

C. K. STEAD

THAT
DERRIDA

WHOM I
DERIDED

DEIC

POEMS 2013–2017

All his life he'd measured
the worth of a work
by its cost in effort.

Only at the last came this
‘certainty of execution’
costing
him next-to-nothing,
receiving his all.

In his eighty-sixth year, C. K. Stead's new collection leads us deep inside the life of the poet. He looks back at his younger self, remembering old loves and cringing at his 'lugubrious rhyming'. He writes most often of those who have gone (Jacques Derrida and Allen Curnow, Peter Porter and Sarah Broom, Colin McCahon and Maurice Shadbolt, Lauris Edmond and Ted Hughes) but also of those still with us (Kevin Ireland and Fleur Adcock, Alan Roddick and Bill Manhire, Michael Frayn and Paula Rego, his family, himself caught naked in the mirror – and dancing). He takes us with him on the poetical life: from Dogshit Park in Budapest to a Zagreb bookshop to the Christchurch Word Festival. The collection includes a series of poems written while the author was poet laureate, including a sequence on World War I in which 'the Ministry' requests poems from our reluctant and sometimes defiant laureate, who responds in the salty voice of Catullus that he has made his own so often before.

C. K. Stead is a distinguished, award-winning novelist, literary critic, poet, essayist and emeritus professor of English at the University of Auckland. He was the New Zealand Poet Laureate from 2015–2017, has won the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction, and is a Member of the Order of New Zealand, the highest honour possible in New Zealand.

The moon

(for Diane)

Six decades after I wrote them an old friend
sends back love poems and a letter. 'Beautiful'
she calls them, but the letter makes her lament

the grief she gave. The critic in me cringes
at my sonnets' lugubrious rhyming and
a plangent prose that owes too much to *Gatsby*.

Do I remember the writing? Faintly, yes
but as we recall the dead, or a landscape
of gold and shadows under a lambent moon.

There's a smiling snap-shot too, a smouldering
twenty-year self fond of ballroom dancing
and tennis. In the letter are dark streets

wet with rain, and I'm carrying flowers,
head full of her loving words just whispered
over the 'phone. But at her gate I see

she's with her new suitor, the golfing lawyer
she will one day marry. I retreat, wounded,
noticing now the moon more silver than gold.

Are these relics to be kept? Two aged friends
once long ago in love debate by e-mail,
and in the moon's absence, 'Your archive or mine?'

That Derrida whom I derided died

'We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it.' Jacques Derrida

Derrida, enemy of plain sense, my enemy too
determined not to be grasped since understanding

was first step on the road to control – how I disliked you
in the years when your flame swept through the Anglophone world

and had it speaking in tongues. Algeria you loved but lived
in abstract France and the beds of its beautiful women

never coming down in favour of this or that because
commitment, too, was a weapon in enemy hands.

America, whom you taught 'Outside the text there's nothing'
loved you, took you to its hot, hard heart. I see you glance

back over your shoulder, handsome face, white hair, keen smile
of the intellect loyal to nothing but itself.

Critical parricide, fastest brain out of the blocks, how
much better you knew your Rousseau than he knew himself!

I see you on the Paris doorstep of Sylviane who bore
your child and whom, unasked, you are visiting in a dream.

You are a ghost now truly, but the ghost of Derrida –
a voice in the halls, a word on the page, *deconstructing!*

Witchy Wellington

A summer southerly
sky grey
the sea a beat-up
and passing Grass Street
I thought 'Intolerable Lauris' –
not so much, or not just, the person
but the name,
the way those words seemed to belong together –
good company, great fun, wordy and witty
but when backs were to the wall and guns blazing
truth was a stranger.

I'd come down from Auckland
in a lassitude of reluctance
but now here it was again
that same old
pricking of the thumbs.

My contemporaries across the Ditch

Drunken Dad holds forth to fearful Mum while little Bruce, not looking, buries his nose in a comic about flying heroes – until Beaver senior, offended by indifference snatches it and hurls it out the window. Little Bruce flies after it, father follows, they land together on the dunny roof and roll to the lawn. That was Manly in the 1930s.

And across the Continent young Randolph Stow, allowed to ride with the drovers, lies in shade after lunch, dozing and dreaming, watching gum leaves quiver in a light breeze, and sleeps. Waking he finds a committee of emus looking down at him, like a conference of doctors confirming the patient is breathing. The boy laughs and they scatter.

Camberwell 1940 little Barry Humphries stares from the top of his scarlet ladder at a wooden iron-roofed house – kids with dirty faces and bloody knees stare back from a yard of chooks and mangy dogs at the rich kid from the next-door brick-and-tile with sprinklered garden. Barry would like to entertain them. Tries to think of a surprising joke.

And then there was Les Murray motherless in the unlined house on the Coolongolook where words could be made to make bark bandages hanging off grey-brown limbs, or a mare's blood-shot stare as she side-stepped, skin flexing off flies in the heat of his vernacular Republic. The Church would be mother – or it would offer him One.

Peter the rock, Porter the carrier, was motherless too, and would turn his back on Brisbane, saying 'To Hell with anyone's vernacular' – a quiet man whose turbulent under-life surged but never broke the surface, and whose ear for music, eye for colour and line, would tell him we were European still, for good and ill – all, and unarguably so.

Last not least the ghost of Ern Malley looks out from the Nolan portrait, who 'prepared quietly for his death' in that single room cared for by his sister Ethel, leaving behind a life's work, *The Darkening Ecliptic*, that would kill and give life to two pedestrian pens, writing 'I am still / The Black swan of trespass on alien waters.'

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