

2.9 Poetry Options

Coming and Going Louis Johnson (NZ)

If love is what would make one offer himself
to bear the pains of another, there is so much
the baby does not understand I would gladly
stand in her stead for. But you cannot take
the pang for another or teach
pain quicker than the piercing thorn
anymore than explain to the blind
the colour of blood or a bird.

Through glass of the kitchen door she watches
me return through the burning light of the day
and the indescribable sunset; her arms
suddenly wild signalling welcome.
What she makes of my comings and goings
I cannot guess or begin to explain.
Here one minute, gone another: small wonder
children find fathers incomprehensible
shadows, moon-ruled like tides, undependable.

Which is not why I pick her up from the floor-
but to secure for myself the fact of return
and the weight of my welcome. My fifty-odd
years are so close to a departure
I know I should have thought harder
about such a new beginning. I tell myself
that love is quite as extreme as any entrance
or exit, and does not come too late. Its colour
glows in the room where I have closed the door.

The Womb Apirana Taylor (NZ)

Your fires burnt my forests
leaving only the charred bones
of totara rimu and kahikatea

Your ploughs like fingernails
of a woman scarred my face
It seems I became a domestic giant

But in death
you settlers and farmers
return to me
and I suck on your bodies
as if they are lollipops

I am the land
the womb of life and death
Ruamoko the unborn god
rumbles within me
and the fires of Ruapehu still live.

Whakatu Keri Hulme (NZ)

Eh man!
They like us on the chains
we do a good killing job
and we look so happy

Hei tama tu tama
tama go away

They like us in the factories
cleaning floors and shifting loads

hei tama tu tama

they like us driving trucks and dozers
and working on the roads

hei tama tu tama

Hey boy!
They like us in the pubs
we drink up large
and we look so happy

Hei tama tu tama
tama go away

E tama!
They like us
they like us
drinking shouting singing
when it's someone else's party
or swinging plastic pois
in a piupiu from Woolworths
and thumping hell outa an old guitar
Because we look so happy

Hei tama tu tama
tama go away
Aue, tama go away

The Moment Margaret Atwood

The moment when, after many years
of hard work and a long voyage
you stand in the centre of your room,
house, half-acre, square mile, island, country,
knowing at last how you got there,
and say, I own this,

is the same moment when the trees unloose
their soft arms from around you,
the birds take back their language,
the cliffs fissure and collapse,
the air moves back from you like a wave
and you can't breathe.

No, they whisper. You own nothing.
You were a visitor, time after time
climbing the hill, planting the flag, proclaiming.
We never belonged to you.
You never found us.
It was always the other way round.

Cold Knap Lake
Gillian Clarke

We once watched a crowd
pull a drowned child from the lake.
Blue-lipped and dressed in water's long green silk
she lay for dead.

Then kneeling on the earth,
a heroine, her red head bowed,
her wartime cotton frock soaked,
my mother gave a stranger's child her breath.
The crowd stood silent,
drawn by the dread of it.

The child breathed, bleating
and rosy in my mother's hands.
My father took her home to a poor house
and watched her thrashed for almost drowning.

Was I there?
Or is that troubled surface something else
shadowy under the dipped fingers of willows
where satiny mud blooms in cloudiness
after the treading, heavy webs of swans
as their wings beat and whistle on the air?

All lost things lie under closing water
in that lake with the poor man's daughter.

Poppies
Jane Weir

Three days before Armistice Sunday
and poppies had already been placed
on individual war graves. Before you left,
I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,
spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade
of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

Sellotape bandaged around my hand,
I rounded up as many white cat hairs
as I could, smoothed down your shirt's
upturned collar, steeled the softening
of my face. I wanted to graze my nose
across the tip of your nose, play at
being Eskimos like we did when
you were little. I resisted the impulse
to run my fingers through the gelled
blackthorns of your hair. All my words
flattened, rolled, turned into felt,

slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked
with you, to the front door, threw
it open, the world overflowing
like a treasure chest. A split second
and you were away, intoxicated.
After you'd gone I went into your bedroom,
released a song bird from its cage.
Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,
and this is where it has led me,
skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy
making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without
a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.

On reaching the top of the hill I traced
the inscriptions on the war memorial,
leaned against it like a wishbone.
The dove pulled freely against the sky,
an ornamental stitch. I listened, hoping to hear
your playground voice catching on the wind.

SONNET 116
William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.