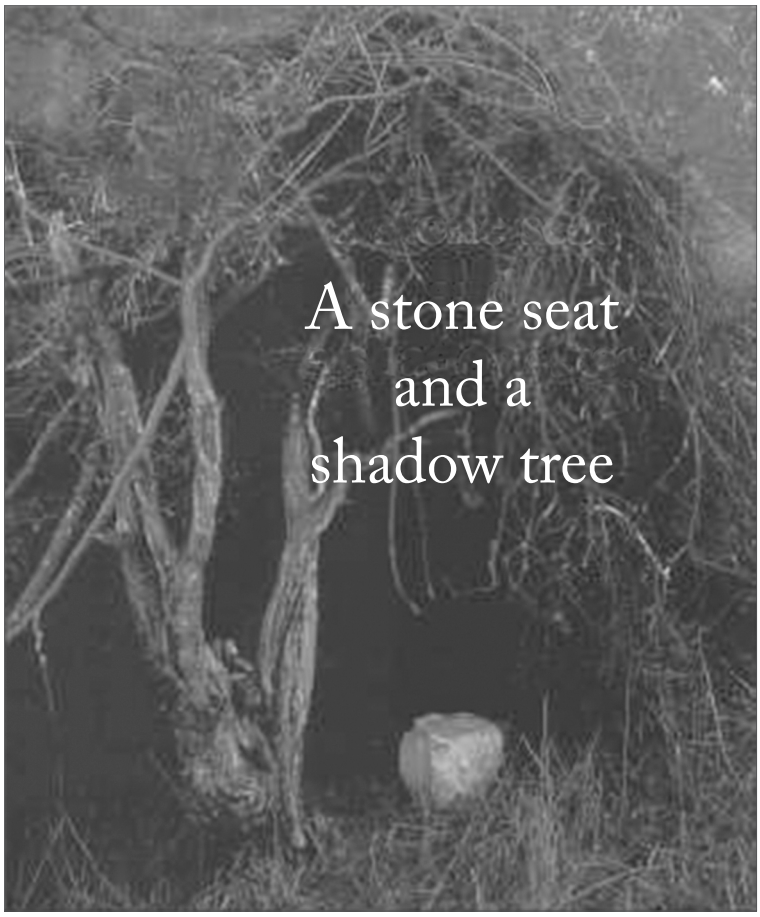

NOTES ON WRITING THE POEMS

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About these notes

Here are notes on some of the poems from *a stone seat and a shadow tree*. I've written these for high school students, thinking about how as the writer I might be able to open up the understanding and enjoyment of poetry, both for the student who likes poetry, and the student who doesn't! The notes cover where the poems come from, the process of writing, and the discoveries I've made as I've looked back on what I've written. I've thought about both content and form.

Talking about where poems come from can give a sense that the poet is just an ordinary person who might have an ear for a possibility, or might just be paying attention. Knowing that poems can come from everyday things like cooking sausages over a fire, or looking at a photograph, brings them back into everyone's world.

There are different approaches to the writing of poetry. Some poets write poetry as a conscious and deliberate art form. I mostly don't think consciously about form when I write, so looking back on these poems and writing these notes has been full of surprises and discoveries for me, and I've tried to convey that. I hope the students will see that a lot of what happens in poetry, which may seem intentional, is accidental; that a poem can be in a sense out of control and can end up in an entirely different place from where it began.

No matter where a poem begins and ends, it almost always needs to be crafted. Most poems go through many revisions. I haven't commented on that a lot, because I'm more interested in the 'making' of a poem here, but I have commented in some poems.

Most of these poems came out of personal experience, but some are a result of writing exercises, and I've mentioned that too. I believe that one of the best ways of coming to grips with poetry is by writing it, and I've made some suggestions about that.

One difficulty in writing notes like this is that I find myself spelling out what I want the poem to say, when the nature of poetry, its strength and its particular quality, is that it so often doesn't say everything, and not directly; it lets the readers discover for themselves. Explaining a poem feels like losing something, but if it opens a poem up to a less confident reader, it's worth it.

Finally, I've commented on some editing decisions (and errors!) so that students might get a sense of the whole process of completing a manuscript.

Are these notes useful for exam preparation? Comments from generous teachers who critiqued them suggest that they can be. I haven't included a detailed line-by-line analysis of structure, figures of speech etc. I've chosen to focus on the area which generally isn't available to students, the poet thinking about why and how they wrote a particular poem. I hope this will make the poems more accessible to the students, give them an insight into the writing process and a good understanding of how form and content reflect each other. Maybe this could form a solid foundation for further discussion and analysis.

Spanish Civil War, 1937

Book p8, notes, p15.

How did I come to write a poem about the Spanish Civil War? I went to see *Patient Planet*, an exhibition of photographs by leading international photographers of the last century, when it toured New Zealand. In it there was a black and white photograph of the body of a fighter, who looked like a teenage boy, lying across stones with his gun beside him. Everything in that photo — his sudden violent death, how young he looked, the passion he must have had — were the material for this poem.

The poem feels to me as though I stopped a camera on a moment of time, maybe ten seconds in all, to record three tiny scenes which happened simultaneously — the mother, the father and the son — but I didn't think like that deliberately at the time. I simply wrote the poem.

The idea underpinning the poem is that at very significant times in people's lives, other people, even far away, may have a sense of what is happening — some kind of unconscious knowledge. Many people have had experiences of this kind. But to me the other major idea is that the boy is so confident and passionate, right up to the moment of his death.

I want this poem to be a strong visual poem. I want the reader to see it as a tiny film, each detail of it, the flour drifting, the beer leaping over the rim.

Because it is about a single continuous moment, the form of the poem reflects that. It is basically in two long sentences. There are only two full stops, one at the end of the poem, one after *but you heard nothing.* I want the poem to pause at that point — it's like an intake of breath, an anticipation of what will happen next.

There are two examples of repetition. One was deliberate — *arm fell/fell away/falling* — I repeated the word to get the sense of a sequence unfolding, almost in slow motion. *Hawk* is also repeated; that was accidental, but when I saw it I decided to keep it, because it formed a tiny link between the mother and the son.

It's important for me that poems are rhythmical, that they read aloud well. There are patterns of lines in this poem — *Your hand so light on the gun/your head so full of knowing* — that I think matter for the 'music' of the poem.

Would it make a difference to know more about the Spanish Civil War when reading this poem? Not necessarily, because war is war no matter where. But what drew me to the photo in the first place was some general knowledge I have about that particular war, which is associated for me with intense passion and a sense of a just cause which drew many people from other countries to join that fight. So reading more about the Spanish Civil War might be like shining a torch onto the poem — it might just show it in a slightly different light.

Passing

Book p47, notes p16.

Many poems I've written have come from actual events. I was walking through Porirua when I saw a man cutting his lawn with a machete. If you're used to cutting a lawn with a lawn mower, the extraordinary skill and hard work of cutting it with a machete is amazing. What happened after that is the rest of the poem. We each said something to the other, in our own language. I think he definitely misunderstood me, and I most probably misunderstood him.

That's what the poem is about.

At least, that's what I thought I was writing about. But maybe I was also writing about the much larger issue of stereotyping, and the way we quickly make assumptions about each other, and often completely miss the point.

Why did I write the poem in such short lines and plain language? Maybe because it was that kind of encounter — short, stark, nothing 'poetic' about it. Look at the one detail I've used a simile for — *shaving it as fine as hairs on skin*. His skill was the one thing of beauty in this tiny event.

Does he think… Do I think…? Why did I use this repetition? Probably for emphasis, and for contrast. And why did I write those lines as questions? Because the whole poem is about not knowing, about misunderstanding. Did we get it completely wrong about each other? I'll never know.

Russia

Book p22, notes p16

This poem started out as a writing exercise. We were given a poem in Russian and asked to write a translation. Since I don't understand a word of Russian, the 'translation' had to be completely made up, but the language of the original poem must have given me the idea for this piece. It was fun to write, too, and it's an exercise that you might like to try. It doesn't matter what language the poem is in, so long as you don't understand it!

It's a poem about stereotypes: both of the people in the poem have stereotyped images of Russia. Stereotypes often, though not always, have some sliver of truth in them (that's how they develop in the first place) but the problem is that they are simplified generalizations of complex things.

Why did I put this poem on a railway platform with two people saying good-bye? I have no idea. It was just what came into my head when I was confronted with the Russian poem. Since it's a situation between two friends, I unconsciously settled on writing the poem largely in dialogue. That's turned out to be a good way to write it, because it allows the poem to express these stereotyped views without the poet having to come into the poem and explain them.

The Russian poem was in short lines — it looked quite like this poem on the page — so that must have influenced the way I wrote this poem.

There are images that echo each other: *white breath/ train smoke/long asthmatic curls/gaspy wheeze*. The cold is a strong presence in this poem too.

Perhaps the last line is an image for what the entire poem is all about — the fogged up glass — the stereotypes we hold which prevent us seeing anything clearly. That's a rationalization — finding a rational reason for something after the event — because I certainly didn't think of that at the time.

Look carefully at the punctuation of this poem. Can you see anything wrong with it? It's an embarrassing example of how carefully you have to proofread, and even when you do, errors still slip through.

Eclipse

Book p62, notes p17.

I've often wondered what people thought, hundreds or thousands of years ago, about natural events such as thunder, or earthquakes, or an eclipse, when they had no scientific explanation for them. It's not surprising that they often believed these events were signs from the gods, or the gods themselves, or omens, or punishments. A few years ago there was an eclipse of the moon, and as we watched it I found myself asking the question again — if we had been living a few hundred years ago, what would we have made of this enormous and strange event? That was the starting point for this poem.

It's a narrative poem. It tells the small story of an eclipse of the moon, through the experience of one family. A narrative seems an appropriate form to use. The poem is about powerful emotions — unease, fear, desperation, overwhelming relief — and it's very difficult to describe strong emotions, but much easier to show them, in this case in the actions and reactions of the family. A narrative also lends itself to strong visual images — small exact details which will create a clear sharp picture in the mind of the reader.

The underpinning of the poem is the father's superstitious religious belief; he believes the eclipse is a punishment from God. (It's helpful in reading this poem, to know that in the Middle Ages, when I imagine this poem to be set, people believed there was a firmament or arch over the world, which contained the sky and the stars and the sun, and God was above the firmament).

A few observations about language:

all is consumed is a biblical phrase — I used this phrase deliberately, to suggest the man's fear of God, which has an Old Testament quality to it.

There are two similes for death — *like the blow of a horse's hoof/ like swamp fever* — I wanted to use images that keep suggesting a Middle Ages context (imagine how different the poem would be if I'd said like an automobile crash, or stealthily, like Aids — the poem would change completely, in fact it might become really bizarre, a poem about a modern western person in mortal fear of an eclipse!).

that moon still pale and weak — is that personification? Certainly I think it reflects how the man himself feels.

Just in case. Why finish like that? Just in case God is still furious with them? Just in case He still needs to be placated? Just in case it isn't over yet? This ending leaves something hanging, something not known. That's the nature of the eclipse itself in those times.

As a writing exercise, you could write about an event or experience but radically change the time or place in which it occurred. For example, you could write about something you did last weekend, but as though it happened 400 years ago.

Three Cambodian Women

Book p10, notes, p18.

In the last thirty years, many Cambodian people have come, often as refugees, to settle in New Zealand. When I was teaching English to new migrants, I met many Cambodians when they first arrived here, and have known some of them ever since. Slowly their lives in this new country unfold, in very different ways for different people. This poem is about three actual women, though I've changed their names. It's a poem about loss, and change. To me it's also a poem about how other people's experience changes us. Looking through other people's eyes changes what we see through our own eyes.

This poem is quite structured. There are three sections, and within each section there are two stanzas: these two stanzas contrast some aspect of each woman's past with her present circumstances. There is also a progression of experience through the poem as a whole. For the first woman, Sophomea, everything of value is associated with the past and the present is empty and pointless, while the last woman, Si Na, has managed to create a new life for herself.

In the first section, the contrast is in the woman's circumstances. Her past life of wealth and privilege is in sharp contrast to her present life as a factory worker. The images of the poem — *the gardener/the shaded house/threads of gold light* — all suggest that world of privilege. Perhaps *whitens the dust* carries an additional meaning, that she is growing old doing this repetitive and meaningless work.

In the second section, the contrast is in the English language — *the cramping child-talk of new English* (we easily forget how frustrating it is for an adult to have only the vocabulary of a child), contrasted with her fluency in talking about her job. Her job is clearly more skilled than Sophomea's, she has achieved more, but her past remains as real and powerful as Sophomea's.

The last section is also about language — the frightening incomprehensibility of a foreign language, in contrast with Si Na's ability to talk easily in perhaps the most important situation of all, friendship. And now the New Zealander, the 'I' of the poem, is no longer an observer, she is learning from Si Na.

I'm using images here to try to understand what it's like for a new migrant. *Bland white faces* — is that how we look, all the same, to a new migrant? *Strange words rattling like dead sticks* — what does a foreign language sound like? *A cold wind* — what does it feel like to come to this country which is physically cold, but also 'cold' in the sense of loneliness and emptiness?

I've written this poem mostly in short lines. This wasn't a deliberate decision, it just happened that way, but maybe it's appropriate in a poem about limited language and experience. And maybe the fact that in the last section on Si Na, the lines are longer and flow more easily, is appropriate too.

How does one end a poem? Often poems are open-ended; the poet doesn't want to tie it all up in a neat ending. But I've finished this poem very definitely — *have a cup of tea.* Having a cup of tea is such a common everyday thing — perhaps I settled on it because it suggests really and finally being at home.

Our first winter

Book p3, notes p19.

This is an autobiographical poem. Everything happened exactly like this! We lived in Canada for several years, and in our first year we bought our first car, a red Austin Cambridge station wagon. It was an English car, and we were living in Calgary, Alberta, which has extremely cold winters, and that English car just wasn't built for them. It's true — not only did we get a thick layer of ice on the outside of the windshield, but on the inside as well! The heater simply couldn't do the job.

But this is a poem about hindsight. At the time, we didn't see any of these things in the way I've written them in the poem. We loved that old Austin, we laughed at our iced-up windshield, we were amazed and excited about snow falling in the middle of summer (July), and we showed our car off to our friends who were really nice about it.

It was only later that I realized how naïve we were then. And this is a poem about naivety.

In the last stanza, it has also become a poem about one-up-manship — how someone else's better car took the pleasure out of our old one — but at the time I didn't feel that either. So a poem can take an experience and change it into something else. Or maybe reveal something you didn't know was there, like naivety.

This is a kind of narrative poem: it tells a small story, with each stanza containing an incident of that story. The theme of naivety is carried by each of these small incidents.

Here's an odd little detail about this poem. Our old car really was red. But after I'd written the poem, I thought I'd change the colour to green. Green is the colour of naivety, so it could be symbolic. The problem was, while one part of my head was saying, 'You can make the car in this poem any colour you want', another part of my head was saying, 'But it was *actually* red'. Finally a friend said, 'Probably Austin never made any green station wagons.' 'That's right' I said with relief, 'I'd better stick to red.'

Does it matter? What would you have done?

The bearer

Book p26, notes p19.

The brother of a friend of mine died after a long illness. She had cared for him all through that time with great love and patience, then he died at her home. At his funeral, she was one of the pall-bearers.

These days, women often carry the coffin at funerals. But that's fairly recent; for a long time it was only the men.

That's where this poem came from.

It's very interesting to me to see how quite unconsciously one matches the form of a poem to its content. I look at this poem, and I see that there's a measured, formal pace to these lines which seems to match the image of a traditional funeral procession. The second stanza of the poem is quite structured. Each set of two lines begins *In the way…* with each pair of lines considering a stage of life, a way in which the woman provides support. I think this is a poem to be read aloud, then the rhythm and music of those sets of lines can be heard.

This poem has been described as a feminist poem. To me, it's a personal rather than political poem. It's about one woman, rather than women in general. But perhaps it's an example of how a poem which is personal can come to carry a much larger significance. I can't judge that about my own poem. To me, it'll always be a poem about one woman's extraordinary care and compassion.

Night Swimming

Book p48, notes p20.

Imagine a still night, stars, the moon, the water as calm as glass, warm, you're swimming through it very slowly, quietly, you hardly even break the surface, hardly even cause a ripple…

Is that how I came to write this poem? Sorry, but no. I was in the swimming pool in Cannons Creek in Porirua one night — quite a lot of kids, noise, splashing, all of it — and I was just swimming up and down the lanes doing lengths, when I realized that if I looked through my goggles at the lights above the pool there were some very strange effects. It reminded me of the way you can get a line of moonlight across the sea. So there, swimming up and down that noisy pool, I started to write this poem in my head.

Now I've probably wrecked it for you. But it's an example of how the starting point of a poem might be quite different from the finished product.

To me this is a very sensual poem. If you've ever swum in the sea on a still summer night, you might know that sensation of losing a sense of yourself, almost as though you've become part of the water. That's what I wanted to write about in this poem — that sensation of each part of the body becoming part of the sea.

What's below the water? In my rational head I know the bottom of the sea is there. But sometimes I imagine that below everything, below consciousness, is a profound silence. Why is it a curve? I have no idea. Perhaps I just can't imagine silence as being a straight line.

Looking back at the structure and language of these poems is full of discoveries for me. If you look at the sentence structure of this poem compared to 'Mr Patel', for instance, it is more complex, more flowing. In 'Mr Patel', sentences finish at ends of lines; here, the sentence runs on into line after line (enjambment, if you want the literary term). I have done this quite unconsciously, but I'm sure it's because the whole nature of the poem is like that, smooth and flowing.

Does it make any difference that I told you I wrote this poem in a noisy crowded swimming pool?

light through rain

Book p51, notes p20.

Here's another poem that came from a writing exercise. You could try this exercise yourself. Take a poem by a well-known poet — or any poet, provided it's not you! Type it on the computer, and double-space it. Look at it line by line, so that you can see only one line at a time, and write a line of your own in response to each line of the original poem. Then delete the original poem, and what you will have left is the first draft of your new poem. The new poem will probably have some echoes of the original poem, but it will also be quite new and distinctively different.

To me this is a poem of suggestions. Poetry is often described as being a kind of shorthand — it's what can make poetry difficult, but it also makes it full of possibilities, and different interpretations. In this poem, some surface details of this meeting between two people are spelt out, but what's going on underneath is just hinted at. So what *is* going on? What do you think is the history of this relationship? What's he going to tell her? I don't know any more than you do. Your guess is as good as mine.

To me this poem is about atmosphere. They're in a café — at least, I think they are — it's raining, growing dark. How could one describe the atmosphere? And how is this atmosphere created? A number of words are repeated: light, rain, grey pavement, bats and bat-hands. The colours of this poem are black (bats) and white and grey. Consider the images too: *his hands are bats… her lips are white as candles… spreading like guilt…* There's an ecclesiastical (church) flavour to this poem — candles, guilt, praying. I think of this poem as being in a country where traditional church practice is still strong, and it is the backdrop to their relationship.

Most of the poem is in couplets — sets of two lines. Why didn't I write it all in couplets? I didn't want to squeeze it all into couplets just for the sake of it. And there's almost no punctuation and no capital letters. Why? Maybe because the whole poem is undefined — we're not sure what's happening, everything is hinted at, so a lack of punctuation may add to that undefined feeling.

I've finished this poem with an image — the wet moth. It was just what came into my head at the time. But the wet moth seems to carry a lot of the meaning of the poem — is the moth like the woman, vulnerable? It's tricky looking for that kind of meaning in poetry, especially when it's your own. But I think that often when you write an image or a line, your subconscious mind is making suggestions and links that you're quite unaware of, but might see later. Maybe this is why a reader will see meanings or possibilities in poems that the writer doesn't see — because the reader's unconscious mind is making its own links and suggestions too.

The original poem I used for this exercise is 'Paschal Transfiguration', by Michael Harlow (An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry, Oxford 1987)

Pot shot

Book p40, notes p21.

This is what happened. When our youngest son was three, we cut down some pine trees on our place. Later, when the branches were dry we burnt them all on a big bonfire, and in the evening we cooked sausages and potatoes over the great heap of red-hot embers. We were standing around waiting for them to cook when Paul looked up through the remaining trees, pointed his fingers like a gun and said Pow! Pow! Our older son, who was nine, said Look! Paul's shooting down the moon! This poem started writing itself in my head right then.

This is the kind of poem when you let your imagination have a lot of fun. What if he really could shoot down the moon? What exactly would it be like, how would it fall, how would it hit the ground, what would it look like on the ground? What would Paul do if it really happened?

Fantasy often works best when there are a lot of concrete details so that you can actually believe the fantastical world or event. Perhaps this poem is an example of that. But for me, more than anything else, this poem is like a photo in words, of a magical night up under our pine trees, dark blue sky, stars, sausages blackening in the embers, and Paul shooting an imaginary enemy moon out of the sky.

Mr Patel

Book p52, notes p21

Our local dairy was owned for years by Mr Patel, who gave sweets to the children and was always cheerful. One night he was beaten up. Those are the only strictly factual parts of this poem.

This is such a small simple poem there doesn't seem to be much to say about it. Maybe the essential question is, do you believe he will ever go back to India? Does he believe it himself? In spite of his resolve at the end of the poem, after his beating, is he any more likely to go back?

The important thing in the writing of a poem — well, in any writing — is the selection of details. What out of hundreds of possible details does one select to describe a person? For Mr Patel, there are three physical details — a purple bush shirt, green socks, and grey knuckles — and two actions — he sits in the corner, and rubs his hands. These details have to be enough to create a sense of the person. Are they?

I've written this poem in three stanzas, the first and third of which begin with Mr Patel… I think the repetition gives a balance and shape to the poem. The third stanza repeats much of the first, which maybe suggests that although the alarm is a new thing, basically nothing has changed. The second stanza has two very plain bald sentences. Understatement is often more powerful than overstatement.

The whole poem is in very simple sentences. The end of each sentence coincides with the end of a line. Although I didn't write it consciously like this, I think the plainness of the grammar suits the poem.

In the third stanza, why did I set off *Next year* by itself? For emphasis. And poignancy.

There is an interesting editing problem in this poem. In the line *with red lights winking right across his forehead* I originally wrote the line as *across its forehead*. I was thinking of an alarm, with its row of red lights that are reminiscent of the red spot worn on the forehead to indicate caste. The editor thought it should be his forehead — the lights being reflected on his face. Now that I look at it again I'm not so sure. The art of editing poetry is to be very exact about every detail, every word. What do you think? Should it be *his* or *its*?

Conversations

Book p12, notes p22.

In the year before I wrote this poem, I was working with Saneha Lauckaphone, a poet from Laos, on an English version of a long poem he had written in Lao. And I discovered how many people had some input into his poem. We think of poetry as being mostly a very individual exercise, but he consulted others about sections of the poem, they made suggestions, wrote parts, gave approval. It had the feeling of a collective undertaking.

At that time I had been teaching English, primarily to South East Asians, for quite a few years. I'd had many conversations with people, and felt as though my head had been turned in another direction by them. I had an idea that maybe I could write a poem which brought together pieces of these conversations, which would also draw together some of what I had learnt from them. Working on the poem felt rather like working on Saneha's poem — I was simply bringing together the words of many others.

It took me about a year to write this poem. There are many more parts to it which don't appear in the final version; much of the writing of poetry has to do with discarding what doesn't work, or doesn't fit, or isn't good enough, and this poem is an example of that.

All of these conversations actually took place — mostly not quite in the form in which they appear here, but sometimes exactly as they were originally said (e.g. bai/3). I decided to use English and Khmer (Cambodian) numbers, since the poem is about language, among other things.

This is a long poem, but I don't think it's difficult to read. Perhaps you just need to read it slowly, stanza by stanza. But a sentence or two about each stanza might help, too.

moi/1: This stanza is about learning a new language, and about patience.

pi/2: People often come as refugees with virtually nothing — but they do bring their values and beliefs.

bai/3: I've written this conversation exactly as it happened. A Cambodian woman told me that this is what she noticed as she was driven from the airport when she first arrived.

buwen/4: People bring stories with them also.

prum/5: This stanza has to do with our attitudes to refugees. Do we see them as the people they really are? Do we celebrate their achievements here? Or do we always want to see them as a 'refugee'?

prumoi/6: Nothing to add here.

prumpi/7 : The story of the kupreng was told to me, and I found it a very beautiful story. What about this belief — that there is one person destined for us?

prumbai/8: So many times I've been reminded that subtlety, and silence, and understatement, are far more widely used and understood in other cultures than our own. We talk too much, we spell everything out, we've forgotten how much silence by itself can communicate.

prumbuwen/9: One of our closest friends said exactly these words (about hospital) to me. If you don't know much about Cambodia during the time of Pol Pot, go and find some information. It's one of the most terrible episodes of recent history. This man had seen so much dying, he had become casual, almost nonchalant, about it, even years afterwards.

the last: I wrote this stanza against myself. Sometimes I've been reluctant to try my small bits of a new language, in case I make a fool of myself. When I set that (a reluctance to take such a tiny risk) against the huge risks that new migrants have often taken, and are expected to take every day, I feel ashamed.

Family History

Book p33, notes p25.

Seventy years ago a small girl died in a hospital in the Wairarapa. Hearing the story of that little girl's death was one catalyst for writing this poem. It is partly how I imagine it might have been, and partly a deliberate changing of some facts, because even now, after all this time, the story is still a personal and private one.

The second catalyst for the poem was that, as a course exercise, I had to write a narrative poem — a poem that tells a story. And this poem does that. I could as easily have written it as a short story, and probably didn't simply because I had a poetry exercise to do! But there are elements of a short story in this poem. There is a clear point of view — that of the boys — and there's a chronological order of events, and a conclusion which offers the kind of insight a short story might have.

Physical details are very important in this poem. The setting is the Wairarapa of seventy years ago — heat, dust, bad roads, isolation. It's about two boys who are being shunted from place to place because there's a crisis. It's about the farm, and the physical environment and routine of the farm. But in the end, it's about a generation of people who were unable to talk about sickness, or death — and the poignancy that non-talking brings. Will the father always be like that? Is it that he doesn't care? How will he deal with this death over the next weeks, or years?

If you're into finding figures of speech, this could be a useful poem for basic figures of speech like personification (*tree-fingers groping, sheep fidgeting*), simile (*like a morepork, like a stuffed sack*), metaphor (*sweaty with dust*). The trick then is to think about why I might have used them, or, more importantly, what meaning they carry.

There are no speech marks around *Lizzie died today*, although it is direct speech. If I had used speech marks, they would have set those words apart, made them a little more dramatic. But I imagine the father saying them without emotion, flat, the words become part of the whole action of pulling his hat, going for the cows. Having no punctuation contributes to this effect, I think.

I said that this poem was about a personal and tragic event in one family's life. How do we handle writing about other people's private business? Writers make very different decisions about this. For myself, I would prefer to handle other people's business as I would like them to handle mine.

Spanish Civil War 1937

At the moment your cheek
scraped down the rock face

your mother felt something, a hawk shadow
across the window, so that she stopped
kneading, her arms resting
on the board, flour like ash
drifting off her fingers,
then she shook herself, said it was nothing,
and pressed and pounded
and slapped the dough again,

and your father, sitting with the men
in the hot sun, set his glass so suddenly
that the beer leapt over the rim;
he put his face in his hands,
shook his head, as though there were
noises in his ears, then picked up
his glass again, carefully,

but you heard nothing. Waiting in clear air,
hawk-eyes keen, body so still that not even
dust stirred from where your held-back breath
touched the face of the rock
you were crouching against,
your hand so lightly on the gun,
your head so full of knowing
that you would all win
in the end,

and when it came, there might have been
a small crack in the stillness,
a tiny rush of air,
a split second of knowledge
too swift to act upon ...
and your cheek slid down the hard rock
your arm falling away from the gun
which dropped away from your body

falling in slow motion
onto stones which, for one moment,
rattled and shifted beneath you,
then were silent,

and your mother sighed and wrapped
her dust-white arms around herself
and your father pushed his glass away
and rubbed the spilt circle with his finger.

Passing

He's cutting the grass
beside his house
with a machete,
shaving it as fine
as hairs on skin.
He sees me watching him
and shouts at me
in his own language.
I stop and say,
in English, I can't cut
grass like that.
He stares at me
and stabs the ground
a few times with the blade.
Then he starts
to cut the grass again,
shaving it as fine
as hairs on skin.

Does he think
that when I walked away
I stopped and spat?

Do I think
that I might get
a machete in my back?

Russia

A platform.
A train.
The time you said
'Come to Russia
with me. Now.'
'No' I said,
breathing on my hands,
white breath like train smoke,
'I can't stand the cold.'
'Nor can I' you said,
taking my two hands inside
your freezing cold ones,
your breath coming
in long asthmatic curls.
'You're worse than me' I said,
'You'll die there.'
'No' he said, 'it's beautiful.
There'll be snow, icicles,
long steel train tracks
through white fields,
women with scarfs on their
heads, fresh baked bread.
a child skating on thick ice.'
'You're crazy,' I said.
'They're all starving over there
or dying of nuclear contamination
or fighting eachother.'
He rolled his eyes,
gave one final gaspy wheeze,
climbed on board,
and we waved to each other
through the fogged-up glass.

Eclipse

The darkness is sliding across it
like a shadow over a dish of milk
on the step. The cat stretches,
unperturbed, light and shadow
as natural as breathing.
The man glances up, casually, and sees —
a shape changed? — Is it, was it a full moon,
could he have been mistaken?
He sits on the bench inside the door,
a rim of fear around his mind,
then slides his head round the frame
and rolls his eyes upwards.
It's as clear as day.
The shadow is eating the moon.
His mouth drops open, cold air
falls on his upturned face,
the top of his spine folds back on itself.
He leaps up, shakes his wife off the bed,
pulls the children on to the floor,
they huddle on the step, fear swells up
squashing their minds against their skulls
and the moon disappears.
Pray! he cries, and they clutch each other,
eyes screwed shut, not daring to look
at this circle of shadow, now red
in the terrible sky, while their father prays
Forgive us our sins! Forgive us our sins!
shouting the words so they'll shoot through the
darkness,
smash through the firmament and fly in God's ear
before His hands cast this shadow over the earth
and all is consumed.

And while they wait, not knowing if death
will come like the blow of a horse's hoof,
or stealthily like swamp-fever,
a bright rim appears, a sliver reflected
in eyes stretched wide — breath stops in the chest,
the man grabs the children, shouts
Thank you God, and weeps, great loud weeping
more terrible even than the shadow
over the moon.

In the morning, he walks out,
under that moon still pale and weak
in the new blue sky,
runs his hand down the horse's flank
steaming with frost, counts the chickens,
sends a hard glance across the fields
and draws a trembling cross in the white air
just in case.

Three Cambodian Women

Sophomea
You were born
to a shaded house,
tall trees, and a garden
of fruits, where the gardener
picked off the first, for you,
and the dripping juice
streaked the threads
of gold light in your skirt.

Now you sit
eight till five
punching rivets
while the neon light
whitens the dust
caught in your hair.

Kem Sreng
The first time we met
you were raw from the war of Pol Pot,
caught in the cramping child-talk
of new English, locking
those years and that fear
in your eyes.

Now we meet, your words run
of capacitors, circuit boards,
electronic diagnostic tests.
But those years and that fear
are still in your eyes
unsaid.

Si Na
Then, you said, Why are your
front doors always shut?
And your face was closed against
a storm of strange words
rattling like dead sticks,
a pressing crowd of bland white faces,
and a cold wind cutting in under the wall.

Now I say, Come in Si Na
my door is open
just as you have shown me.
Your face is clear and laughing,
we sit and talk together
and have a cup of tea.

Also in Mutes and Earthquakes, VUP, 1997)

Our first winter

In 1970 we bought our first car,
a '62 wagon,
red Austin Cambridge
300 Canadian bucks

We drove it to Banff
slept in it, and froze
in the sudden white shock
of a quick July snow.

In November we learnt
about chipping the ice
with a credit card edge
from the windows inside.

After a skid
on a road like dead glass
we bought winter tyres
when we knew what they were.

The day that we bought it
we took friends for a drive
all over town.
They gazed out the window,
said 'Nice to have got one.'
The next week they traded theirs in
for a fast-back, V-8, '71,
metal-blue. They took us around
and we had nothing to say.

The Bearer

It never was the custom
for women to carry the coffin.
Once, they would have walked behind,
black-veiled under the hot sun,
weeping, perhaps chanting the words
to send the soul, while the men, silent
and steel-faced, stiffly marched the body
into the grave.

But, today,
in the way a woman feels the baby
pulling down on the weight of the breast,
in the way the mother holds the child's
heaviness on her shoulder,
in the way she steadies the child-adult
leaning uncertainly from her,
in the way she bears the weight of the man
pressing upon her, supports the slow weariness
of the head, then the failing body,

in just that way, today,
you carried the coffin.

Also in *How Things Are, Whitireia Publishing and Daphne Brasell Associates 1997; Essential NZ Poems, Godwit, 2001*

Night swimming

I could just dissolve.
Slip along this line of light
into the moon
or peel away my skin
lay it thinner and thinner
until it becomes the glass
on the slow dark breathing
of the water. My bones soften
and bend into shadow
while trailing behind me
is it my hair, or threads of wind
slicing the surface to fragments?
They jostle, and touch me.

If I stretch out my hands
and let my feet go down, and down,
I can feel the smooth curve
of the silence.

light through rain

light through rain on the grey pavement
coffee, and a cold blast of cigarette

his hands are bats hitting at words
her lips are white as candles

he wonders if she's praying
she knows he's going to tell her

she is sitting in a window of rain
his bat-hands reaching towards her
spreading like guilt across the table

hot blood under cold skin
water pouring against the door

it is growing dark
a wet moth hits the light
and falls through rain
onto grey concrete

Pot Shot

Paul thinks he can shoot down the moon.
He thinks he can point
his finger straight at it,
say 'Pow!' and in a second or two,
the moon will jolt from its socket,
tip sideways, and fall
not with a fiery whoosh or a shower of sparks
but in a slow spin through the blue evening air
through tall black pine trees
to land with a soft thud
right at his feet.
It will bury the edge of its curve
in the needles
with a faint hiss where their dampness
cools its white skin.
And Paul will stretch out his hand
touch with his finger and say
'Did I really do this?'

Also in Sport 2, VUP 1989

Mr Patel

Mr Patel
sits in the corner of the corner shop
between the heater and the cigarettes.
He wears a purple bush shirt and green socks,
on winter nights his knuckles turn to grey.
Every year he rubs his hands, and says,
I'm going back to India next year.

Last week two men came to his shop quite late.
They beat him round the head and took the cash.

Mr Patel
sits in the shop below a new alarm
with red lights winking right across his forehead.
He rubs his hands and says, 'I'm going back
to India.

Next year.

Conversations

For all the South-East Asian friends who have shown me what it is to survive a war, to become a refugee, and to live in exile.

1/moi

You are teaching me
the numbers for this poem
moi pi bai buwen
I am tripping and stumbling
on the edges of the sounds,
then I lose one small word
altogether. You pick it up,
gently pass it back.

moi pi bai buwen
one two three four
Did I hand those words of ours
as carefully, to you?

pi/2

Tell me, Houmpheng,
what did you bring with you?

Only the Buddha.
We came empty-handed,
stripped naked
of all that defines us.
But the Buddha was with us
for hundreds of years.
We carry that knowledge,
fragile and strong,
buried within us.
In that place or this place,
no one can take it.

bai

What did you first notice
when you came here?

I noticed that the front doors
were all shut.

buwen

Some of us are looking at the moon.

I say, The moon is made of cheese,
and there's an old man
eating his way through it.

Phoeun says, There is a woman
planting rice up there.
Look, do you see her hair
behind her shoulder?
Khim, the next, says no,
the shadow in the circle is a tree.
It's where the Buddha sat
and knew the light.
Loeuth, the last, is listening.
Then he tells the old words of a poem.
A girl and boy in love,
but she is of a lower birth than he
and so they cannot marry.
The poet says she's like a rabbit
playing in the moonlight
that will never touch the moon.
Look, can't you see the rabbit?

A woman planting rice, a tree,
a girl in love. And cheese.

prum

What is a refugee?

I am a refugee.

No. We offered you refuge, citizenship, a passport. Those things say you are not a refugee.

I am a refugee. I wear a second-hand coat.
When it wears out, you give me another second-hand coat. If I buy a new coat, you say, What are you doing in that new coat? Don't you know you're a refugee?
Do you see who I am? I am the child of my grand-parents, my parents, I have lived with the monks, I have studied literature, I speak many languages. I have survived a war. Now I am a refugee. A refugee is a very small and flat thing.
When will you take your foot off me, so that I can stand up and be myself again?

prumoi

Here is a small conversation
from Hao Huor and me.

I said, What are you doing, Hao Huor?
(She was scraping the pot
we had used for cooking the rice).
She said, I am putting this rice
outside for the birds.
But birds don't eat rice, I said.
She looked at me. What do they eat?
They eat bread.

Later, I looked.
They had left the bread
and eaten the rice instead.

prumpi

Today you may meet your kupreng.

What is kupreng?

Kupreng is the love of your life.
The one fate has marked for you
or kept for you from an earlier life.

How do you meet this kupreng?

Sometimes you make a small boat,
put in a flower, and set it to drift
on the river. The flower will find her.
Sometimes you sense a direction,
a catch in the wind.
But kupreng often comes unexpected.

Will you find your kupreng?

I have already met her.

Where is she?

She's dead.

prumbai

Sometimes we sit and say nothing.
Sometimes there's nothing to say.

prumbuwen

What about dying?

Sarouen lets his hands
fall loosely on his knees.
Then he says,
I was in hospital
and I was dying.
All the rest were
dying too, or dead.
So what? He shrugs.

He is a thin black line
on empty paper,
moving casually
towards the margin.

the last
I tell the numbers back to you
moi pi bai buwen
I can't use these words, I say,
I cannot trust myself
on this new ground.
Someone might laugh at me.

You look at me.
You sit there silent.
That is your way of saying
everything.

Also in Landfall, Spring 1995

Family History

He could see the top of the wardrobe
black, like a stuffed sack,
and tree-fingers groping
the faint folds of the curtains.
His brother humped beside him
in the bed, sounding when he breathed
like a morepork.

There was a smudgy noise
through the wall,
his sister Lizzie's room.
Then a pinched-in voice,
We'll have to take her
in to town tonight.
He lay, eyes wide, and listened
to the beams settling
after the burning day
and sheep fidgeting
in the dry grass.

Just daylight, and his dad alone
scratched his leg above his sock
and said You'll go to Grandma's
for the day. Nothing else,
just the tinny spoon
dragging through the porridge
on the pot.

They often went to Grandma's place
in town, took the truck.
He always edged the window down a crack,
poked out a straw, watched it buzz
then snap and whip away.

Grandma made them pikelets,
stared through the window.
He pinched her on the arm
and said Gran the tops are bubbling
but she stared through the window
and the pikelets turned brown-black.

The boys went down to the bus-shed,
ran their hands on the iron,
carved their names with a nail
on the underside of the seat,
then kicked the gravel around
and wanted to go home.

The truck bounced hard on the road-holes,
the windshield was sweaty with dust.
As he opened the window a crack
his father said Shut it!
Shut it! Can't you see
the dirt's blowing in?
The sun was large and old,
it was past milking time
and their dad only just
coming home.

The boys went out the back,
started to fight about
first turn for swinging
on the gate.
Dad took off his town clothes,
stood in the back door
pulling on his boots.
He screwed his eyes
against the flat sun,
looked to the boys
said Lizzie died today
then he pulled his hat over his eyes
and went for the cows.