

Our war

Above the beach a new bench is bolted
to the concrete roof of the old gun emplacement.

Was it on a day like today
In '42, weather turned southerly,
rain in the air,
that the men in khaki shorts who'd poured the walls,
who'd made the boxing for the gunner's slit,
finally levelled out this concrete slab
sealing off the black space below
for the Home Guard, crouching,
wide-eyed, machine gun primed,
scanning the sea for – what?
A U-boat surfacing, the blocky silhouette
of a Japanese destroyer?

What could one machine gun do?
Blast the top off a conning tower?
Punch a hole in a metal hull?
While the U-boat, inexorably, drives forward,
deck guns swinging in a deadly arc around our bay,
picking off our small wooden houses
cowering on hillsides, while we race away –
where? Out through our backyards,
past our washing lines, past our woodsheds,
slamming out our rickety gates,
while the U-boat runs into shallower water
and soldiers swarm off, all splash and shouting
and do they reassemble in lines, and march
along our main road, past the dairy,
past the post office, past the fire station
(are the men out front, making a stand?)

while we scramble up the steep clay tracks
and hide in the gorse and taupata,
holding our breath?

Splinters of rain fall on the varnish
of the newly-bolted bench.
Frenzies of small birds
scatter like gunshot.

Was it on a day like today
that the men in khaki shorts
disassembled the gun,
hefted it all onto a truck,
while we let out sighs of relief
and whipped our washing off the line
before the rain set in?