

## Sandpiper

You can allegorise this several ways  
piping bird means poet  
sand his element  
or you can think it up

and see the scuttling cuttlefish-white  
fluffed-up body  
torpedoing across the beach  
a foot above its invisible stilts

that's the poet again  
defying gravity chasing something  
unseen in the dunes  
ready to gobble up the living

or you can forget the lot  
and remember your own images  
from whenever wherever  
sandpipers crossed your tracks

or maybe they never have and this is  
an empty sign stuck up outside the shop  
where inside the counter's bare  
and there's no-one minding the till

whatever, the poem tells you  
sand will slow you down  
and a shrill squealing in the wind  
will tell you you're too close to a nest



## Sandworm

Beach worms are spade-headed  
with wharfies' hooks around the mouth.  
They scent the stockinged stink  
trussed like a ham in a nylon net  
as it slides across the bar-top smooth  
of watered sand. They come out  
of the ground like death through the swing  
doors of a hospital ward – urgent,  
to grab a rotten limb before it's pinched  
by interfering fingers. You've  
got to be quick, quicker than it, thumb  
and forefinger round its throat  
and out it comes, blood-red tube  
from its silver yellow winding sheet,  
feet and feet of it into a bucket.  
Strung out and slack, it waits  
to be used, lure and line, hook and bait,  
death tied in knots about itself.

## Timber wharf

It takes twenty minutes to walk there:  
up the high-level bridge across the shunting lines,  
down, across the dockyard tracks, to the wharves

and up river half a mile: an intricate path and dangerous,  
to find when you get there that yesterday the *Waipiri*  
out from the islands has left a grove of sandalwood on the wharf

you can smell it as soon as the river breeze gets behind it:  
walking west towards the red dust cliffs of the works  
above creosote and hydraulic oil you know there is

another world: you track through it for half a mile  
until you reach the sawn bound billets of bleeding logs  
stepped like ghats at the river side, pyres of perfume

smoking entrails of forests plucked out and thrown here  
to dislocate the mind through false scents.

Twenty minutes, and a lifetime to find the way back.

## The oyster bank

Were there really oysters there?

or did some ironic tar name it that  
for the way it opened up ribbed and bearded hulls,  
no matter whether wood or iron,  
of whatever wandered there

blown from the grasp of nursemaid tugs  
running free down the roads outside the harbour  
bang on to the drowned flats  
sluiced from farms and gullies miles away

oysters need tides and food,  
twice daily baptisms and communions,  
was the water under this path so shallow?  
it is now: a breakwater of wrecks

made from disasters of air and water  
cemented into place so no storm will move them  
and a safe Sunday walk into the elements  
but not an oyster anywhere.



## Floating dock

an old freighter in dock  
bare hull humped up  
to show its shameless secret places  
birth-naked and stranded  
screw, rudder, bearded bilges,  
blunt cut-water, toothless transom:  
age should be clothed

not penned in a steel change room  
propped up and told not to move  
while air and steam drain you  
of all that holds you on an even keel  
and workers come to clean you,  
maintainers of eternal youth

vital signs are still there, the stack smokes  
lights glitter in fo'c'stle and poop  
incontinent waters vent, and on the halyards  
flags still proclaim name and purpose,  
not yet paid-off and headed for the breaker's yard

but nothing signs from the floating dock  
grey in its war-time camouflage it is the sea  
bearing up on steel waves its cousin ships  
amphibian of time and change it sinks and rises  
to its own tides, but carries no flag of its own

## Chrome works

This is as close to alchemy  
as tradesmen get  
the hard bright currency  
on base moulds of perfect shapes  
migrating metals to other poles  
like a world transposed  
in an etching's negative  
to the positive of print

dark shop where all is touched by acid  
curtains are cobwebs, walls furred  
with salts and oxides  
the concentrate of industry is here  
nothing made but changed  
by dark illuminations  
of paradise on metal plates

## Dockyard

Mother's sewing room but run by men

filthy with rust and dust, steel fabric is cut  
by flaming scissors, sparks, blobs of hot metal  
glue the gusseted bits, and seams of rivet pins  
run round the paunch of the belted keelson

and over there is a mangle bending  
crusted sheets, wringing the last drop out  
before the steel sets into complex curves  
hung out to dry on a bony bush of ribs

dark and dirt, mazes with red-lead hedges,  
companionways and three-storey heights  
inside the nave of the engine room,  
sphinctered hoses, chalked graffiti, mother

is another world, of ticking treadle,  
damp comfort of a hissing pot,  
the lavender gloom of linen presses,  
a footfall in the hallways of sleep

away from the suck of poppet valves,  
the stamp of steam hammers, the stink  
of flux and electric arcs, somewhere  
beyond the slipway where in months

this inert metal with its fields of force,  
steam, fire, oil, water – the womb of men,  
will slide into its proper world,  
launched at last into that other sex.



## After a war (any war)

In Freetown I sat by the radio for two years  
listening to the short wave  
roll back and forth across Biafra:

Ikot Ekpenni, Owerri, Port Harcourt  
– just down the coast – while I watched,  
safe, above the harbour, as the sun set

deep in the slavers' Atlantic.  
So far above it all – and beyond  
what happened in Long Tan

or Mi Lai. Out of that because I  
was conceived when my father  
was on leave in September 1940

and born when he was on manoeuvres  
five months before he went to Malaya  
and three and half years as a prisoner.

Safe in the peace of existential depression –  
the in-grown anxiety of life of those  
who were in school when the Yalu River

burst, and never had to face the Chinese  
human wave which swept the next generation  
of diggers back to Panmunjon;

and safe in the hothouse hedonism  
of booze and travel on the right side  
of the iron curtain, I warmed myself

by the cold war's electric tension,  
stretched to the thrill of militant peace  
and marched in moratoriums,

until I sit here in Merewether and watch the sun come up  
from Chile and Argentina and their dirty wars  
and shine on me now at the water's edge

an open beach far from the harbour I once called home  
where the dead and mutilated were stacked  
in stinking piles in Wilberforce last January:

I saw the photos and the news as it happened  
on the net, before the sun which curdled those corpses  
arrived to warm this open beach

where in 1942 they thought the Japanese would land  
and we were evacuated for three months until  
that horror passed, and even now I wake

in the night and hear the planes come in  
and the tidal wave of swamping change  
rise out of usual horizon and bear us all away

to today where the westerly has laid everything  
flat and the surf slides and creeps like history  
and someone listens for signal in all the noise

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and that noise is now  
the present confused with all its freight  
of what has gone before – different for each of us

the noise of spring and freesias in the lawn  
the first butterflies and we were on the beach:  
swimming before breakfast

the water cold as the wave which drops  
from the opened ice-chest  
but the top layer of sand dried like old mortar

warm to walk on but frangible and breaking  
through into the cold underworld  
which our feet are always part of

poised to take their first plunge of the year,  
father and son, into the antarctic current  
to be chilled into sudden salty life

my father who made such ingenious things  
as my own life and now his again  
in this new world of peace

who locked up the slaving human beast of war  
in a peace-time house and garden  
with tennis court and surf laid on

it seemed proof against anything, and as I  
float in the cold current of the rest of my life  
always within coo-ee of the beach

he rises in the morning wind toward our new dawn  
and disappears forever into the fiery  
eye of the beast he thought he had finally tamed

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a death by fire makes minor headlines  
though it happens every day in lesser ways  
and there is his in the sydney morning herald

but the obsequies which followed in our  
industrial town were of a fitting nature  
ash in the grate, gritty smoke in every eye

nothing is made without fire  
and nothing undone without its virtue  
so everywhere had fire

tiled and domesticated in its cast iron  
basket it warms the house-bound  
and is the child's vision of the world to come

more alive than the sleeping dog it is book  
and song and sunlight, comforting nurse  
without big sister's smoke and smell

the backyard incinerator which consumes  
all that is dead and past, or uncle's open hearth  
where fallen angels play with magic pokers



to create the new, or mother's gas ring  
grandma's copper, close relatives in steam  
with all that graze along the wharves and railway lines;

bright fire is story and belief in mysteries,  
so when they told me you were a box of ashes  
it seemed that was how things were each cold morning

a new start with the broom and pan, clear out the past,  
put it in a box, and post it in a wall  
along a garden where roses grow, clean, equal and confined

like an equation which explains the world  
that though the outer shells may change  
within life's energies are always conserved

perhaps that's why I've never returned  
to see if the roses grow, especially 'Peace'  
the one they'd just released the year before

and if the wall is standing, the long honey-comb  
of bricks grouted together by so many bodies,  
not to weep upon but to stare at and realise

that everything is still the way it was  
and nothing changed, though I am older  
now than your own father when you died

nor have I brought my sons to see the fruits of peace  
blooming in vigorous display among their thorns  
because, thank god, they have yet to know a war

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so all my life, though I have been to none,  
I have carried within me a war, and scars,  
like a birthmark without cause or pride

invisible stains of peace from when men came  
home to that other world of women and found  
that neither recognised the other, unfamiliars

who spoke different languages and lived different lives,  
two hemispheres in one household where each  
inhabits other seasons and reads other skies at night,

tribes of children who do not know their fathers  
and resent the stranger ignorant of their rituals,  
hard men whose eyes are blank as Caesar's as they watch

for faults, then walk down sleepless moonlit corridors  
in search of the peace they waited for so long –  
who find it here, in my own wakenings in the night,

when in the dark of all those years I hear at last  
the sounds of parents talking – it is the white noise  
of peace: the sleeping babble of the kids at night.

*Newcastle, 2000*



## Faults

*for Larry*

Too possessive by half  
I wanted to hang on to everything:  
the past, the moment, that phrase,  
a photo, a sound, that tune:  
finally it all had to come undone.

We sit on bentwood chairs  
in the tea-room my mother took me to,  
looking through a fourth-floor window  
across the harbour: dykes, groynes  
and docks, the water still as life.

Cracks are everywhere, even in window sills  
where seasons of summers have split the wood:  
but the cracks everyone is talking about  
are there in the walls, the pavements, and in the shock  
which still echoes in their speech.

The forgotten ships, their smoke and steam,  
it's no use pointing them out to you.  
Empty wharves and broken buildings are what you see:  
at the end we live in different worlds  
and talk other languages.

Fourth floor, forty years, loading faults  
so that something slips and slides,  
toes and fingers straining as the continents drift or,  
squeeze together – we creep and crawl, walk,  
and then we run, the earth elastic beneath our feet.



## Making waves

it was good to wake up this morning knowing nothing except  
there was a seep of light under the lids, someone had lifted  
the lid, just to see if anything was living inside yes – here I  
am: real and unimagined just like yesterday, a pearl still in  
its shell, globular, perfect but jet, ink, dark and sequestered,  
not pierced and strung by hours around the neck, unnatural,  
the real being what is known when the box is opened and the  
wave collapses into a sphere of dawn light grey, pink, cyan,  
blue, then white  
the eye

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a lake, lacquered crimson, smeared with an algal bloom of light  
shallow in mud then sand flats where whiting wait  
or leatherjacket slouch round weed, proof against hooks

where jetties tiptoe in morning mist, boards bleaching,  
piles askew thigh-deep in mud, scabbed with white oyster ulcers,  
and waves are cat-licks at the lawn where the sleep-drowned man

lolls in his deck-chair, hears the faint scratch of tongue on  
the bank,  
suck, suck, unstoppable, mincing up matter and years, waves  
hungry to be flesh, to get to a point, consuming themselves

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in a bay you need a long line to catch anything, long and wavy like the old metres used to catch the attention of the dozy and drunk, a line for story-telling, which says the bay

bowl-deep is perfect for eye-drinking at sunset and salute to the day which has gone, and perfect for making the soft susurrations of the deep ocean heard:

it babbles through the night window open to summer holidays with that old story, how's it go? this way will do  
i am the sound of all things, the sum of none for i am everything

i am your blood, the flux of atoms and the freeze of things:  
the fall of a wave on a silver beach is the first thing you will hear, and the gasp of its relapse the last:

and the story – the sine curve to climax – is waves laid over interfering and fitting, humped in chaos, slumped in order until there is only one line you hear

clear as the mosquito in the dark, but yours alone seen and heard by no-one else, as it follows your blood-beat: the bay to a ten-year old is the way to fifty and will be here

when all the points which make you up are scattered, but what you heard one night will still be heard as your wave propagates into that deeper bowl, the southern lights

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surf, on a reef, on a beach, even in open sea, is the wave  
made visible  
that's surf, toppling in white caps when force breaks out of  
the skin,  
pure threads of energy mazing across green-marble flats of sea,  
as clear from the 'plane as webs of ejaculate from  
supernovae to unblinking cameras,  
it's the hiss and spit of tumbling particles  
thrown out of the first moments  
white sound out of a terrible darkness,  
it's the crested and plumed fore-runners  
of the most ancient of kings racing in to meet you,  
passing you in turmoil  
sliding around you, touching, teasing,  
throwing you to the heavens,  
but only once taking you with them,  
it's the sound of disaster, sudden hard rock in the sweet yielding,  
tooth aground on a foreign shore,  
it's the ever-present talk of adults through the night wall  
to those who live near it,  
it's presence at a distance,  
remote and consoling as submarine cable calls,  
it's surf,  
the moody mind more real to us than ourselves, surf –  
ocean speaking,  
the only god to speak to all of us, maker of prayers.

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a thrown stone, tide over a bar, a tap drip,  
are syllogisms of a sort,  
a particular become a universal,  
where energy passes from one state to another  
the camel drives through the eye of the copula to become  
something beyond categories,  
and the verb 'to be' predicates itself:

a thrown stone hits the surface of water  
as a word passes into your mind hurled  
there by someone else breaking your order

and the waves ride out solar systems on the water  
and the word sounds out the edges of your mind  
then reflects inward, coming back but changing

that's the verb 'to be'  
protean but still the same underneath it all  
just as a wave hits its own reflection  
cancels and amplifies into  
the complex sentence  
which unwinds  
here on the still  
surface of the screen  
advancing argument  
retreating qualification  
until it disappears exhausted  
in the static of a point

