

This Joyous, Chaotic Place



Heather McPherson

Among women writers who had, since the post-war period, felt their voices alienated from the mainstream poetics of Aotearoa New Zealand, the work of Heather McPherson has long been a valued text of precedent. Her poems' fiery and passionate lesbian sensuality and their engagement with sexual and indigenous politics offer a fearless aesthetic to all who follow in her footsteps.

In this meditative late work, a suburban garden becomes the forest of the imagination. With a hat-tip to Ursula Bethells audacious candour, Heather focuses on the natural world and engages deeply with the pleasures and companionability at the fingertips of a householder. This work is in every way a clear-sighted distillation of all of her lifelong passions. - Janet Charman

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Garden Poems



Heather McPherson

*Good company makes good spirits, and good spirits
make good company ...*

Spiral offers warm thanks to Mokopopaki, 454 Karangahape Road Auckland, for its introduction to Phinney Jenson and its manaakitanga in hosting *This Joyous. Chaotic Place*, the exhibition associated with publication of this book (1 March-14 April 2018). E te whanau Mokopopaki, ka nui te mihi, ka nui te aroha ki a koutou katoa.



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At Rangiora s Ashley Street Cemetery

The poet Ursula Bethell is buried here

This graveyard's a bit like the one
where we buried my mum and dad. Oldish,
a small town Anglican acreage...ours

used to seem huge. But after farms on the state
house outskirts got bulldozed and suburbs
blew round and past it and the dead

had fewer advocates than the living, it got cut.
Rows of empty plots were sold. Ownership
flats rub feet with wards of the undisturbed.

Once sited near the centre, my parents
lie hard against the hedge; retiree units
buffer the separate churches' blocks.

But my mum would have loved the tree
thickening leafily above her, the moving seasons.
She wouldn't mind the bird droppings

and twigs, nor the oldies pottering in handkerchief
sized backyards behind the fence. Other
burial grounds get dug up for motorways.

O Goddess, may all the parents' graves,
as this poet's- for whom we
companions make this pilgrimage - stay

at least as long as our coloured life-lines
keep weaving together
new and surprising waves...

Since you came back

for Ao

After that gentle cage in which you taught
yourself to dawdle a slow-motion stage
where expectations fade

in front of your footsteps, and ghosts
throw up their powerless hands

you are quieter.

You smile more often
and after I pass you in the garden I look back
surprised you are not a plant -

a downy thrush-speckled shrub
kneeling in a decisiveness of spring
blades or a flaunting freesia

shout; or bent over crawling strawberry
suckers where you flourish a trowel
in winter compost

and loosen chickweed, puha and perky sprouts
elbowing squatters' rights and edibility
past bubbly dark-green beet

and chatty broad beans' spiky salon
hair-cuts and a pale not-yet trendy
dusting of silvery green

spectrums where you seem to grow
invisibly into stalks
and buds becoming

part of the colours and presences
of your garden, kneading earthy feeds
between palms and cupping hands...

Thanks for your garden...

I made you nearly invisible
among the presences of your garden
I made you a surprise

I almost made you a plant

What would you choose if I'd asked?

Come prow! the silver beet trees. We harvest frugally,
they sprout. Rocket shoots white flower missiles,
tomatoes redden. Tall weedy stalks,
pinkly-purplish, nod graciously,
like frail elderly school teachers half-drowned
in thunderstorms and ferocious late
spring hail, but resilient

Small dogs toddle on tangled paths

Bumblebees fossick, bums up, scrabbling.
Artichokes are dramatic.

Tall, spiky, troll-slashed, Ice Queen and icy Greenland
underworlds suckle a fright-blanchd ghost plant, its
fist-sized head...as if Kali's stickle-back blades
turn scythe, decapitate it; steam it, steep in garlic
butter, bypass bellicose chefferie, and guzzle...

a supper from Brothers Grimm, perhaps...
Shivery Grass, a childhood magic.

Birds, butterflies, cicadas, painters, writers, poets
pick food, predators, epics...did you choose a plant?
Strawberries, small, warm, suns in leaf-caps?

Pomegranates, the crop? dodge spikes, clamp
hands tightly round each globe, snip -
drink the crimson juices...

The iconography of a tree

has a surprising similarity with that of a body.
I learnt today how an ankle sprouts bulbs that ignited
by a gammy knee, tilt hips & stance off-balance

as it counteracts a stress-by-damage Pisa lean - as
does Aorewa's ankle after a youthful motorbike
crash. All nature's mesmerised by an injured angle

but a clever astragal re-sets its epicentre with
unconscious or subconscious prompts - interior dialogue
darts between body-parts that attach or detach

in fluid systems like blood & lymph or fibrous
networks of tendons and nerves. The body's capacity to
do oddities like grow spurs is miraculous but not

as admirable as it turns painful - even lethal. Tree
roots like octopus arms do the same: their creeping
sinuosities change colour, elongate and slim into

missile and wasp-waist shapes as do coloured knobs
spaced along a limb as you stare up into a wintry
persimmon tree's night skeleton - black against

dark bluish sky - and see bumps scarcely visible in
daylight as hidden surges plumped to break out - sap
sped cysts you're not sure are benign and spring's

inflammation won't bulge feverish or virused - will
they fatten to buds, blooms, leaves or writhing cobra
roots to prop a leaning trunk upright? Must human

surgeons bring secateurs, a saw, a threaded needle to
sew dissolving stitches in this historically injured ankle
and with nature's amazing volatility turn it pain-free?

Labour Weekend, October 2014
revised 2016

*What can I dream up for your birthday?
...more than you have around you*

when you disappear in the presences of your
garden and are gone till I surprise you in a shaggy
wilderness where I almost make you a plant.

Which one? I prowl calendulas & silverbeet trees.
Stalks dip & shake their quivery blooms, pinkly
purplish-headed, breast-high - frail elderly

tutors half-drowned in thunderstorms & ferocious
late spring hail but nodding graciously keep
resilient. Small dogs potter & dash down

tangled paths. Bumblebees fossick, bums up,
in nasturtium throats. Artichokes are dramatic. Tall,
spikily pale, troll-slashed, in Ice Queen caverns

or Greenland underworlds they're plant-ghosts,
blanched fright with stickle-back blades, at eye-height
under a pale fleshy bulb, fist-sized, steamed

& dipped in garlic butter, a tender Kali scythe that
drinks moon-milk & nibbles shivery grass, buttercups,
& scarlet pimperl threading the box hedge

with tiny orange-red star-flowers like scene-painted
fingernails, embroiderer-designed. All whiskery
sprouts bring a habitat, each year new - birds,

butterflies, poets, painters, gardeners, cicadas,
food, family, predators, epics - common themes split
by odd goddesses & long deviance; how to live,

love, trust, provide - who to surprise, lifting green
& red-leafed cover to pick & savour small red suns,
warm strawberries, a trug of blueberries, asparagus,

coriander - mind the pomegranate! spikes lethal as
darning-needles. Tenderly cup a crimson breast-globe -
its complex hint of ancient garden riches...

November 2012

revised March 2016

In my neighbour's garden...

Sometimes your walled garden's
small trodden pathways end
without warning...a sun-dried

track closes and you stand inside
a stopped thought past the missed
turning and leaves whisper,

quivering...a rustle might be
a mynah or a thrush scratching
dry twigs or a breeze rattling

spiky rose-stalks or a weighty
orchid stem dipping and bowing,
a curly pinkly-purple tongue

staining shadowy white flesh,
like aging divas reminiscing in
scented rituals and exfoliant

lotions...and something you've
forgotten flits among the grasses,
something you'd like to recall

you saw younger...like moth-winged
buds breaking greenly up skeletal
arms waving stiffly over a misty

sponge-cloud sky...did you bring
or think it? Did it lengthen with
you away, this lost strangeness,

leaving room for ghostly absences
to mill about in, imagining this
fat magnolia bloom flickering

in unseen, unseeing eyes...

6th October 2012 (third version)

When loitering you look into a hibiscus bloom

it's hard to get out...

first five skinny stalks gawk up with bulimic forearms
wearing fingerless red pads that shiver into velvet-slipped
feet on ballerina legs and start dancing a fandango
across your forehead & kicking can-cans
till out of breath you wrench out

anyway and stare distantly at the red blobs and gold trim
of wild antennae tips wrapped in a delicate crepey
skin with darker thread-worm veins - a bit
like crushed-quince silk lined with reddish
seams...

hibiscus grows in South Asia, America, the Pacific, Japan,
Egypt too has named varieties. A hot plant it grows
almost anywhere not snowing. Stare down its
wide-lipped throat into a pink blur, stare
past the immodest tongue poking
out of a small hibiscus abyss...

you might dig out a fiery egg, you might find
a glottal stop...just don't miss the green force that
nobody gets to the bottom of...

I was waiting for my warrant of fitness when I dallied
by the hibiscus...guess who wears the fittest cloth
when the Springs get overly hot & the lions
roar at night - what happens to all that
miniature erotica dancing off velvet-slipped air

The hibiscus throat is fragile...

as a poppy petal, a frail skin exposing pimply
bumps and sprouting hair as if a coat's
just peeled off - this inside throat is

longer than a tornado whirling into a clawed
destroyer's horn - start peering in, you're
lost. I suspect its wobbly-stemmed stigma,

its five red velvety tops, startles a first-time
looker into shock - as if filaments dance,
velvet slipper-shod, into underground

ballrooms for the masked princess's midnight
ball... these five pads, like fingers - are they
a creator's after-thought - or accidentally

blindly repetitious designs? A photo-record
on the Net shows hollyhock & hibiscus almost
rallies - lots of hibiscus in Auckland - behind

Pasifika ears & the supermarket check-out
operators - a bloom behind the ear says *I'm taken*
or *I'm available* - left ear, yes; right, no.

And both? A blare of instant drama: *Taken*,
but I'll let my old one go... I remember moving
south how charmed I was by my old cottage

garden near the indigent ladies' institute - lilac
& hollyhock in Aberdeen Street, wallflowers &
spindle-berries, convolvulus, deadly nightshade -

an edgy Rimbaud garden. Each island's displaced culture becomes an adventure: some forty years on are we so changed? Am I? Cities go shabby or sleek after quake demolitions, after floods and slips. Poking my nose inside hibiscus, in this garden I'm as close to sniffing all other living beings as in

time or out of it as I'll ever be.

June 2013
revised 2016

*Friends, you give me a window
through green foliage in a green yard...*

Marking a seventh decade

You give me an eye in an orchard

I didn't see it at first

looking at that black square through
a tangle of red leaves like a hole
in the sky's fabric

but then it looked like the lair
of some furry feral creature
snuffling and scratching and baring its teeth

and then it looked like the retreat
of a wounded bird
framed with pale luminous slashes

of forked branches and twigs

And then I saw it was glass
the window of my room looking out
blankly and being looked back at

from your green yard

nobody visible in it

except if you get close enough
a misty figure breathes in
the mirror she waves back from

& somewhere inside
not yet ready to loom

a brood of disparates
stirring a cauldron and chanting
shuffles shifty with reflections

while leaves dance

and something
nameless blinks in the glass

There s a mirror on my wall

...a small oval one
that's caught a reflection
not my living-room

in it and it should be

But while you were in Wellington
the grapevine on your balcony
went a bit wild

It flounced across my deck like a leafy Gay Pride Queen
parading her satin bustier spangles tutu and wig
and knighting courtiers and gay-boy naughties
with her fairy wand and strutting
tempestuous costume displays
for those who like a boosted-up touch
of quivery pulchritude to set the bee-hives
humming in the archway over the laundry path
where bunches of green grapes hang drooping
lusciously from a plumply Sapphic idyll

and plop onto grey planks in juicy intoxicated kisses
of summer hail that inflate this scent into
a hot night-pool of winery bouquets

so now when I look in this mirror I don't see
poet nor paintings nor etchings nor charcoal drawings
no astrological moon calendar - no bookshelves,
no Japanese woodcut, no Venetian mask...

I see grape leaves big as fig-tree fans
to weave into rain-capes or shade-brollies
or an art ensemble that feeds

green armsful of unseen purring...

March 2014

A birthday poem

...starts with the pomegranate
tree outside your study
window

I go by cautiously

edging a wide loop back from the compost
past a green-leafed scarecrowish figure
its static assumption of oddity
or a strange frozen cavorting tree

I propitiate, I finger its peculiarities

its changing strangeness that free-falls into a child's
vast Biblical deserts where sand dunes slide and ripple starlit nights
and eyes stare past old shadowy city walls and domes
and stick-legged camels black on a moon-licked sky
where myth and splendour crash

tents pitched in stony dirt and children in striped cloth squint
shyly out of a sepia Holy Land before big brothers' jihad
armies sow tanks, weaponry, ruins on snaky borders
and quick blood dries and death waives ownership
claims and treaties tear and crackle out of sight -

does this tree bleed?

Winter strips it, a spiky skeletal basket-fungus,
but November's flaunting green hides the vicious needling
thorns - later it's spotted with scarlet-orange bloombeny
flowers like designer Christmas lights that fatten
to waxy slugs and swell and darken crimson -

become a woman's tight milk-swollen breasts and engorging
nipples that cupped hands twitch to grasp - then sun
and sun reddens pomegranates ripe - splits them
yoni-shaped - bares many-seeded viscerae
whose halves drizzle crimson juice and are prolific...

whose Jezebel songs ooze potency
under your window...

2013

fragment

into crossroad traps small creatures large insects monarchs
fluttery cuzzies who gobble or munch live dinners
or stare expressionlessly above a lizard's jaws
whose grip paralyses prey before they gulp it.
The odd cicada squawks a protest; echoes
a larger disaster when a basking log threshes
into life and snatches a stunned mammalian biped in rows of wicked
teeth and sub-merges
in a whirlpool of muddy water...

but this shape-shifter tree blossoms
tight thick-skinned buds like thrusting rose-hips
but more swollen and as spring they open out into

in spring it sprouts shoot-here
shoot-there twigs
with spaces-in-between -

*Waiting for the breakdown truck
at the Pak 'n Save carpark*

I scramble in the glovebox

All the fitness warrants that kept us mobile - State Highway 1,
motorway, Great North and South Roads, expressways,
bypasses, detours...and not a lot to show.

Ah. An old optometrist's test. I jot sums on the back.
Not what the AA man said, I remember that.
It's cut, he said.

My eyes go wide. Somebody cut my fuel line?

No, no. See, it's like old age, he says, eyeing my face.
Goes slack and perishes. Soon as I touched it, it gave way.
Dangerous. Gone holey. I'll get you a tow.

I ponder. Old age goes holey. Wholly? Holy?

That was hours ago. I pace under the big arrow Exit
sign. My dog, more philosophical, snoozes in the back seat.
Somewhere down the parking lot, the odd train rattles
past. Oak leaves, horse-brown, papery, shuffle
in dull green shrubbery beside wrappers
and silver cans, or tremble on bare branches.

I rub cold hands. A bird perches and darts.
Streaking traffic slows and pants for the lights.
I blink at faceless figures in faceless glass...

at the ceaseless blurry movement of a cortege...
at another aging driver waiting to be towed.

A birthday re/arrangement

Triptych for Fran

1.

You are not in the orchard
Not under the grapevine
Not picking herbs

Are you hiding in your images
are you hiding in your words

You are not on the balcony
not in the studio
not in front of your easel

What flesh are you seeding or bleeding
What are you skewering with a pencil

Maybe you're happily snapping
tongues of hibiscus or kisses or lips
you will render with a brush

In a cosmic vision's rush

Or are you flicking through artist collections
And looking up dealers with connections
A host of eager buyers in tow

Maybe I'm joking
Or not so discreetly hoping
Whatever

I miss you

2.

You've been changing the big house
You and your partner
and your paintings

The other day in the old kitchen corner
you hung two portraits in long thin strips
Ao's painted faces eyeing us

over new sewing machine space
where the stove used to be
and ghostly dinners cooked

oozing steam into high shivery faces

We stop shocked on the threshold
facing a one-eyed bone-yellow profile pulling back
from some edge she's not yet ready to cross

and she faces you down and her side-turned jovial face
and reddish-streaked undulant flesh sucks
through wave after wave of seasick eyes

and cheeks and a swollen turret-shell
opening darkly erotic beside her mouth and higher up
where one squint eye looks in or out

the other sees or laughs through us

making her presence felt
in and past the heaving paint
telling us all is flux

don't hang about

staring at these two
studio guardians
and entrance Fates

you know
how the Goddess
changes faces

3.

- *after walking in Fowlds Park*

Where are you when you're not here

When you're not here I'm not
here wholly either

There's a gap in certain continuums

Draughts are playing through the spaces
between our walls and the grapevine's
drying and sagging leaves are gone

brown and yellow

as Adam and Eve loin-cloths and crisp as
umbrellas for cheeky sparrows diving under
them and robbing the last grape sprays

and ignoring the browning bunches

When you're not home answers trickle in
showers over the guttering and we're
roaming the unsafe universes

in our skulls and others'

We're losing ourselves in the labyrinth
behind our eyes and in the straggles of high
country snow

Where are you I can't see you

In the line-up of resisters
Will you come back maybe sometimes never
Will you retrieve your young dreams

Did they too change when the earth split

And the empty playing fields contain long late
shadows of a yellow poplar avenue
and in-planted baby kauri

Two women are picking up feijoas
On the periphery of the paddock

April 2011

Poppies

Poppies poppies poppies...red-headed
black-bellied upright masses on light green
sea-milk stalks - surely such riotously
frilly leaves can't be edible - can't be
blanched - baked - boiled - toast...

but smoked...mmm...darkening milky veins
and brittle glacier-green leaves - we'd inhale
blue vapour snaking up from the sticky brown
globes in which the milk becomes - well,
papaver - papaver somniferum - ahhh...

Chun Fat said: You feel the pain but you no
longer mind - and Toni - whose deft razor-blade
slashed fat green cheeks to release milk oozing
from an unpetalled green head and lizard-frill
halo - Toni said: It's like water running through

your head - the house on fire you nod serenely -
how beautiful...Toni who joined the Moonies -
how does she meditate now? I saw sweaty
nightmares - the multiplying mirrors and row
of white attenuated cats - their huge blue eyes

and equivocal smirks - and the moon ballooning
whitely in my window...I thought I'd never wake up
as its waters rose and rose...but these red saturated
petals...I could drown in - munch and swig their
crimson blue-bruised flutters in wind-whisks

flailing them limp-winged across
the path. How frail
the fabric between veins - a fingernail
can scratch
a web of life-lines in
disintegrating skin...I can't
smoke them now. But to stare oneself
into oblivion
in this red poppy uprush might be
enough, enough...

4th December 2008
revised 2013-2015

Do we need to meditate the knee?

Amazing what a surgeon can do
It sounds like fantasy

How they transplant a heart or a pair of lungs
Or both if they're spare and going to waste
and compositionally fit a space
open through debilitation

But let's talk about the knee

How they reconstruct renew replace it
How its metal sets off airport alarms
But helps us avoid a wheelchair's arms

a concern when feet step perfectly
but joints get seizure or graunch in sockets
and medics tut-tut vexedly

*Ms McLeod your knee s askew
This mechanism won't quite do*

So off to Ascot goes Aorewa
Not the racecourse where aristocrats bet
in fluttery silks and insouciant hats
that mimic a frozen screech on the wing
But a hospital where the lucky go
when in need of assistance structurally
so to keep our dignity in the street
and dog-walks and new places to eat

Says Ascot we'll *straighten you up anew*

Aorewa doesn't think much of *straight*
but she'd like to sashay with the queue who'd
dance with her as once they knew her

She endures the operative tunnel of pain
for the theatre's flashing far reward
that says if she extends her knee
and flexes it past its original bent
and if she exerts her kneeling skills

She'll dance and not be excruciated
Her days become unexpurgated

Aorewa will be rejuvenated!

On the promontory: Meola Reef...

I stare over mangrove mudflats; languid tongues
stretch flatly under the shiny metal arches flashing
with car-bugs - our coat-hanger Harbour Bridge

against a grubby curd-white sky that makes
Meola Reef a trail of brown droppings or stepping
stones for the legend's lovers to escape

to Kauri Bay. The dunes' seaweed curls harden
to tiny islands winking in tidal ooze; on the far
bank is the pink ramshackle Sugar Works; ships

at this dock carted its bounty off to lesser wharfs
It's a cafe now. Back here toetoe and stumpy colonial
plantings inch into headiness. Frothy wave-rows

shudder up sand-banks basking like crocodiles...
a young country we were taught but - whakapapa,
artifacts, cave paintings, dinosaur bones

& sluggish estuaries? I shift uneasily this aged but
not ageless ground. Long grass ripples, unbroken green
bursts into a pink flamboyant splotch. Carnival

crepe brology, party windmill? I wade waist-high
twitch, the dog wallaby hops; grass-tails grab our coats
as swishy pirates we swagger downhill. Surprise!

The pink daub turns to trumpet-headed lilies, pink
flamingo beaks on naked rhubarb stalks I grin
remembering I believed my mother's whimsy

named this wildly flagrant splurge blown from
hot Pacific islands *naked ladies* & though her garden
fed six children and a war-disabled husband

freed into widowhood my mum chose more flowery
directives; this, her home town if not harbor
recalls her & this dramatic lit-up bulb

in a waste of stage. Sun through cloud-drifts strikes
epiphanies, tidal flats flower, gold shifts slice this
nest- this stand - *of naked ladies* - and flash brief
spiky joy - a pink hurrah - in a green grass sea...

11th April 2009
revised July 2013

*A frosty morning with elated sun
and ice crystals prickling the
strawberry beds*

I swing my blue bucket and its steaming
smalls to the clothesline

How old-fashioned, says my young neighbour
pegging up shirts, sheets, knickers, towels
I throw all mine in the washing-machine

Maybe, I say, your smalls are not the sort
that fall apart when agitated & spun
dry

Aahhh she chuckles, maybe, maybe not

June 2009

While you were cruising...

the other hemisphere, sauntering
Brighton pier and Budapest
bathhouses and the Venice Biennale -

sopping up olives and feta in Tuscany,
I was watching persimmons ripen
and slicing silver beet leaves

and scissoring rocket shoots and poking
spinach seeds across the sharp end
of a raised, blade-shaped garden.

Acute-eyed over fruit we tenants ate
lemons, persimmons, mandarins -
competitors except for the last

pomegranate - half each of those
vivid blood-red seeds - and I picked up
fruit with crinkly Romney curls -

Kaffir limes - so the mower man could
get round trees and cut back lambs' -
ear pods; then came the frosts.

Red-leafed strawberry plants go crisply
crystalline-outlined in a white porous
coat and thin-branched veins...white

grass crunches smeary underfoot and on
the line my smalls hung steaming gently,
inflating swathes of shifty morning

fog - a mysterious fragility shrouding
yard and stone-walled street and densities
unravelling night dreams to float off

to picture-book destinations. But ah, you
home, calendula blazes, orange-faced,
spiky rims suck greedily at the sun

you bring back and as I thread through
the orchard to empty my compost jug
I see on gawkily spindly stalks

against dusky sky the burrs and knobby
knuckles of skinny clawed finger-bones -
earth-tinged pantaloons tightening

over bud-green swellings on fruit-tree
branches that must pink and redden
into moth-kissed blossom...

August 2009

Down the street...

lives a little old man in a little old cottage
behind a tecoma hedge and under
a huge old macrocarpa. In its stringy

bark and flighty branches a juvenile tui's
half-strangled cry dissolves late dusk
and dog-walkers peer up at a white

chimney against white sky...a ghostly
composition. And stained glass panes
glow eerily...*and the old man dies...*

and developers tear out the hedge and lop
off macrocarpa foliage leaving handless
stunted limbs like barbaric punishers'

carnage; then they lop branches till only
a naked trunk's left crying up at a colourless
sky. Then the torso's felled. A huge

sun-streaked stump lies face up to be sliced
for altars or table tops. Then blokes saw
the cottage in half. And one night

a beeping convoy flashes red lights on its
carrier where empty half-rooms with blind
windows inch past the stone wall into

spun darkness. Now town-houses block my
city vignette of steeples, cranes, phoenix
palms. And a workman, tall as the Sky

Tower's needle that jabs our aspirations up
into pastel blue, climbs over the tiles.
He unreels a long black cable...to lure troglodytes

or Flood doves? Thank Goddess for a kitchen
peek at next-door's hedge, yard, sky - not
just roofs over spindly fire-escapes, not

just an invisible tui choking on mating calls
from the ruffled beat of a spectral
dark-winged macrocarpa...

2010

Sniffing the roses

poking my nose in roses
I metamorphosise
into a wasp, a bumblebee,
an aged dyke in a ditch,
a broomstick witch

whose eternity is
to stretch into plaiting
just-dropped petals as linings
for pliant rose-nests exuding
hundreds of dusk-smearred
scents.

Or maybe like Rip Van Winkle
I'll wake hog-eyed, hairy-faced,
and be wildly transfixed in
some garden waving a telegram
from the Queen and assigning
my longevity to frequent
guzzling of hot pink
rose-blood...

mixed maybe with bulging
pomegranate juices violent
as honey-gatherers' suns
that blaze through volcanic
dust while visitants
hungrily graze
a bee-stung calyx

and somebody enterprising bottles
rose-breath for when reality
needs a slant or blood
needs mopping up
or desolate lost loves
and family face nightmares
or we become a butterfly
waffling a dottily drunken
sun-dance up a trellis
before a sudden blackbird
swoops low and snaps
no no... first we dream
we end up transposed
into a rose

Alterity & functionary

...a meditation on our Lares and Penates

The thermostats went haywire, the hotplates glowed fierce red; the pots got blackened bottoms and the spuds a blackened bed...the grill decided not to - alas

for cheese on toast; when the macaroni browned on top, its bottom turned to leathery roast. Casseroles were easier, we had a lot of those: the bottom element, thank Goddess, kept a static, if not frozen, pose.

But on the whole it was difficult to do more than boil and bake; how could this damaged cooker deliver a delicate omelette or rare Miss Steak? Charred remains and baking soda - the latter, humanely, shifts the first - marinate in a murky pottage that shouldn't grace any stately cottage.

Replace or fix it, used or new? Hmm. Mending we had tried and faltered: it must be done repeatedly; hot-plates bum their old connections, rust corrodes whatever's left.

A-hunting Aorewa went; on a trek out west she found the Appliance Shed. What a beauty! And it fit! Gleaming, gallant, pristine white - no burnt offering; a glass door-pane, a working grill and bless my apron! a dish and rack to catch the fat.

The handsome heart of any house, the shrine we bow our heads across, keeping souls and bellies solicitous, testing elements, figuring which bit goes where. And I, the tenant, find it good and baptise the hob with vege soup. Aorewa and Fran bring bread and wine; a splendid partner-ship -

for whomsoever sails in it - who've sailed unknown
and perilous seas - and gay - if not a true gourmet, are mostly
culinarily au fait...grateful that one wet June day, Ao
went hunting for a stove. This kitchen altar, luminous,
glows in a space it feeds, in a place made brighter...

2010

Taking the rug under the trees

I staring at bird's-eye height
through the daisies - what
first is a seed-sower's throw

is now a forest - a scatter
of wide white faces turns
thickly the same way -

a crowd at a riverside race
gazing in tiers down the bank
oblivious to all else...

and under the lemon tree
a blackbird stills to eye us
and swells - an alert

security guard in a matronly
plump bosom or maybe
a puffed-up pumpkin
paunch

in a tight irreproachable uniform
meant to comfort orphans
and breed in predators
respect -

almost imperceptibly -
quick as a dropping petal
but more purposefully
disappears -

even worms seem longer -
stretched in lazy apathy in paspalum
and grasses that nod

like wind-skewed power poles
or streetlights with bee-body heads
and necklets of shivery seeds

and delicate white-wing tears
thin-stalked snowflakes whose
strings might shake in unison

or flip a bee-sting headed seed -

The morning was still

The morning was still opening
sleep-prickled eyes and my head bent
heavy-footed with discontent

as I walked my blue bucket's
steamy smalls down an aisle
of whiskery borage and toad iris. Near the clothesline
under a hollow sky a monarch butterfly
came gliding diving imperiously

swift-wing'd at my face, over
my startled neck and mouth - this
sharp-lined exotic flier flipped

swerving - then dipping dottily -
black and orange across urgent
arthritic wisteria breaking

out over a pale house balcony - over
shiny silver beet and feijoa rows
and a scatter of daisies

on damp green lawn - and
my eyes were opened and my heart
O beauteous interruptus

August 2009

Parnell Rose Gardens

...roses roses roses...

We bury our noses greedily
Shireen and Molly and Mitzi and me...

overhead a white fur-bundled sky,
around us a spread of spiky beds... we
mooch through quivering wing-tip
flits and suss out extra-particular scents...
olfactory addicts, traversing the petal proliferate
islands the Rose Gardens have become...
we stare transfixed

here's a heaving rose-sea surf where luxuriant pink
frothy heads and fluttery breeze-kissed scalps with blowsy
skirts and streaky dabs lift, drop, spread

and splay...and those who've endured parade-ground
musters in regimental rows must let go musk and droop
a bit...and tiny tight-lipped buds and waxy, well-bred,
smell-less models and breeder-named trophy blooms
with something parodical in their skin and polite
dummy-dangle poses offer a paralysed lack
of resonance in their hues...
or a lack of breath as if bred embalmed or cold-blooded
marble effigies and down the end here, placed discreetly
like an old-fashioned scandalous bar-room girl
whose film-star gusto and secretive heart
blooms deliciously as a seductive velvety scarlet rose
nodding in shivers of sensuous promise...
hardly believable as plants, more like worlds that invite you
in and change you in expanding universe vasts whose

concepts unfurl for you a glimpse of planetary
harmony - serenely beyond erotic promise a lover may
loosen or marinate in and whose connotations
we ignore in this distilled essence of afterworld

lest lust's foolish anarchy creep in as desperation
across the globe, and hate, and cries of lost
and murdered kin, and no sleep as red dawn lifts

don't sniff too much don't get too drunk
in roses roses roses

where breakers splosh in seething foam
you become a bevy a glut of flying rhinoceros
horns lethal as thorns
on a wild rose
stalk

while heads down tails up wagging queries
under the old rose garden benches
the dogs sniff out a resident cat
and vacuum up the cut-lunch
crumbs

and in miniature sphinx-pose
blink wisely benign in eternal present
as little and much as we too brave

between infinity's rose-sea waves

Ursula Bethell

A poet of lyric and spiritual persuasion who
built Rise Cottage on Cashmere Hill, Miss
Bethell looked out on the Canterbury Plains;

her live-in companion was Effie Pollen. Miss
Bethell planted dwarf mandarins, roses, exotics,
veges, bulbs; she carted rocks for a small rock

garden and wrote and taught and entertained.
Outside one day, while earnestly digging,
she lifted her head and gazed at the Alps -

and suddenly saw an utterly new magnificence...
and wrote the mountains, rivers, plains, their
fluctuant beauty and longevity, as one who,

after Effie died, fully knowing grief and loss,
with a lover's tender breadth, divined an artist's
love of land we squabble to be guardians of...

2010

There are no people

in your garden
poems you once said

so you away
I peered through
the trellis and brushed
past trees and greenery
routing sparrows mynahs
starlings thrushes
a pigeon once

and zebra finches
and curious blackbirds
rustling the grapes
and pecking windfall
apples and persimmons
hollow and stoking babies
up to winter weight

and among mortals
there's no human in sight
in this middle universe

whose cicadas screech
incessantly and crickets crick
and I pick red and yellow

droplet tomatoes in
the centre of all our
burning summers

March 2010

Te Wai Orea

Two figures with a third...

Identical, except for barely-gendered genitals,
two stubby figures do a hand-stand; on bare
upside-down feet swings an old bald child.

A doppelganger, maybe? Blood dribbles from
nostrils, mouth, and glares in bloodshot eyes;
black spidery lines, a comic palisade, draw

eyebrows, eyelashes, a sparse moustache.
And what red fingernails Mister Wolf! Or is it
Ms Vampire? vampires being big in cafe

circles; and who bullied us into role and role-bound
looks we determinedly reinvented in Women's Lib.
Is the sculpture saying mum-dad couples - with

or without connivance, birth a succubus? breed
an upsetter? I mooch on a meandering path,
brood over a hump-backed bridge. Black swans,

white geese idle, a red-gold carp lurks blurrily;
writhing eels flash silvery, gritty, blue, a ceaseless
mazy tangle. Claustrophobia! Purgatory? hell's

flurry? Which lipstick vandal or artist manque
gave this child bloody fangs? Displaced from a garden,
perched on rocks, this holy trio contemplates

a pool: birds, springs, greenery. A temporary eternity?
which had its Golden Age. Is this Eden? whose Fall
has been and gone, and life goes on, in god and goddess

masks, who fly in armies and incendiary rages, who
leave us irresolvable queries. What's the story?
Who narrates, who turns the pages?

In a corner of the library...

on a black half-globe chair I sip hot chocolate
and wait for the free lecture on Waikumete
Cemetery by the man who heads
its guided walks.

Two students sit on bar stools at a bench
and write, shift, write, and toss black hair-licks;
another's cockatoo frenzy tells us
he slept rough; another's asleep
on the floor by my chair; colourful ninja

novels strewn round his head. A pale youth
peers beadily till I prove harmless; we all
subside in coffee wafts among small
chidings and defends, like
the pecks and flutters of nest-box hens.

I mark a cross by a family search site.
The sleeper stirs, peers up blurrily, rolls back
into coma. From beside the entrance
a stately Polynesian security
guard strolls purposefully toward us.

Six foot plus - and big - he pauses, bends
to the sleeper's face, and shakes his
head. Breath goes quiet.
Poor boy, he says. Benched girls,
the beady-eyed boy, his mate, myself,

the guard and other unexpected subversives
breathe out a conspiracy of grins.
The tailman turns. His dignity precise, his gaze
benign, he paces to sentry role,
his stature having far outgrown his uniform.

July 2014

April is the loveliest month

A sky brittle as a lark's eggshell,
bone porcelain smudged with off-white cheekbone
hollows - the white Venetian mask
a witch-wand touches -

taut as skin-tight sails lashed to a bent mast
strained and heeling almost flat across
a spitting foam-flecked obsidian-surfaced sea
these skimming wing-scoops dunking
their canvas in this froth-rimmed channel
ploughed into the City of Sails gulf
as the Waiheke ferry chugs us back

from gazing at sea uninterrupted to the horizon
and admiring undulant green micro-climate
valleys and empty white sand beaches
and rows of brilliant red and brown vines
a grape sprite dances up and down

but steaming back across the Gulf
past yellow volcanic islands to the city the sun
dithers and subsides at eye-level so that we squint
through smouldering silk scarves into a nest
of multistoried buildings making whimsical
Lego steppes and one topped with silver -
that half-comic, half-cosmic disc
lobbed by Xena Warrior Princess at enemies
crossed with King Kong genetics from
her legendary Te Henga cult, to embed itself
a fallen spell on this earthling paradisco

with shirt-tails of slippery sun slopping brimful
over office blocks and a burning westerly horizon
behind the Sky Tower and tall black buildings
honeycombed with pale-lit cell grids mimicking
open-cast beehives propped along the ridge
of a burial mound or the spires and domes
of some desert city flipping between visible
and invisible, between it and the odd black tree
Phoenix palms and Norfolk pines

and a beaky-branched macrocarpa silhouetted
above peaked house roofs is a hardening ripening
strip of old gold afterglow poised a quivery moment
on the verge of explosion when O O O in this
vision of the lit-up city and darkening harbour
what joy to be alive alive O...

The Artist-Astrologer
for Peter Youngd. 28th April, 2010

1. The Artist-Astrologer in his Wild Berry Garden

Among currant and raspberry canes
is a glasshouse with a grapevine
and asparagus and cherry tomatoes

all a little wild and overgrown
but flourishing once as the cottage did
in two rooms and a cubbyhole

scullery doubling as a darkroom
stacked with artist's tools - not
just the cameras but the still-life

odds and ends - their provenance
and usage so changing in your lens
they took on mystery

and splendour in those sensuous
black and white prints - tools
for gardens and collages

and compositions - tools for
the flying mind in books and images
and discs - and tools for shaping

a gentle kindness a lively eye
for quirky Neptunian tussles
and beauty and mathematical puzzles

and how the universe began
and plants and planets and people
your gaze made momentarily

a star - and where maybe
the spaces you made in the starry
dimensions you inhabit - for us -

to see who you were - you are

2. To the Artist-Astrologer in his Wild Fruits Garden

We kept in touch
but distantly of late -
as one planet may

be aware another's
passing in a slow elliptical
orbit as sound-waves

beam - but as befits airy
aspects that attract
compatible thought-veins

we swapped communiques
and tales through others'
tangling currents...

now I only wish I'd thanked
you for our son - the qualities
I loved in you - and miss -

but some of which I see
in son and grandsons - sweet
ghosts of your gifts

3. Of the Artist-Astrologer in his Garden

In this painting you made some forty
years ago, I see a narrative - not yours,
maybe - but apt as part of my seeing
that guessed at a part of yours -
and over time saw more.

This ghostly hovering figure - angel -
painter - surrogate deity? turned up
in a landscape calendar. By Matisse.
That month - and the next and the next -
I couldn't rip it into history - I'd grin
from figure to floating figure - that

original to yours - which in meant
or unmeant homage hung under a fat red
sun - or moon - a guardian blessing
the scene: this joyous, chaotic place where
red air unrolls in waves, a blue bird
swoops through an angelic underarm,

red surf daubs a crazy lipless smirk,
a sturdy child spreads a red-fleshed hand -
her turned-away, smiling, green eyeless
face is a blind Muse above what might
be a kneeling man - and a precarious

stairway zigzags past odd boxy cliffside
houses with dark windows - like
the Clifton house you loved - stories
shape-shifting in greenery - like
the escapee goat - what it ate and whose
and where...and beaky serpents like

Sumner breakers over greyish dead
brown leaves, a cloud of fur pelts, a few
splashes and streaks of blue - serenity
or rue? Blake's world in a grain of sand -
a Young world in a gold-rimmed frame?

Was it then, when what you saw seemed
richer than you could make, you would
not choose the approximate...?

And turned photographer to another
kind of truth: black and white images
with fewer variables, delicate, sensuous

compositions - fruit, flowers, cloth,
a cricket ball, painted plates, unstill-life
scenes from cottage to garden which -
with the stars - became your final work:
a life-art outside safe parameters, aspects
to untangle where you saw more than

most - where a kindly, mostly loveable,
mostly gentle, restless soul might fly
unboxed - sharing arcane wisdom as
beneficently as cherry tomatoes, grapes,
and juicy currants you grew in
spirit-inhabited spaces...

May 2010

Things shift

for Fran

But I don't have lots of things in
my work - like Anna does, you said;
ah, I said, but your paint traps

amazing movement in it - it moves,
it moves - whether or not your
subject does - it moves internally

& moving, spills - to tell you fills my
head with your strangely edgy quilt
of many skin-colours - from this

rackety stuffed-to-overflow storage -
this 20th century gloiybox behind my
eyes where samples bask in viscera

& rich plates simmer suggestively &
your paint's a palette, a book of fabrics,
a blueprint for - is it walls, floors,

carpet strips, tiles, beds - dense, intense
bold, flickery - a heaving sea-bodied
skin whose gulf-dips & flesh

tinctures ease into a shadowy pinkish
terracotta, its red-flecked browns & blue-
green tints that bungy us - surprised -

in outrider curves - & drip-drop rips
& glistening shooting-stars & the startling
starting-place shifts that biff back lids,

flip open shutters & change - & changing
shift - & each shift changes our eyes - & this
& us - & the way I see - you - others - me...

April 2012

revised March 2016

Walking with echoes up Finch Street...

I stare from the steeper, darker side. The house
has twin-peaked gables jutting into a blue sky laid
out flat as a bolt of cotton along a drapery table

the red iron roof drips curly foliage and vines.

Further on, the corner house has an outside laundry;
like my grandparents' backyard wash-house. It
stored stuff they couldn't quite toss: a birdcage,

suitcases, a blackboard compass from Grandad's
teaching days, bike wheels, a maybe mendable cane
chair...any artist's familiars. *We knew a Chirico*

before we saw one. But the Finch Street house

and its tall tree has a compositional oddity: as if
the tree froze, slid its ice dome off and now a white cloud
floats on blue, a gliding cloud-scalp echoes

the tree-top midden-mound, that classic curve.
Maybe it grew dense with transmigratory words,
blew up, a flying flat-bottomed island Laputa.

Here heads skew, eyes squint up or in, rulers lower
their craft to squash revolting subjects. Or make it
a burial mound...one of Te Kooti's ghostly

kumara pits swung up off the Hamilton Basin;

he led the militia a far from merry dance and stayed
uncaught and got pardoned. I limp up the shadowy side
of the street. That white cloud makes me uneasy.

Is it a smoke signal I should know? A warning, a hope

steaming up White Island's simmering volcano?

Behind

a surreal invisible train white puffballs boil on the horizon,
salt pillars spill like cathedrals that don't last and won't

get mended; everyone rushing to remake now - to be

loved, to belong, to reconstruct what's gone...wait!

Who chooses? *Is somebody chosen? and for what?*

September-October 2013

The sixth month...

*for the family at the Haemophilia Society memorial,
Te Wai Orea*

Back at this glade where one path stops
and the other circles the grass between bush
canopies and vanishes in shadow...

nothing moves. Sunlight glints, stilled wind-chimes,
in the branches, sprinkle the flax with light gold
spots and opens a glow in blue sky-space.

Late afternoon stretches furry forepaws
across a disc of names inside a sparse arc
of sitting stones. I perch, brittle

as a fantail's egg. A dark tremulous edge
of branches dips over rocks propped upright
in damp leaves. Briefly visitant in our

hemisphere, Matthew, through the years,
did you come here? But here's where
I call you up, where I wrestle loss:

of graceful courage, intelligence, talent, wit,
the whimsical human habits that made for
your presence a unique small niche.

I meditate thanks. This short menhir says
for those affected and their carers - and Anna
you cared you cared for thirty-nine years -

mother, companion, mentor as nobody else
could be - and Jenny who loved the brother
who sometimes reflected her rare gaiety

and confident well-loved charm...

Difficult times

I read how Brecht
looking out at red and black
garden patches mused
whether he should put
on his glasses to better
see the elderberries
of his youth in
the berries
outside the window...

I blow my nose and feel
a poem coming on about
the baby elderberry tree
I planted in Browning Street
beside the letter box after
reading how great herbalist
Culpepper raised his hat
to elders as he walked by

so venerable did he find them...

and I wonder if elders
still flourish in Augsburg
and in Browning Street (not
Robert, but Elizabeth,
I'd say) and if Browning
Street's small cottages
still exist, habitably,
after a year of quakes
and liquefaction...

and I feel an urgency
simmering in hot dark red
juice to steep my hands
in elderberry wine

and hold them out
stained, dripping, brilliant,
images of hard times...

August 20JI

Poem for a Friend

... who, a Vegetarian, and being asked by the Author, an Omnivore, to undertake the disposal of a bowl of unfeathered biped remains - namely Chicken Soup left forgotten in the microwave by the Author before she drove to Hamilton - said Friend did Graciously dispose of the Remains, in recompense for which she asked the Author for a Poem, which is herewith delivered, a little late...

Dear Fran...

Walking Mitzi in Fowlds Park under tall ghost gums
along the footpath dangling red bark strips
and peelings hanging twitchy in flippant winds

or dropping faded red and brittle as parchment scrolls
and split bamboo we rake into a midsummer bonfire
and set alight like phosphorus lumps along

a crackling ridge that flares and crumples shyly
into twisted remnants of black ash and purplish-reddish
flames licking the bottom of bone-white trunks -

here I picture your tousled shared-bed landscapes
and how in this heat I want to peel off my skin
and toss it over the green blades of a backyard

jungle-orchard where we wade knee-deep in
tangling dandelions purple-top clover paspalum
and buttercups among thuds of falling apples

and wary birds pecking windfall skins hollow so that
between our fingers and thumbs ooze sticky brown
remains and scurrying ants unlike our gory human

interiors baring white tubes pink flesh brown organs
playing under bloody arteries veins
and butchery bleeding all over the place

when the interrupted rhythms stop pumping and
go haywire and like skulls packed by the angel
in the house unzip and explode

in blasted thoughts ripping everything apart
into electrifying re-conceptions of art and gender,
intellect and sexuality - edgy drawings

and elucidations feathery and not flattering us
as herd mammals or with ant and bee similarities
but tracking alien fermentations inside identity

framings we embody as makers of ghost gum
scripts and witches' beards and a pale stretched torso
emerging sleekly tensely with tiny dark moles

and sensuous folds stretching up into leafiness
and exposing a vulnerable nakedness
we most of us shrink into with no clothes on

but as to no skin over shockingly raw flesh
I tease you with - knowing we privileged lot mostly
agree in principle not to eat other creatures

and that meat exudes degrees of carnivorous
offensiveness - remember edibility's relative and to
playfully indulge in its pretense - as did

that young dyke grinning over us oldies outside
the Northampton club when she announced us
palpably mature dykes as Fresh Meat - well

that can ignite queer juicy exotic hungers...

7th February 2011

Aging and the family story...

begins and ends in divisible and indivisible threes
not a shifty godhead of faces and numbers
changing as crowns shift head to head
but a small voice piping I was...I am...I intend to be...
or having been young a voice saying: yes we were...
we are...we intended to...be - and if projected
destiny seems in Dear Leader's binoculars
to be a magical sequence
growing
above houses of the past in sections
with long grass & once desirable mansions
to be a family of standing stones in a circle to catch
the rising sun its equinoctial angle...

we always knew mum dad child might be mum mum
or dad dad with or without child and can line up under
a flag on any peninsula floating in the gulf's
lip-lapping ripples while the sun's tongue
unrolls a liquid spillage
of dandelion heads
loosening into gold Orion's belt
across froth-laced green waves lighting
a green hill's three t frames that overlook
the home paddock kill-spot behind the wood-shed...

while a spa-robe of grape vines splashes red gold orange
plotches down the sunniest slope and squats a giant
chook, plucked ducky off the nest
eggs, to be shooed back into the yard and flock

but to have done before promising spring and loblolly clouds
boiling and bubbling puff up creamy and playful as
plump harmonics and nanny-privileged
children, chubby, gregarious, gleeful
putti - that's something - to see fog steam
up the ranges like hot pools or bum-off smoke
sweeping up hillsides like blown gauze and one cloud
almost sentient as a porcupine fish trailing
a filmy tail which looking through it
into dark bush on the ranges
softens - as age does
sometimes in desired and undesired changes

In Western Springs Park

Something's stirring up the green
trees hissy as irritable geese
that guard the beech trees

and strip their twigs and rebel leaves
while other trees with sequined aprons
and fluttery hankies off thin arms

stretch skinny shadows like drowned
swans' necks in ruffled pools - while
snoozing crocodile jaws sway up

and down and sting my sandalled toes.
By squarking bandy-legged ducks' webbed
dinosaur feet - here come those white

heads-up goosey stares - their glassy
orange-rimmed blue eyes don't scare - they
outstare us - outraged with comic lisp

hisses - and inflexible thickly human-like
tongues - on their ground they
don't meditate outcomes

January 2010

Sometimes after I've seen you

I come away disorientated
You have just the same charm as you ever did
Your eyes sparkle in the same way
and little crackles of electricity so glitter
and busy up the air I never hear
the thunder as a warning

just God rolling his rain barrels around in heaven
and house and city-shift furniture toppling off
van-loads of old planks bricks cans politics
and redressals crumbling in a pile of liberated
kindling while we talk lively family friends

and goddesses we know after fourteen years who's
trustable who's a worry and who'll slither by which
slant on which foreshore and seabed mining whose
grandchildren still face islands and continents
with no guardian laws or the wrong ones and why
a ranting god-mouth turns some women torturers
or suicide bombers not just widows and childless

while risky winds sweep nor' west arcs and refugees
land no passports and exploded homes and might
we have worked but for quirks between ghosts
in flailing pasts and misconceptions and jailors
strutting across border bridges as if in a silent film
somewhere we took part in and fell out of

and somebody else touches you now

and I squat in a doorway facing a hail-storm through
a spiky red-homed tecoma hedge with a bit of meteorite
or what might be a pale fist stuffed in its twigs or a fat
little goddess behind gritty ice pips that bounce off
the steps like sparks in a particle accelerator that slash
the idol into a flat-fish skeleton that glimmers wetly
with a hole for an eye and dark green shoots
poking through do I know you

Symphony on a rhododendron lawn...
for June at the Hamilton Arts Festival

“The moon’s impaled on the tip of a cypress tree”
a lively, hackneyed image, and jovial. A blurry
crowd, all pastels, fans out from the orchestra

marquee; the moon is taking its time to disentangle
blackening foliage, be a skeletal stencil on fading
blue. The gum tree’s ghost-lit, bony upflung

arms might out-shriek Ophelia, Lear, Lady Macbeth
its silent scream turn any ending electric, send
agonized speech to stutter down the centuries.

Grand opera. The moon untangles, unzips itself,
is a naked autumn honesty disc, a white stare
this morepork-cloaked night is yet to trap - so

high above the river’s bowl, beyond a horizon-line
of trees whose silhouettes turn chords to symphony,
chorale to mystery - a vivid sound-bouquet

as if the audience hums open another kind of beauty
made thousands of years ago in amphitheaters -
here’s not so different. Peel off the summer

cellophane, expose a filmy evening — the Waikato’s
twisty rush, a chill breath-catch, to hint at the old
disputed bloody confiscations, oozes of slithery

silver loops as a spring wells, spills, slides easy out till
implacable underground streams nose blindly between
banks - we drink its pasts in music, fireworks, wine,

a public picnic on the grass; we breathe the gardens'
invisible dimensions, those who did something similar
once - and offer - to *out there's* vast revolving

silences a provincial city's scatter of cultural pickings:
a celebration, its well-intentioned resonance, inherited
strings, their blindnesses, their piping to the shades...

The snowmen...

A raw July I tuck under a double duvet
with a Scandinavian thriller of truly
gruesome ingredients: a glass-eyed

snowman lumped & shaped anonymously
overnight in the yard; footprints in the snow -
not yours - that stop at your front door -

late heavy breather phone calls - headless
corpses - a secretive worn cop who plays
stalker-cum-serial killer games

to save the victim and win the kudos -
even if the killer escapes (I guess a series
sequel) and Whew! thank the Goddess

of Comforts for fictional murder in
which we re-slay prowling monstrous
ghosts we knew once - maybe know

now - or don't - knew distantly as our
own - while we lock doors whose handles
rattle between us and neighbours

we eye slant - along with law enforcers
and shadowy stalkers whose interior
snowmen we never really know...

29th July 2012

revised 24th July 2013

*Not so much an alien deity, though scarcely
a familiar...*

I go to a goddess festival in the Grey Lynn community
hall; now images keep flooding in from India and the world:
Durga and Kali, Lakshmi, Sita, Parvati; their profiles

don't mirror Greek and Roman deities - or pagan ones
swallowed by Western cosmologies but which left their
poetic traces. Robert Graves gets the frisson right:

Hecate's screech-owl hurtle through moonlit nights to
herd us into labyrinths and groves or buy us, half-crazed,
at the crossroads - but Graves avoids erotic visitations

except La Belle Dame sans Merci - who fades as priests
and popes take over her robes and gown. But painted
goddesses preside in temples, cathedrals, on re-sale

shelves and electronic screens; they swoop serenely over
battlefields, they drink red fountains out of their own
and others' headless torsos, and as our planet hots up,

as ice-caps calve and melt, as we brew frantic antidotes
to wipe out superbugs - look! Durga brings not golden,
flying eight-armed goddesses unrolling their jewelled

untranslateable scrolls, but she who offers love: Mata
Amritanandamayi, who travels her continent healing all
pilgrims, but especially women and children, with hugs.

14th August 2013

But hang on, critics and friends...

He's not perfect, Brecht. Mostly I quote him
with respect: he thought deeply about life
and class and work and exploitation;

which didn't stop his acquisitive tactics about
women named by others his harem. Then
there's his wiping out of Dante's politics

and eschatology, enlightened for its time; Brecht
said to idealise Beatrice was a sham since what
the Florentine fancied he'd not tested; is this

a Marxist bias towards who ranks highest
in gender priorities? Brecht ridicules the glimpse
that set alight an epic, but is Dante's scolding

Beatrice less real than Brecht's raging Mother
Courage? I'd admire Brecht more had he put
beside his name on those bold scripts

the names of women he claimed kept his pen
honest and so helped elevate him into being this
great bleak seer and compassionate politico.

2011

revised April 2013

Three years later...

for Ursula Bethell

The graveyard has a seedier air

What seemed an unwall'd room is now a yard
Trees that hung plumply over fences
have been cut, fences are gone

Stumps stare nakedly up

Roof-tops and black panes peer slyly over new
palings; wrought-iron railings hobble
a scramble of wild roses

Dust blows over the graves.

But saplings in the centre aisle are grown
I guess cryptomeria, Morrigan says ash - she
the Southerner undoubtedly more apt

The grave's unchanged

except rosettes of pale lichen spatter the top
apron and hide the elegant cross
again - and a young tree,

a prunus with dark reddish aubergine leaves -
tall as a three-year old child - sprouts in the crack
between poet's and parents' graves;

a symbol maybe, of that Spirit of Beauty

the poet talks of that will not be
side-lined nor lie down - even after
the ground shudders

and people die
and a city is displaced

Rcmgiora, 2013

a note on the text

Many of these poems were written as occasional pieces in the years that Heather lived in a garden flat at Aorewa and Fran's home. Heather referred to the work presented in this collection, in conversation, as 'the garden poems'. A few pieces drawn from her wider work, which relate to this 'garden' theme, are also included.

Where Heather dated or revised a particular poem her note is included. However the sequence is not chronological, but rather ordered intuitively. This recognizes Heather's own treatment of this project as a non-linear cycle. In a very few cases where titles were absent or provisional, they have been conferred. Likewise in a very few places a conjunction or emended tense or punctuation has been silently supplied.

A good number of the poems were read by Heather at *Pride Day* celebrations. *Poetry Live* and *Rhythm & Verse* - at Lopdell House and Black Salt.

Heather's page in the Aotearoa New Zealand Poetry Sound Archive is at <http://aonzpsa.blogspot.com/2007/! I/mcpherson-heather.html>

a note on the people

Before she died, Heather requested that Janet Charman edit the garden poems' and Janet, Lynne Ciochetto and Marian Evans formed a Spiral collective to publish *This Joyous, Chaotic Place*.

Janet has published eight collections, including *Drawing Together*, with Sue Fitchett and Marina Bachmann, (Spiral 1985) and most recently *┐ Surrender* (University of Otago Press 2017). She won the Montana Poetry Award in 2008.

Lynne Ciochetto introduced Marian Evans to Heather in Christchurch in 1978; Heather cooked them macaroni cheese accompanied by a weed salad. Lynne and Marian later worked together on Spiral projects, including J.C. Sturm's *The house of the talking cat* and Keri Hulme's *the bone people*.



Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003), a prolific and influential poet and visual artist who used text, painting, drawing and film to bring significant and everyday actions...to close as possible together, was - like Heather and Allie Eagle - a key and beloved participant in Aotearoa New Zealand's women's art movement of the 70s and early 80s.

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p.88: Allie Eagle *Joanna at
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Heather McPherson (1942-2017) published four collections during her lifetime and was widely anthologised. Her first book, *A Figurehead: A Face* (Spiral 1982), was Aotearoa New Zealand's first collection of poems by an out lesbian. In 1974 Heather founded both the legendary Christchurch Women Artists Group and *Spiral*, a women's literary and arts journal. She was also a founding member of the Womens Gallery in 1980. A much-loved lesbian feminist, editor, activist, friend, partner, lover, teacher and mentor, she was deeply committed to her family, especially to her son Rick and his family.