

JOHN
DICKSON

MISTER HAMILTON



*For many years I lived in Southland.
In fact, I am from Southland.
Some people say my speech is slow
I say it's deliberate, just.
And my soul runs dark
like Southland's slow intestinal rivers
laden with manuka dust.
And my detachment from anything plain.*

Poet John Dickson's first collection for eighteen years, *Mister Hamilton* is an appealing, questioning mix of elements. Over a base of South Island bedrock (granite, schist, greywacke), Dickson has peopled this quietly fiery collection with day-to-day working voices, shifts and narratives (sometimes comic, sometimes tragic) charged with a political consciousness and lyrical intensity.

Shot-through with a vein of jazz, rock and blues, a quizzical religiosity, a streak of the absurd: this book takes a fresh look at the streets and lawns and people of urban and suburban 'Pig Island' and from that space offers some careful, wisely pitched and immensely likeable poems.

And who is Mister Hamilton? A familiar everyman, a voice of authority, a common presence, an old friend – readers may make up their own minds after spending time in the company of Dickson and his book.

Descended from a mix of Irish, Scots and English ancestors, John Dickson was born in 1944 at Milton, South Otago. He attended Southland Boys' High School and the University of Otago. John worked at The Bill Robertson Library in Dunedin for many years, and was Burns Fellow at the University of Otago in 1988. He is the author of the poetry collections *what happened on the way to Oamaru* (1986) and *sleeper* (Auckland University Press, 1998), as well as an audio CD *Plain Song* (2009). In 2000, John Dickson was the Writer-in-Residence at the University of Waikato. Since 2007, he has worked as a kitchen hand and as an undertaker.

The reader of hands

The sign tells me: All The Way From Memphis
THE GREAT MADAME CUSACK
Fortunes Told, Palms Divined.

Madame Cusack is somebody's aunt,
but when she smiles, her eyes suggest
don't you ever steal my gestures, otherwise, you lose.

Her confident hands take my cash and
then my right hand gently turning it this way and
that before she finds her line.

Plainsong

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Some people say my speech is slow
I say it's deliberate, just.
And my soul runs dark
like Southland's slow intestinal rivers
laden with manuka dust.
And my detachment from anything plain.

The yearning for love (even now)
I put down to watching the Southern Lights on still freezing nights
my heart abandoned only to itself
like a song heard outside a dance hall.
And this habit of accepting things
until too late.

I have mementoes
signed certificates proving attendance:
my father's waistcoat when he tended the farm
washed utterly of sweat and the warm smell of cattle
and the score of Beethoven's *Appassionata*
that belonged to my mother once.
And look here, this Box Brownie photo
my parents, I think.

I used to have place, somewhere called home.
Today, I write
my office facing a concrete wall.
Southland's now nothing but a thinning of words.
Yet how it smoulders still
burning in my soul like swamp fire.

Spinster

The woman stands by the window
and gazes at the setting sun.
The red clouds to the west are pain.
Three days before
her mother left her body behind
and went somewhere else.

As the sunset becomes night
the woman hears the mute sounds of the house
the plates, the saucers, the cups
the picture of Jesus pointing to his red open heart
and the photographs of her nieces
in their confirmation dresses.

The woman turns back to the house
and her eyes turning inwards see death
the life she breathes and longs for
but beyond her grasp
like the crack in the cup she holds.
'Who will speak for me now?'

The sound of her voice echoes in the silent house
amongst the plates, the photos, the cups
amongst the furniture and the brooms
and the picture of Jesus with halo and thorns.
For the first time in her life
her heart has nowhere to hide.

Two small girls visit ChristChurch Cathedral

Can I help you?
the Canon asks.

Yes, says Cueba.
Is this God's House?

Yes, my dear.
This is God's House.

Well I don't see him.
Well my dear,

God is everywhere.
I still can't see him.

And then young Mila
pipes up: God's a

woman wearing this
big red apron.

Grace Jones

Taken from a New Musical Express interview

1

A classic performer, she sits on a window ledge
thirty-nine floors above the street.

She lets her legs drift back and forth, a girl on
a playground swing, scuffling her feet in dirt.

2

Every so often, she honks up mucus through
her nasal passage and swallows it down: 'Oh, I'm sorry,
that's so-o-o disgusting'. Through the window,
skyscrapers shimmer in blue pollution haze.

3

Recently, she missed buying an exclusive plastic jacket
implanted with Japanese seafood.

And her weight? Her weight must go up!

She swigs some beer, nibbles a tongue sandwich.

4

'Oh yeah. Sure. Oh shit, otherwise it's boring, no?

I don't want to sing sweet things,

though I don't mind sweetness so long as

it has [some] little sour meaning underneath'.

A short history of rock and roll in Southland

1

Two strainer posts and two waratah
joined in line by six strands of number-eight wire
through which we talk

2

Number five perfume is Hollywood
is the name of the oldest strainer post
its budget underwritten by a heart without knots

3

While the name of the second strainer was Jimmy
he was Salvation Army and loved the wind
as it howled over the Cadillac's bonnet

4

And the youngest one was big spender
it's tanalised now
still dreaming of being a post like Hollywood

5

One hundred and forty dozen pairs
of women's high heeled shoes
and those nylons
and those panties
even the sheep look good

6

But not as good as the pink Cadillac as it drives us fast
on the long unbending straights to Mataura
and changing gear
it waves at the girls of Edendale

7

And when we arrived at Invercargill's big tent
Mister Billy told us
to be grateful and to not split bets

8

But the horses running in circles
weren't as good as sheep in the yard

9

And in the cosy pink Cadillac, we never did split bets
we just licked her out
taking turns to drive home

10

And at one hundred and twenty-five miles an hour
it felt so good
Billy
it was like number five perfume accelerating Hollywood
like a poet discovering how one gumboot works
like a strainer post forgetting five strands of wire

11

Talk about turnips

12

Us waratahs were never the same

13

Here we are now Sunnyside up

waiting in a piecart for three nuns on a raft

the four of us thinking of more flocks of chicken

the four of us with no particular place to go

except on the next big pink Cadillac rev

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