



sam hunt

COMING TO IT
selected poems

Coming to it

Three kids down at the front gate
wait the school bus;
fog hung low down the valley,
the house in sore need of paint,
the bright washing on the line,
a Van Morrison morning.

A man without a dog is not a man.
You don't have to believe it,
you really don't.
But it's all to do with the farm gate,
the three kids waiting the bus,
the man singing, the man we're listening to.
He knows where buses go
and why they never painted the house;
and if it's songs about fog you want,
Van Morrison's your boy.

So come over here,
take a look:
the fog is lifting – or is it just drifting? –
the bus has taken the kids to school.
And there's a man singing.
Wait for it –
the bright-washing-on-the-line bit –
we're all just
coming to it.

Four plateau songs

for Tom, turning 11

1

I climbed the mountain to learn
I had no need to be there,
took a room further down;
could not have gone further.

I spend the most, most days now
inside of a hotel room –
a distant dad, a dizzy man,
on the edge of a mountain.

2

The lady at the pool table
has on a see-through dress.
Which is, I guess,
worth mentioning.

I mean, if she didn't
and I couldn't (see through it)
I wouldn't have thought
to mention it worth it.

3

A man asked me
last night in the house bar
just how it was
I could remember poems.

I told him I could not forget them,
they're flesh and blood.
And your best poem? he asked.
I told him Tom.

4

Your mother loved this plateau
country, Ruapehu.
Our best times were here
of three years together.

We never got to climb
or ski or tramp or do
what people do on mountains.
But she comes with the view.

October in the bay

Their mating is taking place
blatantly in front of us,
two tall blue white-faced herons –

they can teach us a thing or
two or three on four-day play!
For four days now around our

bay of bright painted shacks,
a couple of herons
have pecked and played and shied and

out of nowhere flown past in
unison, in pendulous flight –
four days we have borne the sight

of what – when it does happen,
when the event does take place –
will last hardly a moment.

And you can be damn sure
that we who have watched hardest
will miss it – like it flashed past us –

leaving us, the academic
bird-watchers we are at best,
the peck and play, shy and fight,

inhabiting a shoreline where we
can dream only, only dream
of such slow pendulous flight.

My white ship

Although together we
Drift the bay's slow pull
Of tides and know this sea
Behind the island will
Never drag us away,
And drifting lift not one
White sail to trap the day
Nor catch the sun,

The ethic of my love
For you remains that I
Am a lone sailor of
The night; captain of my
White ship: and though you be
A good day's mate, your fight's
Too weak to ride with me
These wild black nights.

So lie please in the peace of
Your anchored sleep, and do
Not cry for help, my love,
As if I'm drowning you,
But lie on without fright
When I raise my sail up
And ride out on the night
On my white ship.

Hilary

for Hone Tuwhare

I too had a lean
aunt. She died at thirty.
Like yours, from Tb.
She was a cross between
mother and sister
but better than either.
She left five kids, and me.
I was aged ten
in the middle of winter.

A northern cousin
found a bird dying that morning.
He brought it to his mother, Joan,
one of Hilary's three sisters.
Joan froze. Then burst into tears.
She knew it was Hilary,
the youngest and most frail,

the one who wrote poems,
the one they called
'the Little Poet of Pangatotara',
the one who never got over
the flood of '54,
the year the Motueka River
rose and covered the farm.

There was silt through everything.
There was silt through Hilary's lungs.
She had strange dreams
the whole of that last year.

One, about me –
I have her letter still
telling of how
I'd one day walk out on stage.
Who would have believed it!

Hilary did.
And not long after, died.

I went by the farm today
but didn't go in.
Her husband lives there still,
a prosperous farmer
who dabbles in the arts,
happily remarried.

I could only watch
the river flow past the farm,
the Tasman mountains heave through mist,
the poplars hold the light apart.
And I thought for
a moment I saw
Hilary wave from the farmhouse door.

The rain quickened.
Soon everything –
the riverflat farm,
the mountains, river and poplars –
was blurred.

It was
years since I'd cried.

Rainbows, and a promise of snow
for Alistair Campbell

1

Winter means one side or other of
the shortest day. Our birthdays both
are on that good side, friend, of
solstice. Winter is a warm hearth;

rainbows, and a promise of snow.
Or so life's been for me this last
half-life of sixteen years. Days go
so very slow they say, so fast.

It matters not. A good mate dies,
another goes abroad or mad.
It matters neither way. What does,
what always will, is that we load

the fire high with logs. She's a
winter this! bull-seals barking in the bay.
If she don't snow soon, I tell you
friend, she's never going to.

2

Sixteen and just left school
I dumped my books and hiked
four hundred miles south;
hitched-up where I liked:

barbaric coast, barbaric winds
madder than I knew could blow:
what better making of friends,
a promise of snow.

I go to the river, friend,
walk along with the flow;
far as third bend,
far as I go:

remembering time goes
so very fast, so slow:
solstice and birthdays,
a promise of snow.

A mad wind has risen,
the bull-seals bark at the moon:
I have a knee-high son;
you, a grandchild soon.

My chance to wish you cheers,
we've many good miles to go.
Here's rainbows (whisky tears),
a promise of snow.

Not in this weather

The hand is not a fist
until that hand is clenched.

Like this frostbitten fist of winter
clenched at the windscreen.

There is no driving back.
And if there were

I couldn't; and wouldn't.
Not in this weather.

Sara

Your body has no flaw.
That must be a lie!
Maud Gonne had sad hands,
Angela's temper never opened doors.

Your body has no flaw.
I look for one daily,
the darkness of the valley,
the climb to your jaw.

Your body has no flaw.
I part the earth and sky
I witness birth
I pray at a bleeding door.

Your body has no flaw.
The black shag neither.
Nor the blue heron at prayer.
You live outside the law.

Your body has no flaw,
buttocks breast and thigh,
curved ankles where I lie;
your calves, another shore.

Your body has no flaw.

Four Manly verses

1

So much bare flesh, so very
smooth, brown as any berry,
utterly untouchable,
a man can only babble,
dream the unattainable,
stutter the impossible.

2

The loneliness of summer,
the over-forty runner:
SWIM BETWEEN FLAGS!
RESCUE PHONE ONE-ONE-ONE:
once a man has blown
youth, oh, once the bird has flown,
man drowns alone, blood and bone.

3

The fat and middle-aged all
out in force, out for a ball:
all end up in the kitsch
lounge bar perving at the beach;
sun, salt; the seven-year itch;
the gold flesh out of reach.

4

Meantime, lover by lover
the young in the sun, never
heard of cancer of the skin;
horizoned there, the dorsal fin;
ever asked the price of sin,
Sonya, Barry, Brian, Lyn.

Wave song

I want to come back as a wave
that in summer breaks in on beaches
full of people and fibrolite baches;
stroke delicate down, slowly
slip off your tiny bikini.

I want to come back as a wave
that scatters among the bathers
go down as they come up for breathers
splatter and spume at their ankles
make every body beautiful.

I want to come back as a wave
so always near, so out of reach,
so when they run back up the beach
their glowing bodies fading home
my salt will still be upon them.

I want to come back as a wave
that in winter moves on.
No one will know where I'm gone.
I will cruise some desolate part
say Shag or Puysegur Point.

I want to come back as a wave,
regather forces, spend myself;
in the spring, move in on estuaries
attend to the mating of stingrays –
tidal, lengthening days.

I want to come back as a wave.
And though I love the estuaries,
bare coasts and autumn memories –
I want to lift you now and float you
as you, too, come as a wave.

Harpooner's song

Too late today to leave
I long since lost the choice.
Outside of the chase
it could be a shit of a life –
so stick it,
it never was Nantucket.

I drink, of course I drink.
It lets me think
of other lives, of anything other.
But town for me is Picton, brother,
it never was Nantucket.

The feel and the fear,
the fever of Cook Strait,
nights and mornings after
this man blown out on it.

Some days on deck sure
footed as a goat or
lucky as a drunk:
long nights, Tarwhite,
songs about harpoons
and men who made an art
of throwing them straight.

I live in Picton, brother,
but I work Cook Strait.

Too late today to leave
I long since lost the choice.
I lived for the chase.
I made the chase as art.
The town chose me
to live in it.
I chose it and called it town.

It never was Nantucket.
Picton is the town I'm in.

Catching the tide

i.m. John Clark, lost at sea

I didn't join the search party;
watched it gathering at the cruising club;
came to watch the fishing boats instead.

I better be careful you don't become our Lycidas,
you silly old bugger, John,
seems like you've done it this time –
you tried hard enough last year,
drove your yellow Triumph Stag
north up the railway line,
met the Northerner travelling south.
The car – I never did like Triumphs –
the inevitable write-off.
I forget what happened after that
except that you walked away laughing
pissed beyond caring.

STRICTLY NO FISHING WHILE ON THIS BRIDGE
the NZR sign reads.

Or is it

STRICTLY NO WRITING POEMS WHILE ON THIS BRIDGE
GAZING AT THE FISHING BOATS
GRAZING HEAVY MOORINGS
STRICTLY
NO DREAMING OF OPEN SEAS

Cook Strait is deeper than coffin or urn.

I didn't join the party.
Join yours instead,
the Big One that never ends;
come to catch the tide, Clarkie,
turning as the fishing boats turn.

Harold Saunders, boatbuilder, Tory Channel

A man built a house.
That man years later
became Prime Minister.
I like the idea
of a Prime Minister
being able
to build a house.

Another man,
a man I know,
builds boats.
He builds boats like
Beethoven, say, wrote symphonies or
Henry Moore
cut so deep
to the heart of a stone one day
he discovered, he said,
the sky on the other side.

This man builds boats in his garden.
They're launched from there –
his garden that floats
a step above full tide.

And when the tide is full in Tory Channel
the moon comes to watch.



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