman, standing
by a white *deux chevaux* that's come off
the road. Watch them stooping, straining, their faces
baffled with sweat, but the car won't budge.

All That Went Out With Kipling

As everyone in Hong Kong knows, Mrs Bradley's dinner parties are nothing if not exclusive. Which is why Mr and Mrs Brown, the young couple fresh out from England, will not be asked again. Her remarks were perhaps in the light of events understandable, but they were not as our hostess firmly pointed out excusable.

The evening began harmlessly enough with cocktails on the verandah of Mrs Bradley's mid-level apartment with its picture postcard view of the harbour. The company was as usual small but select. Mrs Melinda Bradley: in her late forties, recently widowed, handsome, rich. AM: wrong side of fifty, writer of witty poems for the *South China Morning Post*, moustache and goatee beard streaked with grey, gold-rimmed pince-nez. The John Mansfields: he's the coming man in Talbot's Trading & Shipping, she compounds charm with loveliness. The Barrats: Rachel announces for RTV-2, Clive lives for racing at Happy Valley. Mrs Amanda Kettle: also a widow and Mrs Bradley's especial friend. The Browns and myself. The Browns had only been a week or so in Hong Kong; he had come out as a paediatrician to Queen Elizabeth, and she as a trainee physiotherapist. They had been invited on the strength of some acquaintance with Mrs Bradley's younger sister in Cheltenham.

As we sat at our ease and sipped our drinks (the men in ties, but unjacketed as the custom now is, the womenfolk in summer evening dresses), the talk browsed over familiar Hong Kong topics: the humidity, the Races, the deplorable cost of servants and the revelation of further corruption in the Police Force. Down below us, the traffic roared and hummed, and the lights glowed in the warm summer night. Mrs Bradley's Burmese pressed his cheek against my hand. Another long, sweltering week was over, and the week-end stretched languorous-

ly ahead, full of drink and conversation. Rachel Barrat told Mr Brown about her new programme; Mrs Bradley and Mrs Brown exchanged news of Mrs Bradley's younger sister, and Cynthia Mansfield regaled me with an account of the last Talbot launch picnic to Clearwater Bay. Apparently a young trainee manager, after a little too much wine and bathing in the hot sun, had addressed himself to her a touch too warmly, and she had had to remind him that *Madame Bovary* was a French novel not an English one. Her husband, overhearing the story, passed a hairy hand across his balding forehead and chuckled at the memory: 'Can't have these youngsters dipping their pens in the company ink, now can we?' Cynthia smiled and was just on the point of accepting one of my cigarettes when dinner was announced.

The boeuf bourguignon, for which Mrs Bradley's cook Ah Yu is justly revered, followed after a decent delay the avocado vinaigrette. It was a Gallic evening with an interesting Châteauneuf-du-Pape. AM, who was imbibing freely of 'the blushful Hippocrene', was in mercurial mood. He told us of a young lady at a recent gathering who had tried to make her mark on a conversation about James Joyce by eagerly asking if the gentleman in question was present since she was dying to meet him. His pince-nez glinting, AM recalled how he had had to inform the eager young lady that a meeting was regrettably no longer possible. It was when the laughter following this little tale had subsided that Mrs Brown asked the assembled company what we thought she and her husband would find it hardest to adjust to in Hong Kong. A volley of suggestions greeted this inquiry: the climate from Rachel Barrat; the smell from John Mansfield; claustrophobia from Mrs Kettle; cultural deprivation from myself. But of course the main problem, as AM pointed out, is 'the people'.

'We're a tiny minority here, you see. Don't get me wrong: there are plenty of rich Chinese, but there are no poor Europeans. Hong Kong's a business community, and it has the mores of a business community. Making money is acceptable, but anything that threatens the — er — balance of payments is not.

Socially speaking, I think you'll find that the locals and the *gwai-los*, as we're called, stick pretty much to their own sides of the fence. It's simpler that way for everyone concerned.' Having spoken, AM refilled his glass and helped himself to the dessert which had just appeared on the table.

'But,' said Mrs Brown, leaning towards him and presenting what must have been a very unencumbered view of her remarkable cleavage, 'but surely all that went out with Kipling.'

There was a sudden pause around the dinner-table. Forks folded with *crêpe suzette* stopped in mid-air. Raised glasses remained motionless, catching the candlelight. Sentences half-begun hung fire. We all turned expectantly to AM, but he seemed quite unaware that he had suddenly become the centre of attention. He swallowed his last mouthful, put down his fork, patted his lips with his napkin, folded his napkin, placed it on his side plate and began to polish his pince-nez vigorously with a spotless white handkerchief. Then he looked up with that familiar enigmatic smile. An almost audible sigh of relief passed round the table, and we all mentally rubbed our hands. The hush was now one of reverential awe. AM gave a final polish, much as a High Priest might give a last whet to his knife, adjusted his pince-nez deliberately on the bridge of his nose and began:

'Life, as Kipling was well aware, is full of lessons largely useless. We learn to deal with those things that no longer trouble us and we learn to understand those things we no longer find important. I'm going to tell you a story I've never told before, but which may explain a good deal to you about Hong Kong, Mrs Brown, if you understand it correctly — though that understanding will in itself, of course, be quite useless.'

He paused, and his pince-nez glinted. We smiled to one another as the familiar, arch voice slowly began again to unwind its polished periods.

'There was once a young man of good background, who realising that he could not find advancement in his own

country (let us say England), decided to enter Government Service abroad in the colonies (let us say Hong Kong, though it was in another country). He enjoyed his life and his position and he prospered. He made friends with men of his own kind with whom he played such sports as he had known and loved at his school and he gave and attended convivial dinner-parties — like this one. In the minds of his friends and associates only one shadow fell upon the summer of his felicity: he never married. But he was in all other respects considered a first-rate fellow. He had, of course, during his years abroad made the acquaintance of numerous eligible young women, several of whom had, so to speak, set their caps at him (and perhaps more), but he had encouraged none and remained to all appearances a happily confirmed bachelor.'

AM refilled his glass, emptied it, refilled it again, continued: "Twenty years passed. He rose high in his profession, admired as a man and respected as a colleague, but, unbeknownst to even his closest friends, he had a secret. He had found in the land of his adoption that he could indulge, discreetly of course, in pleasures which back in his home country he would have considered forbidden. Imagine him now in his early forties. He is rich and successful; his character is beyond reproach. He fancies himself above suspicion and the power of the law. He has recently fallen in love with a local boy of eighteen and he buys an apartment for the boy and himself to live in. All goes smoothly for a week, a month, six months, until one night they have a terrible quarrel, and he finds himself holding an open razor to the boy's throat. Suddenly aware of the horror of what he is about to do, he freezes, staring at the face of the boy he loves with the razor clenched in his hand. The boy breaks free from his grasp, but he remains motionless, staring at the hand holding the razor. According to some reports, it was the boy who telephoned the police; according to others, it was the neighbours alarmed by the noise. In any event, the police were called in and since the nature of their relationship was illegal in that country, they were tried and convicted. Many people, particularly the

local community, considered they should have been imprisoned, but the judge (ruling that the exposure and resultant scandal were penalty enough in themselves) only imposed a nominal fine. The man of course was ruined.'

AM paused. We waited uncertainly for the axe to fall, but instead of delivering the *coup de grâce* he took off his pince-nez and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. We sat silent and confused. This was unlike any story he had told before. It led nowhere. The victim had offered herself, but she had been spared. We felt cheated, like theatre-goers who expecting to enjoy a favourite comedy find themselves subjected to an incomprehensible modern drama with boring characters, pointless dialogue and a meaningless plot. Everyone looked to their wine, and those who smoked lit cigarettes. There were stutters of embarrassed conversation. Mrs Bradley rang for Ah Yu to clear away. Finally, Mrs Brown could be heard saying to AM in a subdued voice:

'Well, I feel sorry for the man. What happened to him?'

'Oh, he went somewhere else. He was a fool, like I was to tell the story. Must have had too much to drink.' Which probably wasn't far off the mark since his voice had totally lost its usual silky edge and sounded more like the mumblings of an old man in his cups.

'I think we should all adjourn to the verandah for coffee and liqueurs,' said our hostess, obviously nettled by the unaccustomed turn of events and rising with elaborate dignity. 'I can't think why we've all gone so *piano*. It's only a story after all and if I might say so, AM, a rather distasteful one, which I sincerely trust you will not honour us with again in this house.'

AM said nothing. He sat, staring into space at a point approximately three feet above Mrs Bradley's head. Just as everyone was about to follow our hostess's excellent suggestion, Mrs Brown turned to her and said with quite unpardonable rudeness: 'Well, I think it's disgusting. I think people should mind their own business. They weren't doing any harm. People are so hypocritical.'

Under her immaculate make-up, Mrs Bradley's face assumed a distinctly pinkish tinge, and her mouth became a hard white line. 'You're very liberal, my dear,' she said and swept off to the verandah. The rest of the table followed in silence. The coffee and liqueurs were as distinctive as ever, but the mood of the evening was wrecked beyond repair. Some of us flew a few conversational kites, but these soon flapped to the ground, and the party broke up unprecedentedly early. AM, after knocking back three Drambuies, was the first to leave. He was closely followed by the Browns who will not, Mrs Bradley assured us once they were safely in the lift, under any circumstances darken her doors again.

Prep School Days

Sunday is a charcoal-grey suit;
going to Chapel; singing 'Hills
of the North, rejoice!'; hoping
it will be strawberries and Carnation for lunch.

Monday is double German with Mr Green
(‘Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten’);
Bullmore T will cheat at Dover Patrol;
Collard be called a ‘little mountebank’ in Prep.

Tuesday is waking up to find
pirates and parrots in the dormitory curtains;
Mr J will tickle Simmons P
under the bedclothes before Lights Out.

Wednesday is smoking frosty breath;
potted dates (Synod of Whitby 664);
The headmaster’s wife will read *Prester John*;
you will suck sherbet lemon; you will be terrified.

Thursday is an empty tuck-box;
Eagle will arrive but no letters from Hong Kong;
the dead sparrow in the water trough
will have a maggot in its left eye.

Friday is a bus with lots
of rooms; in one room in the corner
is the whole world; if Lord Scribble
is very good, you will let him ride on the bus.

Saturday is a perfect offcutter;
Whitney will run you out and after your bath
Mr M will call you a bad sport.
Sunday will be a charcoal-grey suit.

The Lecture

Who can I be talking about?
Can it be Shakespeare? Or is it Yeats?
(Someone like that.)

I hear my voice intoning the same
or similar articulate mendacities

seven years ago in another room
(air-conditioned Hong Kong)
behind a desk they said belonged

to Edmund Blunden, if anyone
remembers his name, to Chinese
students brought up to believe

that teacher must know best
— and feeling then, as I feel now,
this disenabling sense of shame.

walk in the sun
under the curved duck-blue tiles
discussing perhaps the example of Lei Feng
who died on the job
hit by a reversing truck
just fifteen years ago

Tales of Old Hong Kong

She still remembers Hong Kong well:
‘Thirty years of fairyland;
the bridge parties, the cherry brandies
at launch picnics. One felt
like a Roman charioteer, waterskiing
in 1926.’

Yes, her household had been large:
No: 1 Boy, No: 2 Boy, Cook,
Wash amah, two gardeners, and one
Swiss Nanny.

She holds court now amongst buddleia,
box-hedges and phlox.
One hooked and mottled hand
pours tea, the other grips
the ornamental silver top
of a malacca cane, given
by George IV to her great grandfather.
Now at ninety-seven
she doesn’t look a day over eighty.

Wasps hum down the receding afternoon.

‘We introduced Brownies out there, of course;
to make them fair to one another.’

She recalls (and with still evident shame)
how at a party of Lady Ho Tung’s
a group of subalterns, each of a family
humoured the length and breadth of the Empire,

giggled at the size of their hostess's feet,
so bound and tiny she must have been lame.

But was it dangerous?
'You could say so, yes.
In two or three typhoons I saw
a corrugated iron roof
slice a tree like a blade of grass.
And then there were pirates in Bias Bay
who hunted down ferries bound for Canton.
And if they were tried by a British judge,
the pirates laughed — no torture, you see,
like there was in the Chinese courts.'

'I can't begin to tell you
what our womenfolk went through
at the hands of the Japanese in . . .'

While she talks, the afternoon
hardens on the garden-wall;
dead leaves stir in a twist of wind;
the oaktree's shadow re-releases the lawn,
and suddenly I see what I came here for.

Te Wairoa: Buried Village
(1886/1987)

You turn up here now
ready for empathy
but the past resists, insists

on showing you rooms of bygones
and bottles. Look, this one's
full of cloudy champagne.

That cash register's pretty
and so are these stones:
red jasper, obsidian, tumbler-polished.

Hang on. Here's a pair
of muddy shoes (plus laces).
The rusty outline of a cot.

A clock that stopped at twenty to three.
This is more like it. Your nose
bumps against the glass.

Stepping out into stringy rain
you take refuge in a reconstruction
of Tohutu Ariki's whare

where he sheltered for four days
— still alive when they dug him out.
The rain unwinds a line of poplars

which they say grew out
of fence posts. Can that really
be true? No more likely

than this quick shudder
as the past, unlocked,
rushes towards you.

Aro St

The goddess is a mess tonight.
One lens keeps dropping from her dark glasses.
Her black eye weeps for itself.

We talk of friends who inhabit
ordinary dragon-chasing lives
and now she's mumbling something

about the Raven, the Virgin and the Hag.
'Don't do that, you hear! Why
must you always do that?

Always thinking. The blood blossoms
I tell you. The blood blossoms and buds.
You haven't been there. What do you know?'

And while that dark inward voice
slurs its painful adumbrations
she chuckles as the words hit home.

Red and Green Fish

Forearms on the parapet, chin on hands, he stared down at the reflections of the huge neon signs, darting crazily like red and green fish in the black waters of the harbour. It was five minutes past eight on a warm March night. Across the harbour lay the long dark hump of Hong Kong island, a sleeping dragon encrusted with diamonds. He lit a cigarette and watched the match spin away into the blackness. He concentrated on the red and green fish while behind him the crowds flowed in and out of the Star Ferry. When he had finished his cigarette and heard the satisfying hiss as it hit the water, he turned and leant with his back against the parapet, looking for a face in the crowd.

Five minutes passed; ten minutes. He noticed a boy and a girl had stopped a few yards away. They seemed to be eyeing him. They approached smiling. They said in good English that they were friends of Jesus and would he like to come with them to a meeting. He smiled and shook his head. They smiled back and went away. He continued to search every face, even those that were European. Everyone was in a hurry, everyone except the young lovers who hovered by the pier, hand in hand, gazing into each other's eyes. Another fifteen minutes dragged slowly by. Ferries came and went. He watched an old lady in black selling lottery tickets. No one wanted to buy. He shifted his position to ease the sharp edge of the parapet which cut into his back. He smoked cigarette after cigarette. Stamped them out.

At 8.33 a figure disengaged itself from the cluster by the newstand down the other end of the pier and began to walk slowly in his direction, looking from side to side. He recognised the red leather shoulder-bag, the expensive blue denim suit, the trousers rolled neatly to the knee to reveal the shiny fawn boots. Finally she saw him and without quickening her pace, moved towards him at an angle like a crab.

She began: 'I've been waiting for half an hour.'

'So have I.'

'I was by the sweet counter.'

'I was here.'

'We always meet there.'

'Only twice.'

She was silent, looking past him at the sky flecked with a few stars.

'Anyway, we've missed the film. So let's get something to eat. Where'd you like to go?'

Instead of answering she turned and started towards the Hong Kong Hotel which grows between Ocean Terminal and Ocean Theatre. He caught up with her, and they proceeded without a word past the pairs of young lovers locked in their silent worlds.

They pushed through the swing-doors into the air-conditioned atmosphere of the hotel. The foyer was almost empty except for the inevitable American tourists, waiting with their cameras to be told where to go. The coffee shop was half full, and they sat down at a table, facing each other. Behind her, was an elegant European foursome; behind him, a single man in a grey suit who looked Japanese.

He beckoned a waitress who handed them each a shiny menu; she appeared not to belong to her orange uniform.

'What do you want?' he asked.

She ordered lemon tea and a tuna salad with two servings of thousand island dressing. He ordered coffee and chicken à la king.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter.'

'Why are you so angry then?'

'I'm not so angry.'

The lemon tea and coffee arrived. Over her shoulder he caught the moving eye of one of the European women. There was an amused curiosity in the glance she bestowed upon the two of them, before accepting a light for her dangling cigarette. An

expensive face.

She had finished stirring her lemon tea and was watching him. Her left hand fiddled with a miniature bottle which she wore on a throng around her neck.

‘Aren’t you going to talk to me?’

‘You seem out of reach.’

‘The man behind you keeps staring at me.’

‘The Japanese man? He probably wants to pick you up.’

‘The Japanese are very rich.’

‘They’re the Germans of Asia.’

‘I’m going to Canada tomorrow.’

‘Why?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

The salad and chicken appeared, and they began to eat. He ate quickly, scooping with his fork; she picked at her food.

‘He’s still staring at me.’

‘When are you leaving?’

‘In the morning. My father’s chauffeur’s driving me to the airport. Do you think it’s over?’

‘I don’t know. Do you?’

‘I don’t think you love me.’

‘I know you don’t.’

He ordered another coffee and lit a cigarette. She abandoned her salad and went to the restroom. He watched the Europeans at the next table. The woman with the expensive face was laughing loudly at something the man beside her was saying. Her lips were red and glistening. The man beside her had a hare-lip and nervous hands which fluttered when he talked. Young businessman. Talbot’s Trading and Shipping. Well-cut suit; sober blue tie. Not quite accustomed to the role.

She came back and sat down. Her hand clutched automatically at the bottle which hung between her almost imperceptible breasts.

‘Well, are you happy I’m going?’

‘What do you think?’

‘I don’t know. My friends told me Europeans had no

feelings.'

'What else did they say?'

'That you get what you want and then you don't want it any more.'

'Nice friends you have.'

'You don't know them.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'I really loved you.'

'Would you like some more tea?'

He ordered more tea and coffee.

'It's someone else, isn't it?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Is it what I said about going with other people?'

'You give me no freedom.'

The Japanese man was standing by the table. He was very thickset; smooth, fifty-year-old, impenetrable face. A bootlace moustache and black dead eyes. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet. He said: 'Sit down?'

'Please.'

The man sat down beside her. She moved away from him slightly. There was the stub of a king-size menthol cigarette with a long plume of ash in his left hand. A gold signet ring on the little finger. He pointed to himself:

'Jerry Lai.'

Chinese, then, not Japanese. The man mumbled what sounded like the name of a large electrical company. They told him their names.

'What . . .?' The man groped for a word, moving a thick, flat forefinger on the table; found it at last.

'Business?'

'Government.'

She was saying: 'Let's go. He's drunk.'

The man was saying: 'No go,' and moving objects about on the table. Then, suddenly, he was shouting and banging the palm of his right hand on the table; his left still held the dead cigarette.

'English . . . no good . . . go . . . you go . . . English,' and

a lot more in Cantonese.

Eyes were turning to watch. Conversations around the coffee shop broke off in mid-sentence. Waiters began to gather. The man was straining across the table, trying to outstare him. The eyes were deep and black. He sat there transfixed.

‘Let’s go,’ he heard her say a million miles away.

The man was levering himself to his feet; right hand turning into a fist. She was calling a waiter; giving him money for the bill. He found himself standing up. The man was moving round the table. Two waiters took the man’s arms; he tried to shrug them off. They tightened their hold. They were leading the man away. There was still no expression on the face, but blobs of sweat glittered on his moustache. She was already walking towards the exit, and he followed, catching a glimpse of a red smile on the face of the expensive woman as he passed.

She was waiting for him outside the hotel. He made a half-movement to take her arm, checked himself.

‘Let’s get you a taxi.’

They walked in silence to the taxi rank. They looked at each other.

‘This is good-bye then.’

‘Good-bye.’

And she was gone without a backward glance. He put his hands in his pockets and walked slowly in the direction of the pier. The red and green fish were still darting crazily in the black water. He stood for a moment staring at them. The young lovers had all gone home. He turned towards the Ferry. He paid his thirty cents, pushed through the barrier, took the steps to the right past the billboards advertising holidays and horror films. The ice-cream stand was closed. A ferry had just come in, and he joined the crowd surging down through the gates. He found himself sitting directly behind a threesome, two Americans sandwiching a Chinese girl. She had her arm through the arm of the man on her left who smiled a lot and seemed very proud of his luxuriant moustache which he kept stroking with the fingers of his free hand. The girl was wearing

a yellow suede jacket which rubbed against the bare arm of the man on her right. The two men carried on a conversation over her head. He had the feeling that everyone on the ferry was wearing a toupee. Then the side of the boat was butting against the wharf, the gangway banged down, and he flowed out with the rest past another old lady in black selling lottery tickets. He stood in the taxi queue, allowing himself to be pushed forward every time a taxi arrived. He was at the front of the queue. A taxi pulled up with its red flag. He got in, gave his address and sank back into the plastic seat. There was a Cantonese play on the radio. He couldn't tell whether the female voice was raised in screams of terror or squeals of excited laughter.

Nothing to Declare

Marriage
is another foreign country
you needn't go to
cannot only visit
but should you dare
requires entry-permit
money & the whole bit

it has a language
you must learn
will never speak quite fluently
& knowledge that will make you burn
to see yourself
as you are seen to be

it has its exiles refugees
democrats of domestic bliss
double agents (indemnities)
betrayals done & undone
with a kiss
yes marriage is
such a foreign country
the whole world changes
upon your entry

Smile

(for Will)

whenever you smile
I see my father smile
in a bloodbrown photograph
of white-eyed Sandhurst cadets
(1934)
 most of them died in the War

he never quite fitted
in the Army though he conformed
so well that now at 64
he's the very image of all
that's right and respectable

happy vandal with six teeth
for you life's a laugh
new worlds to plunder
each day new faces to enchant

you loot cupboards
for booty look to make sure
I'm looking smile and crawl upstairs
in the morning your smile
splits the day wide open

and

whenever you smile
I see my father smile

Your Secret Life

(for Jessie)

I can see it all already:
sitting up long after the kiwi
and the cat have gone to bed
to do whatever it is they do
when the screen scrambles to noisy snow.

I'll hear you shut the front door
with a soft click that makes me jump
— just time to fix a welcoming smile
before you bound into the kitchen (perhaps
for a drink) blooming with your secret life.

What shall we say? Will I blurt out
'Do you know what time it is?'
angry with relief that you're home
at last and apparently unharmed
from that film, that party, that lover?

Would that be better or more likely
than a 'Had a nice time, sweetheart?'
poured out with an oh-so-casual cup of tea?
'Sorry, Dad.' 'Yes, Dad.' Not now, not soon,
but someday it will happen.

Early Settlers Museum, Dunedin, with Tom

eee-or eee-or eee-or

You hum your new tune all the way
down Great King Street. We're off

to the early Settlers Museum
to see renovated Josephine,
photos of severe beards,

harpoons, blubber pots,
the huge jawbone of a whale.
And for once everything fits:

the bright morning, the lolloping dogs,
the sweet chocolate smells
from the Cadbury factory,

autumn staining the hills.

Victoria Museum, B.C. with kids

The mammoth, I imagine, was Melissa's favourite:
so huge and tusky.
(‘Look!, he’s got eyebrows!’)

Jessie appeared taken with the seals
basking on convincing rocks.
(‘Dad, are they real?’)

Adrian seemed obsessed with the mine;
tried (‘Christ, Dad!’) to climb down into one
of the trucks and get really dirty.

Leanna and Will? Well, it’s hard to be sure;
perhaps the underwater movie:
trapped in a bathescope on the bottom of the sea.

Only Jamie had no doubts at all.
Jamie liked the cougar best.

Albergo Sole

Lie jet-lagged in Rome in the half-dark.
(Listen to the bells.)
The kids are still fast asleep
unlike the young Americans next door
going pell-mell all night.

Light is already beginning
to lick through the shutters.
(Listen to the bells.)
Was it for this you flew back
across the world? Well, was it?

You're thirty-five; that's the age
for reverting to type or at least
for telling the story so far.
(Listen to the bells.)
They say the truth is

you'll never be other
than the self you are. But it's
all right. The light is
shining bars across the room.
Just listen to the bells.

How Things Are

This is how things are:
if you leave their mother
the likelihood is you'll lose your kids.

Of course you love them;
they're the heart of your life.
This is how things are.

Should you stay till they're
older, then go? You know
the likelihood is you'll lose your kids.

You'd write, send presents.
They'd never understand.
This is how things are.

Each day it just gets
worse. Look, you're going under.
The likelihood is you'll lose your kids.

You may or may not
be to blame. It's the same.
This is how things are:
the likelihood is you'll lose your kids.

After

Afterwards, say five years afterwards,
you wonder why you stayed so long.
Hope, at first, and the kids; then the wheel
of habit; next, duty; last, fear.

At the time it made some kind of sense,
or seemed to. Now it feels more like
someone else's life whose crazy fairground
mirrors you still know by heart.

Stroke

Tubed and wired, naked
beneath the single sheet,
my father's all there,

just a little baffled
by the casual way
they talk in the ward.

'It's Moira, Clare, Steve
and Paul,' he says. 'I don't
know their proper names.'

Outside it's warm, perhaps, sunny.
At school Nicholas or Matt or Rich
will be giving someone else

a hard time. They're not bad kids,
just ill at ease with themselves.
Up on the fifth floor, father's worse

but hanging on. It's not what
happens to us that matters;
it's what we think has happened.

True or false? I can't decide.
Persuasion's a comfort.
This coffee tastes of burnt acorns.

Even more tubes now, more wires.
Coloured graphs scribble heart beat,
blood pressure. Numbers pulse

and change. Father's chest goes up
down, up down, up down.
His eyes flick open, shut.

His hand in mine is warm.
His feet seem to be
trussed up in silver paper.

The end when it came
was peaceful and quick.
You were there breathing

and then you weren't.
After they'd taken off
all the tubes and wires

you looked more like your
old self, but so still.
I wish we'd said good-bye.

Reading Between the Lines

1. The Phone Call

March 1981. I'm standing in a cold, stone hallway in Leicester, trying to phone Newcastle.

'Hello,' says a slightly uncertain voice.

'Hello, could I speak to Fleur Adcock, please?'

'This is Fleur Adcock.'

'You don't know me,' I begin and, wondering how often she's had to put up with this original opening, start to gabble.

'My name's Harry Ricketts and Lyman Andrews gave me your number and said you wouldn't mind if I called you. Because I'm going to New Zealand, you see,' I ended lamely.

'Oh, *Lyman*, yes. How is he?'

'He's drunk.'

'Yes, well he often is. What exactly did he think I could do for you?'

'He thought you might tell me something about the New Zealand literary scene. I'm going to teach in the English Department at Victoria, you see, and I write poems and . . .'

There's a pause; quite a long pause.

'Well, it's rather a long time since I actually lived there and I expect things have changed. Some of my family live in Wellington though. My sister's a novelist and my mother's connected with the Poetry Society; you could always get in touch with them, I suppose. Look, I'm sorry not to be more helpful. I'll be in Wellington myself at the end of the year and I'm sure we'll run into each other.'

'I hope so.'

'Well, good-bye then. And — good luck.'

Click.

2. The Party

February 1982. Fleur Adcock is giving a party. She's finished collecting the material for her anthology *The Oxford Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry* and the party's a mixture of birthday party, thank you and farewell. It takes place in Vincent O'Sullivan's house in Wadestown where she's been staying (Vincent's away in Australia) and everyone in Wellington with literary interests, aspirations or pretensions seems to be here. I'm standing in the kitchen talking to Ian Wedde. Suddenly, he looks up, and I see Bill Manhire has arrived. (He's just back from a year's sabbatical in London.)

'How's English literature, Bill?' asks Ian, quick as a flash.

Bill smiles.

Nothing in it apparently; just two old friends who haven't seen each other for a while. But for some reason the cryptic exchange sticks in my mind, and at odd moments over the next few days I find myself playing around with different kinds of paraphrase. It becomes a game.

1. 'Anyone over in England writing anything interesting.'

2. 'How's that museum monster English Literature?'

3. 'How's that museum monster English Literature, Bill, which as two top New Zealand poets we've both broken away from?'

4. 'How's that museum monster English Literature, Bill, which as two top New Zealand poets we've both broken away from, but you of course teach at a university and I could have but don't?'

The game I decide is full of possibilities.

3. The Advice

Later in 1982. I want to send some poems to literary magazines, and Bill has offered to help me sort out a selection.

‘What about this one?’ I ask, passing over a poem called ‘Smile’.

‘No, I wouldn’t send that if I were you,’ says Bill, after reading it. ‘Sounds too English. That opening line: ‘whenever you smile my child.’ Maybe that would be okay in England but here it sounds all wrong. You’d have to say: ‘when you grin kid’ something like that.’ He laughs. ‘I think you should send *Landfall* those three poems you showed me about that Scottish poet George Fraser. And you could put in a short note saying who he was.’

So I do, and Bill’s advice is obviously good because the poems are accepted.

4. A Few Don’ts (1983)

Don’t use rhyme or write light verse (unless you’re Sam Hunt).

Don’t be witty or elegant (unless you’re Lauris Edmond).

Don’t listen to the ghosts of Yeats or Dylan Thomas (unless you’re James K Baxter).

Don’t listen to the ghost of James K Baxter.

Don’t call fourteen line poems ‘sonnets’ (unless you’re CK Stead or Ian Wedde or James K Baxter).

Don’t use a word like ‘orthodoxy’ (unless you want people to think you haven’t heard of postmodernism).

5. The Book Awards

April 1983. I'm feeling flattered and in a panic: flattered because, with Michael Harlow, I've been asked to judge the Poetry section of the Book Awards, and panicky for the same reason. The panic isn't helped by a colleague casually remarking that of course Allen Curnow's *You will know when you get there* is the only real contender, isn't it?

Michael and I exchange a flurry of letters as we try to narrow the twenty or so volumes down to the required short list of three. It's soon obvious that a meeting is essential, and Michael flies up from Christchurch. We spend a week-end of frenzied and often hilarious discussion. Finally, we arrive at our short list: Curnow's *You will know when you get there*, Cilla McQueen's *Homing In* and CK Stead's *Geographies*. We also have a 'special mention' category for Keri Hulme's *The Silences Between* (my choice) and Roger Horrocks' *Auckland Regional Transit Poetry Line* (Michael's).

We agonise over the short list, agree \$50, the books and the honour in no way compensate for the pain. Wondering whether we'll be branded as compromising cowards or saluted as challengingly courageous, we decide on a joint award: Curnow and McQueen. We draw some comfort from the reflection that judges in 1930, say, with Auden's first book and a later collection of Yeats's, would have experienced similar problems.

6. The Reading (i)

Thursday 30th June, 1983.

'That was the most obscene poem I've ever heard,' says a voice behind me during the break after we've finished our first stint of reading. I turn round. I'm so surprised I almost blurt out,

‘Thanks, that’s what they said about *Paradise Lost*.’ But the woman in front of me is obviously very angry and upset. I find myself desperately trying to explain.

‘It’s meant to be a send-up of geriatric Oxford dons, that’s all. I mean they really do write things like that on the bottom of your essay. (‘This was really not very good./ You haven’t answered the question;/ nor, dare I say it, understood/ the points it tries to test you on.’ The poem’s just a parody of that kind of pedantic voice, and the last verse is imagining what they’d like to put but would never dare. (‘One thing I did enjoy, Miss Booth,/ although the essay is shoddy;/ your writing — it’s so looped and smooth /and rounded like your body.’) It doesn’t mean I approve of that sort of mentality.’

She looks dubious. I can’t think what else to say. Perhaps we simply have a very different sense of humour. Perhaps the verses, innocuous as they seem to me, have touched on some raw nerve. She turns away.

Where are we? At Canterbury University. Murray Edmond, the Writer in Residence, has arranged a massive three days of readings, featuring: John Dickson, Murray himself, Russell Haley, Michael Harlow, Keri Hulme, Cilla McQueen, Joanna Paul, myself, and Ian Wedde. It’s some feat of organisation to get everyone there and looked after, and Murray carries off his dual role of reader and ringmaster with his usual energetic flair.

I’ve done a few readings over the previous couple of years (one under the daunting auspices of a huge blown-up slide of Baxter in full messianic regalia) and I’m starting to realise that New Zealand poets go about a reading very differently from British poets. British poets (and audiences) expect some chat between poems – Seamus Heaney perhaps providing the most extreme example. (His chat can be so beguiling that after a quarter of an hour he could probably recite ‘Mary had a little lamb,’ and no one would know the difference.) New Zealand poets seem to favour the opposite extreme – no chat at all. This is fine if it’s a compelling reading,

and you happen to know the poems in advance, but while Cilla McQueen is reading from the long, unpublished 'What's Going On', I begin to wonder whether there isn't something to be said for the Heaney approach. After a few minutes the images are flashing past so fast it's impossible to take anything in.

It's after we've finished on the Saturday night that Murray comes up to me and says: 'I hadn't realised how English your poems were.' He manages to inject the word 'English' with an acute sense of disappointment heavily laced with suspicion. I feel as though I've been billed as one of the clowns, but turned out to be the 'straight man'.

7. The Reading (ii)

The audience has been most polite;
and why not? — jacket, short hair, English, I'm safe enough;
my poems won't bite.

I give them a dose of my Hong Kong stuff;
as usual, it goes down 'all right'.

(Faintly reminds one old lady of Arthur Clough
whom her great grandfather knew by sight.)

In the second half (a bit drunk) I start to bluff;
tell a risqué story — which falls flat.

The audience is getting bored,
and so am I. I wonder if I were going to strip
— decide it hasn't come to that.

There are what appear to be two huge tusks growing down
over my upper lip.

I stop. The audience, relieved, applaud.

8. The Curious Case of 'Wingatui'

December 1983. In London on a short visit, I'm trying to write a talk for Radio 3 about going to New Zealand. Thinking of cultural shifts and linguistic confusions, I remember a conversation with Ian Wedde about Bill Manhire's poem 'Wingatui'. (This had appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in April 1982 and shortly afterwards in 'Pseud's Corner' in the satirical magazine *Private Eye*. High culture approval one week, pretentiousness award the next — although an appearance in 'Pseud's Corner' has always had a certain cachet in itself.)

Ian's view (repeated subsequently in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*) was that a 'transposition of context' had taken place. Not knowing, as many New Zealanders would, that Wingatui is the name of a small South Island town with a race-course and that the 'birdcage' in the poem referred to the area where the horses are saddled, *Private Eye* found the poem incomprehensible and an 'example of preciously fatuous surrealism.' I agreed that outside New Zealand few people would know about Wingatui and the specialised use of 'birdcage', but, I suggested, couldn't it also have been the final two lines that *Private Eye* seized on? ('You might have touched that sky you lost./ You might have split that azure violin in two.') Ian wasn't convinced, but remembering the conversation I find I've got a good anecdote for the radio talk.

(My later view for what it's worth is that 'Wingatui' is like a condensed version of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. In other words, it's a poem about revisiting a place with special associations and measuring the gap, the sense of loss, between past and present — without in this case offering any of the consolations about 'abundant recompense' with which Wordsworth tries to cheer himself up.)

9. *the bone people*

July 1984. Everyone is talking about *the bone people*. Everyone has opinions about it, whether they've read the novel or not. Keri Hulme's preface explains how (finally) it came to be published by the Spiral Collective, but the myths continue to grow. And how you respond to the novel itself: that becomes almost a test of how ideologically sound you are.

It's the great New Zealand novel.

It's the great New Zealand Maaori novel.

It's the novel from nowhere.

It's a responsible account of New Zealand's darkest secret: child abuse.

It's disturbing.

It's disturbed.

It's *Woman Alone* as opposed to *Man Alone*.

It's a kind of transposed Celtic Romance.

It's badly written and quite unreadable.

It's a work of Joycean proportions with latently anti-homosexual tendencies.

It's . . . the winner of the Pegasus Award, the New Zealand Book Award (and of course the Booker Prize in England the following year).

'The one thing that worries me,' says Louis Johnson, 'is that some government hack is going to turn around and use the book as an excuse for clamping down on literary grants and funding. Can't you just hear them now? "If Keri Hulme can produce a best-seller out of the air, why can't the rest of you bastards?"'

10. *Talking About Ourselves*

July 1983. I have the idea of trying to do a book of interviews, half with British poets and half with New Zealand poets.

December 1983. In England I interview: CH Sisson, Fleur Adcock, Dick Davis, Edwin Morgan and Gavin Ewart.

February 1984. Back here it's clear that the kind of book I have in mind won't find a local publisher. However, one with just New Zealand poets: no problem.

August 1984 - May 1985. I interview Keri Hulme, Rachel McAlpine, Ian Wedde, Lauris Edmond, Brian Turner, Elizabeth Smither, Allen Curnow, CK Stead, Fleur Adcock (again), Michael Harlow, Louis Johnson, and Murray Edmond. The only interview that causes the publishers some uneasiness is the one with Murray Edmond. They wonder whether the different format (an exchange of letters followed by extracts from an interview proper) might jar with the rest of the book. Eventually, they accept that it makes for variety, and besides it's the way Murray wants it.

March 1986. *Talking About Ourselves* published.

7 June 1986. 'Any post-colonial anxieties about English-born academics interpreting our literature for us soon evaporate. Ricketts is an amiable sort, content for the most part to nod along toothlessly.' (Iain Sharp, *The Listener*).

November 1986. 'His self interview (the introduction) is extra-ordinary. It is too long for what it has to say, and it manages to be both chirpy and coy . . . I suppose him to have been attempting an 'easy' and non-academic manner, but he has tricked himself into a chumminess of tone which alternates with introspection

. . . Lauris Edmond I hardly feel safe to write about for she has a kind word to say about me, and, therefore my own kind words to her must be suspect.' (Kevin Ireland, *Islands*)

11. January 1987. Some Afterthoughts.

1 *British poetry*

Most of these poets seemed to feel British poetry had had little or no effect on their own work or on recent New Zealand poetry in general. Predictable enough, given the (necessary) turning away from all things British over the last twenty to thirty years. But what then has happened to all that backlog of British poetry they were exposed to at school and in most cases university? Simply something to be consciously rejected?

2 *Baxter*

Many of the poets had strongly felt reservations about him and his work. Was this merely the kind of reaction which often seems to follow a famous writer's death? A necessary distancing of so commanding a figure? Did his early raiding of the British tradition (pointed out by Louis Johnson) play a part in this? Did Baxter borrow so extensively and so successfully that this has automatically become a non-option for later poets?

3 *Fleur Adcock*

Why did responses to her and her work tend to sound grudging? After all, she's not exactly the first writer to decide to live in another country, and make a success of it. James, Conrad, Mansfield, Eliot, Auden, Isherwood, Thom Gunn: one could compile a long list of writers who have done this.

4

How much difference did the fact that I was English (or at least not New Zealand-born) make to the questions I asked and the answers I received?

5

Is the book proving useful? Yes, to judge by acknowledged (and unacknowledged) quotations from it in reviews of the poets' subsequent work.

Three Poems for George Fraser

(GS Fraser, the Scottish poet and critic died in 1980. In one of his last poems 'Older', he cast himself as a kind of latter-day Polonius figure. 'Polonius: Old Poet' (written while George was still alive) was intended as a reply to 'Older'. The other two poems were written shortly after his death.)

1. Polonius: Old Poet

everything seems disconnected

mottled hands mischievous eyes
rough frosted hair and disobedient brown shoes
cheeks with the blush of mulled wine
your soft-vowelled Scottish blur

you shuffle frailly inside your suit
the blood must move so slowly now
your mind still moving in worlds not realised
you shared the air that Eliot breathed

you know we all tell stories
in coffee-rooms and corridors
ironically envious of your eccentricity
how once you said:
'Which way was I going?
Ah, thank you, that way
— then I have had lunch.'
but Polonius
you are so far out
you're on your own
way back

though it's true you stalk dead minotaurs
in labyrinths where we lack the clue
and Hamlet is dead, Polonius,
and Ophelia too
and maybe you'll never write
all those poems you promised to
you did once live in Elsinore
and for that
we envy you

2. Polonius's Home Truths

'Is there no more to life
than this?' I'd ask. 'Job, house,
kids, wife — domestic bliss.'
'Yes,' he'd reply, 'the pleasure of the eye, nose,
tongue and hand and eye;
these for a time are sure.'

'Has life no more to offer
than this? I'd ask. 'To age
to suffer — and then nothingness.'
'Yes,' he'd say, 'words may assuage,
may even change your mind;
but the past — that you may not leave behind.'

3. What Polonius Said

Polonius said

(he would come most Thursdays;
slow, but dapper always):

‘As you get older, the past grows gappier,
riddled with all you’ve thought and read.’
I’d nod and smile, being younger not older,
but I’m not smiling now that he’s dead.

Polonius said

(he would sit over there
on the edge of that chair):

‘As you get older, the world grows colder
inside than outside your head.’
I’d nod and smile, being younger not older,
but I’m not smiling now that he’s dead.

Polonius said

(he could never get warm
fingers flexed to the flame):

‘As you get older, the mind grows bitter;
love is better when all is said.’
I’d nod and smile, being younger not older,
but I’m not smiling now that he’s dead.

Miss Booth's Tutor Comments On Her Essay (Oxford c1936)

This was really not very good;
you haven't answered the question
nor, dare I say it, understood
the points it tries to test you on.

Your argument, Miss Booth, is thin
and I've read it somewhere before;
to start with 'I think' is a critical sin
— particularly 'I think Milton's a bore.'

Your style so-called is a capital crime;
we do not call an epic 'nice';
of course Blank Verse isn't meant to rhyme
and there isn't a 'c' in Paradise.

Try to give your essay a plan
and could we have some quotation;
whatever you think of Milton the man,
he at least used punctuation.

One thing I did enjoy, Miss Booth,
although the essay is shoddy;
your writing — it's so looped and smooth
and rounded like your body.

Hermeneutics

*This poem talks about itself;
that is mainly what it does
— John Ashbery*

This poem talks about itself;
that is mainly what it does.

Consequently, it doesn't say much
about sexual politics, the big bang,

or epistemological angst
and only refers in passing

to the end of the Cold War, Bosnia,
the rise of Nelson Mandela.

Not that such concerns are trivial,
or inherently unpoetical,

simply that this poem talks about itself;
that is mainly what it does.

Footnote to Larkin

*They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
— Philip Larkin*

To blame it on your mum and dad
and claim it's their fault what you do
takes quite a nerve — as though you had
no part to play in what makes you.

This fucked-up childhood myth's a line
that everyone's at some time used;
it may explain why you're a swine,
but not why you should be excused.

Re/-Verse

I'm the kind of poem
(fusty, old-fashioned, *passé*)
that dreams of being postmodern
— you know, depthless, unstable, *outré*.

I long to be mannered as Manhire,
as wacky as Cilla McQueen,
slippery as Smither;
so no one knows what I mean.

I crave the knotty syntax
that leaves you all agog;
the sort of stuff Al Curnow does
out walking with his dog.

My author, he's the problem.
Just look how he mistreats me:
how can I be like Ashbery,
when all he does is Keats me?

If he'd take a course in theory,
I'd come out in my prime,
shake off this dreary, weary,
pantomime of rhyme.

I want to be postmodern,
not some well-wrought bucket;
so next time you see that authorial he,
tell me from me to — forget it.

The Elephant's Nest Shuffle

It's riddledeedum, riddledeedee,
it's him, her, you, me,
it's the elephant's nest up the rhubarb tree.

It's here, there, this, that,
it's Fitzzy's ear, Rutherford's bat,
it's stealing the boots from the pantomime cat.

It's one fine day in the middle of the night,
it's green not red, grey not white,
it's never quite getting the accent right.

It's another blackbird in a pie,
it's trying to tell a line from a lie,
it's on your knees reaching for the sky.

It's deconstructing the flasher's coat,
it's playing the game, playing the goat,
it's the missing name in the suicide note.

It's the broken bit that never fits,
it's young farts, old shits,
it's double or nothing, double or quits.

It's scuzzy rhythm, upfront rhyme,
it's Sally Bowles, Harry Lime,
it's knick-knack paddywhack all the time.

It's the elephant's nest up the rhubarb tree,
it's him, her, you, me,
it's riddledeedum, riddledeedee.

Mushrooms and Things

It all began with a dark-brown voice on the phone saying: 'Is that the lady from Oxford?' I agreed it was indeed 'the lady from Oxford?'

'Good. Well, how'd you like to come out and eat mushrooms tomorrow evening? We're getting up a small party; some University people, a lawyer and his wife, the odd banker or two. There's this rather nice little place down Lockhart Road that specialises in mushroom dishes.'

'All right,' I said, then paused. 'Um, who are you?'

'Oh, I'm Mister Normal,' he replied. Throaty laugh. 'The very nice man you met in the Senior Common Room last week.' The voice did sound familiar. 'Derek Spears?'

I vaguely remembered him. Late forties . . . endless glasses of San Mig . . . paunch . . . hearty, public school? No face.

'Oh yes,' I said brightly. 'Of course, silly of me. We talked about . . .'

'Ghost marriage, very interesting.'

'Ghost marriage very interesting,' I repeated mechanically. 'How stupid of me.'

'Now here's how you get there,' he said, and I dutifully wrote down the directions. 'Seven thirty, don't be late. Everyone's very keen to meet you,' and he rang off.

I've always been rather sceptical about people who don't conform to what I think of as 'my sort of person' — whatever that is — but I said to myself: 'what the hell, you only live twice; you're leaving soon' and anyway I like mushrooms. So the next evening found me, dabbing on a bit of eye-shadow, changing my jeans for a skirt and slipping into a simple white blouse; quite casual, nothing fancy. I don't think I washed my hair (it always looks like an afro whenever I do) and come seven fifteen, I was in a cab heading for the heart of Wanchai. I even felt a bit excited.

I located the restaurant quite easily. It was on the right squeezed in between an electrician's and a chemist's. The taxi pulled up outside a girlie bar. I took a quick look at the glossy photos of hostesses; bright faces with elaborate make-up, smiling invitingly above daisy-nippled breasts. I crossed the street, braced myself and walked boldly into the restaurant.

'Ah, there you are,' said the dark-brown voice, and my hand was engulfed in a large, hairy fist. It was Mister Normal. I remembered now why I couldn't remember his face — it was so ordinary, sort of blimpish. He ushered me over to a table full of people and made the introductions. First, his wife Marjorie, a blowsy woman with bleached hair. Then, another University couple, Raymond and Joy Brassington, whom I'd met at a drinks' party — she talked to me about dogs. Next, the lawyer who had recently defended a well-known policeman prosecuted for corruption. He was a small, pink, humane-looking man in a tropical suit, light-coloured shirt and tie. His wife was tall and gawky in a very English way. Plain, friendly face, hair parted in the centre and twisted up into a bun; she looked like a middle-aged Jane Eyre. She wore a long dress with a batik design on it. Lastly, there was the banker and his Chinese wife. Everyone except me seemed to be in their forties. All the men, apart from the lawyer, looked almost identical; same height, same slightly portly build and all wearing neat, well pressed, patterned shirts outside their trousers.

The restaurant was small and cosy with Chinese paintings on the walls; the meal was delicious. Seven different kinds of mushrooms cooked in seven different ways, washed down with beer and wine. The banker, Roderick Stowell, quickly emerged as master of the revels. He was sitting on my left and after asking what I was doing in Hong Kong and how long was I staying, he asked whether I had dined at the Hong Kong Club. I said no, I hadn't had that honour.

'That's a pity. They've introduced a rather interesting variation among the waiters. They've got this chap togged up as a eunuch. You know, the slippers, black silk pants, the little

hat, the lot. It's like dining at the court of some Imperial Emperor.'

'Which dynasty?' I asked innocently.

'Oh, I don't know about that,' he said. 'But it's really awfully quaint.'

'It sounds it,' I said. Hong Kong is full of surprises.

I lost track of the conversation for a bit after that, because I was concentrating on the mushrooms, and they were discussing a mutual acquaintance whom the East had got to. I only tuned in again when they started talking about mushrooms. It turned out that among other things Roderick Stowell was rather an authority on mushrooms, particularly the hallucinogenic kind.

'Now your Lancashire witches, they knew a thing or two. They used to rub themselves with all kinds of strange concoctions: bats' blood, toads' liver, all that stuff you get in *Macbeth*. But their speciality, the thing that really turned them on, was one particular mushroom,' (he did say the name, but I've forgotten it) 'which when you rubbed it on, could be absorbed through the skin. Then they'd all get on their broomsticks and — um — have a good time.' He paused and smiled benignly at the assembled company.

'Really, Roderick,' said the lawyer's wife a trifle testily. 'We all know you've got rather unusual tastes, but I hardly think this is quite the conversation for the dinner table.'

'The trouble with you, Penelope,' he replied, 'is you're getting stuffy and narrow-minded in your old age. Now she,' he turned to me, 'coming from an enlightened institution, knows there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Isn't that right, my dear?'

'Well, I know a hawk from a handsaw,' I said brightly.

'Of course you do and quite right too.'

'What about this Jesus-was-really-a-mushroom theory, Roderick,' asked Mister Normal. 'Know anything about that?'

'I'm glad you asked me. Yes, actually I know rather a lot about it. It's pretty interesting. You see, the Greek word, *Christos*, was also the name given to a distinctive kind of

mushroom; it — er — looked rather like a half-erect penis.’

I think Marjorie choked; at least she appeared to be in some difficulty which required the use of a handkerchief. There was one of those pauses and nobody seemed to know quite what to say next — a reflective silence during which everyone had a dr-ink or lit a cigarette or just meditated about Jesus and half-erect penises.

‘Now, take the Last Supper,’ Roderick went on amiably. He was certainly a sticker, no doubt about it. Give him a fence and there was no shying. ‘There they were, all gathered together, sitting around the table like we are now. Probably hadn’t eaten all day, tucking into the mushrooms, ingesting the old psilocybin, and they had this vision that they were all drinking Jesus’ blood and eating his body. Stranger things have happened. It’s all perfectly understandable. Same thing with Pentecost when they started speaking with tongues.’

‘Well, on that note, perhaps we should adjourn,’ said the lawyer, signalling for the bill, and we left.

It seemed, however, that the evening was far from over. ‘The night is but young,’ said Mister Normal as we stood around aimlessly outside. ‘Why don’t you all come back to our place for a drink.’ Everyone agreed, and it so happened that I got a lift with Roderick and his wife. She hadn’t ventured much during the meal, but now she turned out to be utterly charming and friendly. She told me about all the places they’d lived in before coming to Hong Kong: India (where they’d met), Singapore and Australia. Australia had been the worst.

‘The young people there were terrible. They spent all their time going out into the woods looking for things and making love. I found it a very upsetting place.’

‘Yes,’ Roderick said, putting a protective arm round her, ‘there were some pretty odd birds in Australia.’ Then they told me about their family — they had two daughters — and how they all used to go off riding in the New Territories on the weekends. They seemed a very happy couple.

The Spears had a flat in one of the University complexes.

Very elegant sitting-room with a beautiful Chinese carpet, huge batik cushions on the chairs and two padlocked show-cases, full of the most exquisite ceramics. Everyone wanted to watch the final episode of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, so for fifty minutes, with constantly refuelled drinks in our hands, we sat glued to the resolution of the Bellamys' fortunes and the disintegration of a house and an era.

Then it was more drinks and conversation. The lawyer's wife was sitting on my right having an extremely earnest conversation with Raymond Brassington about Toyota Corollas. Since I have difficulty riding a bicycle (I once hit a stationary car — but that's another story) I didn't feel I had much to offer on the respective merits of estate cars. So I moved onto my third gin and tonic and surveyed the scene through a mellow haze. Suddenly I became aware that Roderick was staring at me in a peculiar way. I'd noticed in the restaurant that he had nice eyes, a bruised look about them, and now they were fixed on me in an intense gaze. I stared back, and he neither smiled nor looked away. The conversation about Toyotas drifted on beside me, and I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. I investigated my drink and tried to appear unconcerned, but when I looked up again, there were the same bruised eyes fixed upon me. I looked around, but that was worse. Mister Normal was also staring at me. Wait a minute, I thought, now don't get paranoid. You look just the same as you usually do. I looked at Roderick again which was a mistake. It was the kind of stare that makes you wonder if you remembered to put your knickers on. Was it a conspiracy? I started panicking and blushing, but before I could do anything, Roderick had got up and come over and sat down beside me. I was surrounded: Roderick on my left and the lawyer's wife on my right.

'Are you interested in magic?' asked Roderick in a soft, quite matter-of-fact voice as though he was asking me if I thought the weather would be fine tomorrow.

'No, well yes, quite,' I said. It was sort of a logical question; we had been talking about it at dinner.

‘Are you interested in drugs? I suppose all you young people take drugs nowadays.’ His voice had become appreciably lower.

‘It was a phase most of us went through,’ I parried.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘I’m just curious. I’m not going to shout it out. Did you try LSD?’

‘No,’ I lied. ‘Too dangerous.’

‘You see,’ he went on. ‘I’m rather interested in the — er — sexual side of drugs. The trouble is I’ve always found them a sexual depressant.’

He sounded so mournful I said fatuously, ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Are you by any chance interested in the — how shall we say — are you interested in sex in the broader sense?’

His voice was now so low I could hardly make out what he was saying. Steady on, I thought, I’ve heard that line somewhere before. But I couldn’t for the life of me remember what the answer was. So I shrugged my nonchalant shrug, and heard myself blurt out in a squeak, ‘Er, that is, no, not in a professional sense,’ and wondered what I meant. He didn’t seem to notice my confusion, because he just carried straight on and asked me if I was keen on sexual deviation. At least, that’s what it sounded like; I was straining to catch what he was saying. Half of me couldn’t believe what I was hearing and the other half just smiled and thought, ‘Sit back and enjoy it?’ I couldn’t have moved or done anything anyway; the gin was racing around inside my head, and I felt hypnotised by his bruised eyes and his soft, confiding voice. He was telling me a story.

‘When we were in Singapore, we got to know this couple. It was pretty obvious that their marriage wasn’t working out, and I got friendly with the wife. She was a lovely woman. Then we got more than friendly and, well, the predictable happened. It was very nice. Anyway, one day I went round to see her and she’d also invited a female friend of hers and,’ his voice, if possible, dropped even lower, ‘and she asked me if I’d like to watch. They actually made love in front

of me.' I couldn't believe the lawyer's wife couldn't hear what he was saying. But no, she was still talking to Raymond; they'd moved onto holidays and were discussing the possibility of making up a foursome for next year. 'It was the most incredible thing I've ever seen,' Roderick was whispering. 'Just incredible. I've never felt so excited in my life. So,' he concluded with a nostalgic smile, 'that was my first threesome ...'

Why me? I thought. What have I done to deserve this? What daemon has decided that I should be the recipient of the world's hidden confidences. Roderick was getting up. 'Excuse me for a moment,' he said.

'Must relieve Mafeking.'

I sat in a stupor while he was away, trying to figure out what he'd been telling me and why. Then he was back.

'That's better,' he said. 'You know, I've never told anyone about this before. You're a very nice person.'

'Thank you.'

'No, I mean it. You'd think you heard this kind of story every day.' I couldn't tell him; there are times when we all need to feel our past is special. Besides, there was probably more.

'There's more,' he said almost apologetically, his voice dropping back to an undertone. 'We had a gardener.' Not the gardener story. 'One day I happened to be out on the lawn under a tree or something and I watched him having the amah. It was fantastic. So violent . . . He was — er — particularly well-endowed.' He gestured down to his crotch in case I'd missed the point. 'Does that trouble you?' he seemed genuinely concerned. 'What do you say?'

I just shrugged and shook my head.

Almost absentmindedly, I noticed that Mister Normal was staring at me. I wondered if he'd been staring at me all the time. Roderick got up and went back and sat by his wife. I'd heard enough for one night; so when snacks were mentioned, I quickly offered to make them. When I went out to the kitchen. Mister Normal followed me. He stood leaning against the dresser, watching me cut bread.

'I don't think I've ever seen anyone cut bread as badly as you do,' he said gallantly. 'Nor butter it so badly for that matter. Do you have someone to do it for you?'

'Of course,' I replied. 'Several people.' And we left it at that.

It must have been about midnight, when we all finally staggered away. 'I do hope we see you again,' said Roderick's wife as we got out of the lift.

from A Brief History of NZ Literature

Bay

The women wave ta-ta to Stan.
Kezia's tickled by Gran.
Florrie the cat
does this and that
and Beryl says no to a man.

Katherine Mansfield

Ecce Homo

The problem with being a poet
in New Zealand is: how do you show it?
No one wants a lone crag,
or Christ on the swag.
But I'm going to be famous, I know it.

RAK Mason

Guilt

All right, so my style's a bit raw,
and Johnson my hero's a bore.
I set out to do
a *Vile Bodies II*,
but we can't all be Evelyn Waugh.

John Mulgan

Here

What'll last takes time to foresee.
This moa, now — tall as a tree,
but failed to adapt.
Result: it got zapped.
The trick? Standing upright. (Like me.)

Allen Curnow

Jib-booms and Bobstays

As a lad I was happy as Larry;
now thistledown's all that I carry.
Flowers of the sea
are no use to me;
so why do I pluck them? *sings Harry*

Denis Glover

Mutability: An Ode

There once was this wonderful bay.
As kids, we would swim there all day.
But the bay wasn't real;
it was just an ideal.
Romantic, like Wordsworth. Okay?

James K Baxter

Nits

Hey Colin, it's just as I feared:
now God's put a louse in my beard.
It seems to be saying
I ought to be praying.
So I do. God laughs. Really *weird*.

James K Baxter

Overripe

There was an old preacher called Plumb
who was deaf and most certainly dumb.
He'd got so obsessed
his kids were repressed
and he wasn't too nice to their mum.

Maurice Gee

Psmith's Dream

I know, I'll put Janet and Jim
— and Frank — in a book for a whim.
All the critics will say
“What a *roman à cleft*!
Why aren't we as clever as him?”

CK Stead

Quod Est Demonstrandum

Oh fucking's the most awful bore;
it quickly turns into a chore.
There's no need to linger,
just use a finger
and do it yourself on the floor.

Fleur Adcock

Rite

My son wants to show me a snail;
it's left a yucky wet trail
all over his bed
— I squash the thing dead
and make up a devious tale.

Fleur Adcock

Tracks

What's hard about being a bard
is the chant — high, blokey, love-scarred.
It's living the blues,
paying your dues;
who needs to be avant-garde?

Sam Hunt

Ward

There once was this girl without fear,
liked shells, was a bit of a seer.
She beat up this guy
who abused his son, Si.
After that it goes mystic and queer.

Keri Hulme

Yahtzee

Wow! Science is poetry too!
Quarks dance. Take a chance. I love you.
Not *another* award.
O crikey I'm bored.
Perhaps I should try something new.

Cilla McQueen

Zenske Pesme

I've said it again and again:
the slyest evaders are men.
Their verse, like their cocks,
always reeks of old socks.
It's lucky I've got a sharp pen.

Anne French

Puppetman

‘Went to see the puppetman with Joseph — forty seven empty cabs, fifteen cops, the pink Rolls Royce.’

As I sit in the gloom of an English November afternoon, that March evening in Hong Kong comes back in a series of snapshots pulled out of a Polaroid, bright and sticky and left out on the table for a moment to dry. Walking down the hill to pick up a cab — a dark red smudge of sunset over the mountains the moon white and full-faced behind me above the apartment blocks — the throb of the city below. The taxi driver with the second and third fingers of his left hand joined together and the thumb, splayed and curved like a tablespoon. I remember, though it’s not in my diary, that I counted seven barbers’ shops, one albino and five cops, on the way to the Hilton where I was to meet Joseph. And the Sikh — resplendent in his white turban and maroon coat, who always opened the taxi doors.

I look at the meter. It says five dollars. I look in my wallet. A single hundred dollar note. I look at the driver and his monstrous hand outstretched for the money. I show him my hundred dollars and he shrugs and shakes his head. I look at the Sikh and with a smile and a flourish, he magicks a brand-new five dollar note from his immaculate white gloves. I thank him and get out of the cab and go into the coffee shop and change my hundred dollar note and return to the Sikh and give him six dollars — his dim smile — and go inside to find Joseph.

Joseph, who as it turned out I never did get to know very well though we seemed to like each other. His family was fourth generation Hong Kong Chinese. He’d worked in Munich for seven years as a photographer and come back on a visit to see his parents, got married, found a job and stayed. Joseph with his crooked smile. He was halfway through a whisky; so I sat down and joined him, and he told me why we were going to see the puppetman. Apparently, his boss on the magazine had been to

dinner at the hotel where the puppetman was performing as part of a cabaret act and had decided that a few photographs would go well with a feature they were running on Chinese Arts and Crafts.

‘So that’s why we’re going,’ said Joseph flatly.

I asked why he wouldn’t have wanted to go anyway.

‘Do you know how much those cabaret dinners cost?’

‘Okay; but it is homegrown culture.’

‘If you like that kind of thing.’

We paid for the drinks and left, but I wouldn’t drop the subject and as we walked to the Star Ferry (the puppetman was performing on Kowloonside), I asked, ‘What do you mean?’

Joseph was silent for a moment; then he said: ‘Let me tell you a story, an old Chinese story about a hunter-hero called Wu Sung. It’s a long story; so I’ll just give you the outline. One day Wu Sung decided to go to the city to see his brother who was a baker. His brother had a very beautiful wife, and Wu Sung had barely arrived before she tried to seduce him. He refused, of course, but it had made him feel bad, particularly when he discovered that she’d been running around with the local playboy. And he didn’t like the city anyway; so after a few days he went back to the country. One night he got incredibly drunk and had a fight with a famous man-eating tiger who was terrorising the district. After a tremendous battle Wu Sung killed the tiger. But he was worried about his brother, whom he loved very much, and decided to go back to the city.’

We were halfway across the harbour by this point, passing destroyers strung with paper chains of multicoloured lights.

‘When Wu Sung got to the city, he found his brother lying on the floor of his shop, poisoned. So he went to look for his sister-in-law. He found her in a wineshop with the playboy. He and the playboy fought and although the playboy was also a strong man, Wu Sung killed him. Obviously, he had to leave the city; so he went to the mountains and joined a famous robber band in Lien Shan.’ Joseph paused. ‘That’s it really; end of

story.'

'It's a good story,' I said.

'It's not a good story; it's a great story.'

'Sounds like Robin Hood and his merry men.'

'Not really. You haven't got any stories that are really like it.'

'Okay, but what's it got to do with the puppetman?'

'He's doing the fight between Wu Sung and the tiger.'
Joseph gave his crooked smile.

'That sounds good. I mean, he couldn't do the whole thing, could he?'

The ferry docked, and we became part of the crowd streaming out into the night. We cut through the Hong Kong Hotel and crossed down to Nathan Road. The streets were full of people. I remember cameras hanging around the necks of tourists like albatrosses. Smart young couples window-shopping. Old men with shaved heads and opium eyes. Children playing, and a beggar with matted hair shuffling along, a bundle on his back. All the shop fronts were lit-up. Huge neon signs invited you to clubs and bars. Cars screeched, and music pounded out from the record stores. All the bustle and stir of the city at night.

We turned down a back-street past small restaurants and mobile food stalls. The air was thick with the smell of cooking and smoke flaring from the open fires. Eventually, we came to a lodging house (probably a brothel, said Joseph as we took the wobbling lift up to the fifth floor). We stood outside in the dismal hall and rang the bell. A man in a vest and trousers half-opened the door and asked what we wanted. Joseph explained that we'd come to see the puppetman, and the man shut the door. He came back a minute or two later and let us in. Inside there were two rooms. The first contained nothing except a few chairs, a TV with the sound off and a beaten-up sofa with a man asleep on it, his head shielded by his arms. We went through into the second room where there was the remains of a mahjong game and some suitcases and cans of beer. And the puppetman. He must have

been about thirty; thin, pockmarked face and short, blunt hands. Joseph explained that he wanted to take some photographs for his magazine. He started lodging his camera, and I located a chair while the puppetman fixed up a primitive stage and some lights.

He began with two puppets (the Monkey and the General, said Joseph, moving about to get the best angles). I don't remember the Monkey, but the General had long feathers (pheasant, I think) arching back from his helmet, and his head was surrounded by brightly coloured flags. Glass jewels flashed from his tunic and a ceremonial sword hung by his side.

'Good puppets,' said Joseph as the puppetman put them away. The lights went down and suddenly a figure on a bicycle appeared, whirling a flaming torch. The torch spun faster and faster, throwing monstrous shadows on the ceiling and the walls, cutting a great circle of fire in the darkened room. The torch went out. I could see shapes in front of my eyes. The lights came on again; the puppetman was dismantling the stage.

'That was amazing,' I said. 'Why didn't you take any pictures?'

'It was just show. It wasn't any good,' said Joseph. I felt as though I'd been cheated out of something.

The puppetman's assistants arrived, and we set off for the hotel. They went backstage, and Joseph and I were escorted up to a gallery, looking down over the diners in their tuxedos, velvets and pearls. We watched the end of a Chinese fan-dance (red and white costumes, red and white fans). 'It's as good as Las Vegas,' I said, and Joseph smiled. When the thunderous applause had died down, and the audience had settled back to dessert and liqueurs, the puppetman was announced:

'Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to present Mr Ching, the celebrated puppeteer. Mr Ching has performed all over the world to universal acclaim and was the winner of the 1974 Czechoslovakian Puppet Contest. Tonight he is going to perform for us an episode from the old Chinese story of Wu Sung: Wu Sung's fight with the tiger. Ladies and

Gentlemen, Mr Ching.'

Amid generous applause the spotlight focuses on the stage, and the music for the piece begins. Slowly the curtains draw back to reveal the tiger asleep by a river bank. As though suddenly aware of the audience, the tiger opens his mouth in an enormous red yawn. Ripples of laughter from the tables below, and Joseph moves away again, looking for angles. For a few minutes the tiger has the stage all to himself. He frisks and gambols and chases his tail like a kitten. Then he must have heard something that we can't hear because he stops and looks around and withdraws stealthily behind a bush. What he heard was obviously the approach of Wu Sung who now appears in a blue tunic with the staff over his shoulder. He is lurching and staggering and clearly very drunk. The tiger leaps out from behind his bush, grinning and laying his head between his paws. Wu Sung stops, and he and the tiger eye each other; then the tiger makes his spring. Wu Sung, slowed by the drink, is caught off-guard and almost overwhelmed by the sudden attack. For a moment it looks as though the fight is all over, but somehow he manages to throw the tiger off and now he stands ready, staff in hand. The two opponents circle each other warily, looking for an opening. Wu Sung attacks; the tiger retreats. The tiger attacks; Wu Sung retreats. Then they are mixing it, stick against claw, rolling over and over, neither able to get the upper hand. Suddenly, in the *mêlée*, Wu Sung's staff flies out of his grasp, and it seems that he's done for. The tiger smiles a huge, red smile and pounces, lashing his tail. Wu Sung is underneath, and the tiger stands over him in triumph; then Wu Sung has kicked him off and is on the tiger's back, punching for all he is worth. The tiger does everything to rid himself of this burden, this indignity, but Wu Sung clings on desperately, raining down blows on the tiger's head. The struggle seems endless. Then the tiger begins to weaken; then he collapses and finally with a last twitch and a quiver, he lies dead. Wu Sung gets shakily to his feet and stands looking down at the motionless form of his beaten foe. Then he stoops, grasps the tiger by the tail and hauls him off the stage. The music

which has swelled to a climax with Wu Sung's victory, dies away and in the momentary silence before the applause breaks out, the puppetman stands up and takes his bow.

'Well, what did you think?' said Joseph.

'I thought it was great.'

'I thought you'd like it.' He smiled. 'Come on. I said we'd have a drink with him in the lounge.'

The puppetman looked tired. He ordered a lemon tea, and Joseph asked him questions, translating as he went along. He had come to Hong Kong from China two years before. He had left because they wouldn't allow him to perform the old stories. He had to do revolutionary stories like the Red Lanterns and White Hair Girl and he didn't like them; so he left everything – he had no family – and came to Hong Kong. His puppets? He hadn't been able to bring them with him; so he had had to remake them all from memory. Then there was a long bit which Joseph didn't translate.

'What's he saying?' I asked.

'He's saying how bad his assistants are and how little money he makes.'

'How much does he make?'

'About five hundred a night, five nights a week. But he says he has to pay his assistants and musicians out of that.'

He had learnt his puppetry from his grandfather. He had started at six years old and practised for ten hours a day.

'When was he allowed to take part in performance?' I asked.

'When he could throw a puppet up and have it land back exactly on his fingers.'

He was going to France the following week to perform in Paris. The pay wasn't any better than Hong Kong, but they appreciated his work in Europe. Joseph asked him if he would come back to Hong Kong. Of course, where else? He was Chinese. Taiwan? No, not Taiwan; too near China. Then he said he had to go; so we shook hands and wished him luck.

I remember we wandered back in silence to the Star

Ferry. It can only have been about eleven o'clock. Crowds moving up and down the brightly-lit streets. Sailors and squaddies deciding which bar to spend their money in. Fruit stalls. A Sikh on guard outside a jeweller's, rifle in hand. The same beggar, or his twin brother, shuffling along with his bundle on his back.

'So, you didn't like him?' I asked as we queued for our taxis on Hong Kong side.

'Oh, he was all right,' said Joseph. 'Technically, he was pretty good.'

'But he was a puppet,' I suggested.

'Aren't we all?' said Joseph, smiling.

I gave the driver my address and leant back into the black plastic seat, watching it all flash by. On the way home I counted forty seven empty cabs, fifteen cops and the pink Rolls Royce.

Prefatory Note to Settling In

It is usually easy enough for a reader to deduce the source of a 'found' poem. The original material was obviously a letter or a menu or an item from a newspaper. What makes this material a poem is the act of removing it, or releasing it, from its original context (without losing all sense of that context) and then arranging it on the page in a form that readers conventionally associate with the form of a poem.

Sometimes, however, the source is not so obvious and requires some explanation. When an earlier version of this sequence of 'found' poems appeared in *Landfall* 163 (September 1987), I explained that it came from Sir Apirana Ngata's *Maori Grammar & Conversation With Vocabulary* (Sixth Printing Revised and Enlarged by W.W. Bird) published by Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd., price 3/9d, no publication date given. As far as it went this information was completely accurate; I had used a copy of that book.

Now, however, I am beginning to wonder whether it was my real source. Anyone looking up Ngata's book in AG Bagnell's *New Zealand National Bibliography* will discover that the edition I used should in fact have described itself as the ninth printing, not the sixth, and that it was published in 1948. Furthermore they will discover that Sir Apirana Ngata's name was first associated with editions of this work in 1901 and that he wasn't the original compiler. The original compiler was Mary Joseph Aubert who published the first version in 1885 under the initials SA with the title *New and Complete Manual of Maori Conversation: With a Complete Vocabulary*. Anyone who looks at a copy of Sister Aubert's edition will see that apart from No: 12 'Are There Any Flying Ships Now?' I could have found my material (in a sense did find my material) in her version.

What then was my real source? Sister Aubert's book of 1885 or Sir Apirana Ngata's of 1948? Both, it would seem, and yet neither; since a grammar book is compiled not written. Perhaps, it occurs to me, the real source of these 'found' poems is not so much a particular person or a particular book but the language itself.

Settling In

1. Come on board of my ship

The crew of our ship consists of the captain,
first and second mate, steward, cook, carpenter,
ten able-seamen, and two apprentices.
I have a bad cabin. The tide is coming in.
Hoist the anchor. Unfurl the sail.
The sea is calm. The wind is becoming very strong.

See how the waves rise.

Look behind and see the waves rising up high
like the spouting of a whale.
Is there much water in the ship? Search, all of you,
for the leak! The water is gaining rapidly on us.
I feel very frightened. Which of us will reach the land?
The large ship appears like a speck in the distance.

Look at the albatross.

2. 1500 acres of rich land

The house, all built with kauri, stands
on slightly rising ground somewhat
apart from the village. We do
not acknowledge that boundary.
The fences have been broken down
by the wind. This plough saves the work
of two horses and a man; it
works like steam. Yes, mortgage is
not a good thing. It is greatly
to be feared, owing to this long
and unusual drought, the late-sown
potato crop will be a failure.
These sheep are brought out from England.
Your dog is devouring my lamb.

3. Do you shoot?

Game in the district is extremely plentiful.
We have any quantity of hares and rabbits.
We also have pheasants.

Do you hear a gun go off? Do not fear, it is
Mr Williams. He is shooting parson birds.
Your dog smells a rabbit.

There are water-hens here in the swamp. That is not
a wood pigeon. I caught a hawk in the garden.
Do you not see the larks?

Do you know how to stuff a wild cat? Please take care,
otherwise that wild pig will bite you. I told you
his tusks were very long.

I think your powder is wet.
You have just shot my parrot.

4. In the garden

How beautiful that bed
of flowers looks!
What a lot of flowers!
Here is a rose
and here a lily.
What fragrance!

These oaks are slow
in growing. Why
have you blue gums
and willows here?
Yes, this is a kauri
and there is a red pine.
The birds are chirping.
Pull down the apples.

5. The war is spreading

The French have sunk an American ironclad with one hundred and fifty men on board.

Latest reports claim that Naples and Genoa have been bombarded by the Spaniards.

Fifty thousand Prussians have crossed the Rhine today and are marching rapidly on Paris.

A definite treaty of peace between Russia and Austria will be signed tomorrow.

The troops are examining the enemy camp. The troops have no train of artillery.

It is impossible to imagine the end. The struggle promises to be a deadly one.

Andrew has received many blows. I will kill you directly.

6. Peace and goodwill prevail

What sort of people are the Maaoris?

The Maaoris may be regarded as a manly and patriotic race.

Are the Maaoris fond of work?

Many of them spend their time in idle pursuits, and intemperate habits have ruined a great many.

Are the Maaoris a religious sort of people?

Many of the more intelligent among them express a strong desire to see people return to the true religion.

How does the Government act towards the Maaoris?

The Government has always been solicitous that the Maaoris should be preserved as a people.

7. Are you disposed to enter my service?

Who was your late master? Your references certainly seem to be satisfactory.

Have you ever been employed as a shepherd?

Can you milk cows? Can you drive a motor car?

It says here you have a wife and a daughter

but are you otherwise without encumbrance?

Has your wife ever been a nursemaid? Can she

wash the dishes? Is your wife a good laundress?

What wages do you want? A pound a week? That

is rather much. I will pay you forty pounds a year.

You will have these three rooms and the verandah

to scrub. You will have to do as you are told.

Bring your daughter as a cook. She looks very

nimble. If you like, you can start tomorrow.

8. The arrivals for the fortnight

The ship 'Catherine', 1,160 tons,
Captain Allen, from London, with a cargo
of merchandise and 180 passengers.

'Tyne', barque, from Newcastle,
with coal. 'Harris', brigantine,
from Hobart Town, with palings
and shingles. 'Swan', brig,
from Otago, with posts and rails.

'Manaia', cutter, from the coast,
with 10 boxes gooseberries, 6 tons sperm oil,
5 cwt. whalebones, 30 spars, 800lb wool,
20 tons firewood, 15 tons kauri gum.

H.M.S.S. 'Armado', 30 guns,
Commodore Lorigan, on a cruise.

9. Do me the favour to carve this quarter of lamb

Ladies and gentlemen, be so good as to sit down. Will you take fish? We have some fried soles, a mullet, broiled hearings, nice sardines.

Now shall I send you a little beef? Do you like it well done? This pork is very sweet. Have I helped you to the part you like best?

Shall I help you to the this boiled fowl? No, this is a kiwi and these are parson birds. I will send you a bit of that pheasant.

Will you have peas or spinach? Pass the bread round. Some pickles. Take some preserves. Pepper and salt. Some mashed potatoes. Here is some good wine.

Do you prefer apple pie? Help yourselves to the strawberries. Will you have a little more?

10. I always remember you

Are you Miss Celine?

Oh, is it you?

I have come a long way to see you.

Warm yourself.

I have heard your father is better.

Sit down on the sofa.

I really must be going.

You are in a great hurry.

We shall meet in Taranaki.

Give me your hand.

Madam, this is our first meeting.

I hope it will not be the last.

I must go.

Do not go yet.

11. Here is some good strong wincey

You :

Yes, sir?

I want a suit of clothes :

Here is a silk dress.

I want a suit of clothes :

Here is a print one.

I want a velvet waistcoat :

This velvet cloak looks very pretty.

Give me the moleskin trousers :

This is a beautiful shawl.

Are these shoes for me? :

Try them.

They are too tight :

Do you want a fan?

Will you measure me? :

It is eight yards long, not quite nine.

Oh! You hurt me :

Do you want a white hat?

I want a straw bonnet with a white feather :

Here is a pink satin bonnet.

Hold it up that I may see it :

It is trimmed with brown ribbons.

Put a crape on it, I am in mourning :

This gown is of moderate length.

The petticoat is not full enough :

Wait, let me look at it.

Do you have any silk stockings? :

Yes, sir!

12. Are there any flying ships now?

When I was a boy there were sailing ships, like the 'Catherine'. There are none now, they take too long on the journey. Yesterday I heard a loud noise in the sky. That would be an aeroplane. Look! There it is now, like a big hawk. How fast it flies! One man came from England by plane in four and a half days. He must have a stout heart to make that journey. There are a great many motor cars now in New Zealand — thousands of them. If you do not go too fast, it is a very pleasant way of travel. Who is the man standing there with the white coat? He is a traffic inspector. Look! He put up his hand and stopped that car. That man will be fined £10 for going too fast. You must be very careful of electric power or you will be killed. I also listen to the radio, and learn the news of the whole world. There were not so many people in New Zealand when I was a young boy.

13. Let us hear the talk of the whole world

What is the news?

There are different accounts.

By a railway collision in Scotland
three persons were killed and thirty-two were injured.

Famine is raging in some parts of China,
the people being actually reduced to eat roots.

We must wait for particulars.

The news is very interesting.

Terrible accounts have been received
of a cyclone in Samoa. The plague
has appeared in Egypt.

Wellington has been stormed.

Is it official? They say so.

This is good news.

14. How is it now?

Do the Maaoris wish their children to be educated?

The Maaoris manifest an earnest desire that a knowledge of the English language should be imparted to their children.

They understand that the future welfare of their children depends, in a great measure, upon their progress in European education.

Do the Maaoris have great power?

They enjoy exactly the same electoral privileges as the Europeans.

Are the Maaoris friendly with the white people?

We have much cause for thankfulness in the social and physical relations of both races to each other.