

Impertinent to Sailors

Curved over islands, the world
dragged me south in a talkative year

slipping Southampton
as the band played a distant farewell.

It was better than steerage,
that assisted passage: ten pound Poms

at sixpence the dozen, promenading
in sun frocks, gathering for quoits,

angling, in an understated way,
for a seat at the Captain's table —

while I, a child, roamed decks, became
impertinent to sailors.

And the heat! My dear, there never were
such days — rum, romance,

the rudiments of ska. Panama beckoned,
locks pulsing like the birth canal.

We passed through, to be rocked
on the swells of the quiet ocean,

its long unshaded days
of trade winds, doldrums, Equator —

then a cold shore,
a bureaucratic harbour,

and the half of a world
it would take to say goodbye.

Shetland Ponies, Haast Beach

Forest and sea have had their way
with memory. A few houses — silent,
locked — remain. Between car and beach,

a field of Shetland ponies, already
calling her by name. But I'm
facing inland, bush not far beyond,

mountains piled like thunderheads
across the morning light. Was this
our house, or this, or this now empty field?

For eighteen months, we lived here
while they built the road. I was two, then four.
What I have are barely memories:

my mother at the washing line. My father's
longed-for homeward stride. Grader drivers
lifting me onto their knees to ride.

Work done, we drove away, the new highway
bearing our fortunes south, over spilling streams,
across the Main Divide. Now I'm back, reclaiming

what may be reclaimed. The forest
has no answers. The sea lies past the ponies.
“Look,” she says, “they're eating from my hand.”

Men at Sea

1. Puysegur

Glint of gold, horizon
proclaiming fish: familiar
warnings of gale and cloud.

He descends to the fishing boats.
One will take him tideward,
southward, a tolerated,

but far from welcome,
inspector of catches. In a pre-dawn
counterfeit of morning, they cast off

for Puysegur: the south-west
corner, the Roaring Forties'
big back yard, their hunting ground.

Three days of the sea as mountain range,
eating with the crew, sharing danger
but not profit. Three days

of soaked skin, puddled clothes, each
wooden bunk a trampoline, salt spray
in every cut and nick. At last

the turning homeward, past Solander,
past Centre Island — the Bluff
finally, blessedly, in sight.

He will make tallies, say farewells,
enact the weary rituals
of damp wharf and empty office.

He will drive a narrow highway home,
eyelids heavy, engine cold and catching
in the falling winter light.

2. Halfmoon Bay

School holidays. The ferry's
uncertain plunging past the fishing fleets,
young feet

attentive to the scuppers. Green bile
derived from dread and remnant breakfast
flung, a final offering,

to the greedy waves. Then this
harbour long desired, Foveaux's fingers
unclamping from my inner ear. Sudden

ease, relief; a brief reflection
that all this must be undergone again.
Boats in our wake, men at sea

raising a laconic workman's finger
to visitors, to loopies,
to the daily irruption of other lives.

And now the island: crash
of gangways, solid ground,
davits whining as we walk away.

Men at sea, I take my father's hand
as we approach the village, houses
hunched against the glowing skies.

The lure of escape, of absorption
into no-time, merely being
and doing. The memory of waves.

The journey back. Hands,
half-longed-for, half-feared,
reaching as we near the shore.

Three Southern Prose Poems

1. Bluecliffs Beach

The boy plays in the sand. His father, the inspector, has been gone for two hours, checking paua, checking crayfish, checking for bad men sifting the tide.

The boy is damming streams. They flow down from the blue cliffs, over the road, and into Te Waewae Bay. Except for one: the stream the boy has dammed. The water pools, goes wide, searches for a way. The boy is ready. He has driftwood, he has sand. One day he will be the greatest hydro engineer the world has ever seen. The Waiau, the mighty Clutha: none will flow free of his reach for long.

His dad returns. No bad men today. They drink coffee from a thermos, taking turns with the single cup, then walk back to the van. The boy looks back. The wind, the sun, the tide, the stream, the sand.

2. Black Umbrella Range

But I want to get to the top. But it's snowing. But my feet are cold. But I only have sneakers.

- Dad, will we get to the top?

- Let's see what the weather does, son.

It snows, it snows again. Ahead, the ridgeline slopes from west to east. It's five hundred feet above us. It's getting very cold. We keep climbing.

My sneakers are soaked through, and the snow is falling harder. Up we go. I take my father's hand. We're on the ridgeline, a ramp of frozen snow connecting distant earth to leaden sky.

- Can we climb right to the top?
- Not today. It's time to get you home.

We turn and hurry down, down to trees, down to shelter, down to the fenceline that divides wild from tame. On the gravelled road, the car awaits — shelter, heater, change of clothes. The snows observe as we drive away.

3. Blue Dismembered Hills

It was nice, but the town is so small now, the people so old, the main street as wide as time. When the bus arrived, Mum and Dad were waiting for you. You got fish and chips from the Main Street Fish Supply, went home and ate them round the old formica table. They still tasted good. You found out some more about the war, when Mum made Rolls Royce engines for the planes. You played golf with Dad, like a good son should. You ran the rule over the garden. Then it was time to leave.

There's always that wait at the station, that anxious will-it-come I-hope-it-comes about the bus, and never an announcement. At last it turns up. Last hugs, last kisses, you climb aboard. You're in your seat and they're already receding. Sliding into the past. Sure you love them, but there's a distance there. 'Cos you're a big boy now, almost a man.

Read a book, take a nap, have a pie and a piss at Clinton. Rattle on through the Taieri Plains. Dunedin's getting closer. Woo-hoo! The Verlaines at the Empire, Sneaky Feelings at the Ori. What more could a young man want?

One last climb before you hit Dunedin, past those blue dismembered hills. Two peaks: one still whole, one torn apart for gravel to make the streets, to make the motorways, to make the roads to bear you home. As you've grown bigger, it's grown smaller.

You travel up to the saddle, your self-image puffing up around you. It shrinks to nothing when you hit the other side.

Down George Street in the Rain

I talked to the shop signs
down Cuba Street
down Cashel Street
down George Street in the rain.

I sidestepped the shoppers.
Take that, Phil Bennett!
Take that, old lady with a limp
and orthopaedic shoes.

We were as Gods
as eighteen-year-old Gods
who wore our Gore High jerseys to the bottle store —
they wouldn't let us in.

We smiled upon our people.
People, we said, we walk among you.
Don't bow, don't scrape, don't even step aside.
In gratitude, in wonder, let us pass on

to our destinies, our mortgages
down Cuba Street
down Cashel Street
down George Street in the rain.