

The Old

Have you noticed how sanguine the old are
about the deaths of friends?
They are soldiers in the line of fire.
'There goes another,' they think, 'and it wasn't me.
Well done, corporal!' To one another they say
'Poor old Maurice, it was time, he was losing it.'
That's what they fear, not death, but that life might become
one very long senior moment.

When they do weep
it's for themselves – not grief or remorse
but regret for the thing not dared,
the challenge not taken up, the word of love not spoken.

The old are not noble or deserving of special regard –
just realists, mercenaries, soldiers of fortune, survivors.

The Death of Odysseus

Abandoned by Fame and Popularity
in his last days he took to singing in bed

things learned at school, ballads and songs of his youth.
The voice was ragged – age and the smoke of caves

had done the damage. Still his head could hold
a tune, and the words, and knew the middle of the note.

Penelope dead, their children long since scattered,
he was shunned by a world that would sooner call him

cunning and vicious than clever and victorious.
So from a timber palace high on a hill

villagers heard the hero singing his heart out,
faltering on high notes, whistling like wind in the rigging –

until he remembered, at last, the song of the Sirens,
and stopped to listen, and fell silent for ever.

The New Husband

A long-time friend who married
the beautiful blonde widow
of a soldier killed in the War

tells in a poem how, naked
after sex, drifting asleep
they heard a knock at the door.

The poem does not explain
why he refused to answer,
just told her it was the wind

and curled around her in fear
pretending to go to sleep.
Did he think they were haunted –

that it might be the soldier
hell-bent on taking her back
or killing the new husband?

‘Who knocked?’ my friend’s poem asks
and answers, ‘I do not know,
and do not want to know.’

They’re all dead now – the poet,
the blonde wife who was also
a poet, and her soldier.

That ghost had need of them both
to apprehend and fear him.
Only the poem remains.

Curno

The name on the box on Lone Kauri Road
has a letter missing
standing perhaps for ‘without’ –
without the one who has gone on a very long journey.

Under nikau and karaka in the half light
or among manuka and kauri

Piwaiwaka flits and taunts.

The poet was her friend but when the time came
she brought her unwelcome message.

The stream had its say but only in opal and silver.

He was master and mentor, the hard mind,
the cool old man who wouldn’t say his prayers
or pay his dues; the long memory, the cleverest wit,
the abominable temper, the diplomat.

Today the beach has turned itself around,
a flat sand plain all the way out
to Paratahi rock. The lagoon is gone.

Sky-high improbable clouds
float like fleeces,

and from the rocks the ghost of a poet fishes
for metaphor and cod.

A big surf
slams its door, and opens it,
and slams it again.

