

Appendix to

Allen Curnow
Collected Poems

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Introduction



This online Appendix collects the first versions of three early collections, *Valley of Decision*, *Enemies* and *Not in Narrow Seas*; the last of these originally appeared in the journal *Tomorrow* in 1937–38. Other uncollected poems from the journals *Kiwi*, *Phoenix*, *Canterbury College Review*, *Tomorrow*, *Book*, *New Zealand New Writing* and later *Cornish Review* also appear. In the years 1934–1938 individual poems, especially in *Tomorrow*, were sometimes signed with the penname Julian. The poems reproduced from that period are thus identified as being either by ‘Julian’ or by ‘Allen Curnow’. The full text of a long verse letter to fellow poet, publisher and dear friend Denis Glover, absent in wartime, is of interest as only part of it, called ‘Spring in Wartime’, appeared in *Sailing or Drowning*. There are also two celebrated satirical broadsheets, of 1957 and 1958, attacking the Auckland City Council in a row about the relocation of the University. The final poem in the online Appendix is part of a commissioned chapter on Curnow’s schooldays at Christchurch Boys’ High School.

VALLEY OF DECISION, 1933

SEA CHANGES

Strange times have taken hold on me,
strange seas have locked across my eyes
thick in the twilight undersea:
from the great deep I made these cries.

Out of the glimmer of green waters
the ringing deafness of dark seas,
such dim-begotten sons and daughters
of love and cold-flesh death are these:

Uncertain are they hunting on
and all their faith's inconstancy;
they are who touch and straight are gone
yet have no other where to be.

RENUNCIATION

Darken, eyes, toward the day,
look well on neither flower nor tree:
I have given a springing world away
for worlds which I believe to be.

The motion of this ill belief
I cannot speak, lest every word
whine to a soft attenuate grief
and every flower burn out a sword

edged as electric flame to cut
the soul's taut artery in two:
eyes, darken; whining mouth, be shut
till I have cleaner work for you.

ET RESURREXIT

Servants of God,
how do you stand
to their witness,
eye, ear and hand?

Eternal heaven
as the eyes see,
is endless winged
monotony:

as the ears hear
the living song,
it has clear birth
nor endures long:

all the hands know
for certain friend
is sweet first touch
and thankful end.

How sort you His
eternity
with this, life's in-
most certainty?

*This way we teach it
sons of men:
on the third day
He rose again.*

VENTURE

He had begun to look within
and midnight high the walls shot up
and God was a full morning-flame
the hour when the winds begin:

and now he was a timeless king,
now dust of all kings ever rode
against high walls and dropped their dead
and knew they were not anything:

now rounding eye on eye he saw
the cunning workman on the walls,
the flinging fabric of the flame
was God within as God before.

“Be damned these aching walls” he said,
“be sunk these fires to natural hell:
there was some peace in going blind,
my pricking eyes have killed it dead.”

So he went by and looked without
to find the old and equal sight
but there was fog and a few stones,
the crazed wind played the dust about;

and a strange face he knew was cold
(so white) said to him with half lips:
“now you have come to look within
nothing is here that is not old . . .”

He saw the deep flight of the wall
and heart of God the morning-flame
and he is king, and dust of kings,
triumph, and agony of fall.

VALLEY OF DECISION

Come to the cliff and look you over
and tell the years of falling hence:
come to the cliff, man, and discover
truth out of blear experience.

Here is the emptying out of time,
high mark of the eternal tide;
here all your lovely hours must climb
and fall, and falling still abide:

this hour you shaped for gracious sight,
see how it huddles down away;
that harlot hour you veiled with night
clings fast and shames your handsome day:

hour upon hour heap up your days;
designs, desires and proper thought
fall impotent on vacant ways
where sense snaps off and runs distraught.

Regard the chasm that takes the life,
breaks wide and scatters over space
substance and shape: take noose and knife
and look the last end in the face:

regard: death gathers home your days
while dust steams idly from the pit –
now, will you give to death the praise,
bow down and break because of it?

Nay, watch the faint years falling hence;
cast loose the cloudy hours; disown
the days whose poor impertinence
is duly on the dark ways blown:

be naked in the highest place
whence the fouled wave has fall'n away:
you have that strong eternal grace
which serves no time nor mark of day . . .

*Come to the cliff and look you over
and tell the years of falling hence:
come to the cliff, man, and discover
truth out of blear experience.*

AT THE BRINK

When I have seen a perfect flower
or stood a little by the sea
my love on beauty there begets
the pain of clouded sight in me;

for perfect things must needs be dead
or live alone in perfect praise,
and one bright day is but the seal
of countless deaths of countless days.

There comes no quiet to my heart
from all things lovely, seen and heard;
calm eyes, sweet music, tell me still:
Keats died, and the Immortal Bird.

The poet and the nightingale
sing yet, two voices in one song;
but matched against eternity
their music will not echo long . . .

Unless there be a Light beyond,
the common sun of lovely things,
beauty's a creature of the mind:
no nightingale, but poet, sings . . .

Beauty walks on the edge of life,
the farthest sentinel of sense,
hard hope of an enduring light
in an eternal transience.

MATINS

Pray God and quiet take
for this day's part
of His desiring, make
greater thy heart

to brim the joy and shame
the hours repeat
as Light in pity's name
kneels at thy feet

and sues thee, offering
quick love before thee:
birds at thy rising sing:
angels adore thee.

He gives thee suns to burn:
beauty for beauty
give then, thy best return
candles for duty.

HIS DECEIT

And so the world makes you unquiet too,
so cold upon your pride of being man:
you too have thought how there is nothing new
under the sun, since under-sun began;

so you lean hard upon your hands in prayer,
your grace of life, your fleshhood all denied
saying "Lord, indeed for these I have no care"
God in His beauty curse you for your pride.

FOUR WALLS

The street's a fixed stare on the pointless night
black focus of the nearest dark, direct
sharp style of limits whose shrewd architect
shaped in the circular flux of mortal sight

a walled city against the infinite ways
where spirits mount nor ever make an end
of star on star, high towers to defend
our finished hours and finely rounded days:

these are brave walls about our narrow peace,
between them measured seconds rule our feet;
the swinging littleness we pace nor cease
to labour comfort from our spare deceit:

yet star on star the motion of ascent
shadows across the difficult content.

BEHOLD NOW BEHEMOTH

See the wide-footed, pendant-bellied beast
called Behemoth, burst loose the river weeds
in cloudy mud-mist down the stream; he feeds
grunting, suck-sucking Jordan with his feast
of grass; slow swings his low eyes to the east,
blinks as the sun strikes, turns away; he needs
no such clean light, shafting the trodden reeds;
logs it in water-holes till day has ceased.

Drowse and be comfortable; lie, Behemoth
under the cross-stick shadow, trembling veil
heat-vibrant, quick in the slant-broken stems.
So has He made you; bone and sinew both
of iron, that His image man may quail
at sight of you, and clutch His garment's hems.

THE SPIRIT SHALL RETURN

Often the things I see are tired,
the sounds I hear lag halting back;
I lump the world along with me,
a murdered body in a sack

that with a sudden weight of death
huddles my arms against my throat;
the silence runs upon my soul,
the dust has fingers on my coat.

The rising dust that pulls me down
knows well I walk the road alone
tearing the night in front of me,
entombed, and straining at the stone:

nothing will rise and go with me,
companion of my journeying:
all things are weary of the road –
I leave them to their wantoning.

Stars that lit jacob's ladder once
drop out of heaven to the dust
or heaven itself is broken there
and yields its gold to moth and rust;

while I endure for ever on
though heaven is eaten, and the night
has emptied on the sea of glass
and thrown to death the Light of Light:

this is the only narrow way
out of the fever-smell of death,
so I may know for truth I live . . .
dust unto dust, the preacher saith.

THE AGONY

Stammering wind this night
its hesitant breath
utters gustily
and the rain,
the rain is urged unwilling against the windows:
there again, there
someone alone without, sighed
the scrabbling sigh of harsh unpartner'd pain . . .
Dark it is, and dark within my heart
and still the sighing, and the rain
dropping . . . dropping . . .
The bloody sweat down-dropping,
O God,
poor, poor God,
strange God to ask man's pity.

PRAYER

Press the hands closer, now that all is stilled
and you can hear your urgent heart
pumping out life;

try now to think that you are near to God,
a naked soul fall'n at His feet,
none standing by;

remember what you are, or might have been –
tear out your guts of vanity;
then rise to look

at the white ardent purity above you
and consider well forgiveness –
my God, it's hard!

SCREENED

He dressed his love in a fine dress
praising its swing and suppleness:

they laughed to see the boy at play
and said, he had a pretty way;

and he dipped to a dainty kiss,
said, this my love, my love is this:

content they were to see the slow
meet of the flesh so lightly go –

good and his evil went their round
and shoulder-looking knowledge frowned.

HOST OF THE AIR

Out of the living pit
deep under the moon
beat to the fiend's tune
round the tall black-lit
scarp of the moon flame,
they whom God gave no name:

earth, water and fire
labour and breathe them out;
twist they a man with doubt
and a knife at his desire:
they are fear seeking rest,
they are pain without a breast.

Stand, now, ye who are known
by name to Christ our Lord
wearing His peace for sword:
arm ye, for one alone
walks with a wind of wings,
the hunt of nameless things.

ARCADY

Bones, be you silent
up streets and down,
end the cold clatter
through the bare town.

Winds are rising
out of high places:
turn to the hill-tops
you gutted faces:

listen, you bones,
for the dry singing:
where the heart was
thorn-twists are clinging:

lie back, bones,
bed you in dust:
winds cannot quicken
worm-eaten lust.

STATUS QUO

If these stuck clods were blasted wide
the rubble raked apart to give
the sun below, they'd spill their pride
and learn of worms the way to live.

THE SERPENT

The plague's about along the street,
in proud decay the dead go by
and, failing flesh on lagging feet,
move on the many marked to die:

there is no mourning day and night,
nor lovely tears nor living sorrow,
since death to-day strikes at the sight
and reaches to the heart to-morrow;

so no one sees the shrouded men
about their business through the day,
dividing to their dust again,
for whom there is no other way

for that the dust has nourished them
and thicken'd round their hasting feet –
thus earth does earth at last condemn
to earth's last pitiable defeat;

Christ take the whip of knotted cord,
flay out the money changing dead!
Christ send the labourer's reward,
the aching thirst on Dives' head!

*See where the healing serpent stands,
Christ lifted up – His felon's crown
crush on our heads, and set our hands
to turn the whole world upside down.*

APOCALYPTIC

Yet a star will speak
and the swift wheels which spatter
clean hours with idle dirt,
the wheels which whirl and hurt
will gasp off at the hub:
yet a star will speak.

The smoke of their burning
slides out of devils' speed,
incense of quick decay,
still the wheels whining pray
God burn us up, burn up . . .
The smoke of their burning.

O man, blood in your head
flies thick with the swing of the rim
round with you bound and broken
while the star has not spoken,
and eyes see sparkling madness
O man, blood in your head.

There is no loosing hands:
the hour is the power which moves,
the very pivot is space
in whose gift is no grace
for there is no tangent,
there is no loosing hands

till a star speak to a man
and two shall join to him
and pain shall die in burning
and the seized wheels cease turning:
guard we our strength to the day
till the star speak to a man.

POWER OF THE MANY

Against these eyes where is a man to hide?
cover him close to friend with the worm inside?
Cover him close by the intimate lips of the worm
where the bed is soft, for he hates anything firm.

The eyes have a hard way with a waking man
in their force – forcing sleep down the throat of him till he can
think kindly sweet of the mothering coil of the worm
where the bed is soft, for he hates anything firm.

Christ, fill his heart that he no more may doubt him
but stand untouchable flame with his cloud of faith about him
so the withered eyes recoil from the wakened man
who has been heartened of God so that he can

*straighten his way from the ravelling stoop of the worm
where the bed is soft, for he hates anything firm.*

THE PEOPLE PERISH

Lord, your talk and thought are vain,
voices in the wilderness
crying, God knows for what pain,
wild in God knows what distress.

Given: yourselves and things around,
piece of time's infinity.
How you waste your breath to sound
the trumpet of your vanity!

How you weigh eternal things,
space and substance, breath and time,
(crowned with dust, you petty kings)
making I and We sublime.

God, your God, is I and We,
your slight breath the living breath
you believe . . . O vanity
blown along from death to death.

You are grown too proud to live
in the beauty of the sun
and the sea has naught to give
you, who swell with riches won

out of the eternal things,
got by labour of the brain
(crowned with dust, O petty kings
how your talk and thought are vain!)

Tears shed now for We and I,
agony of throned pride,
no return of peace shall buy
in the day that you have died;

tears as these God shall not know,
these your cries He shall not hear;
deathly, quiet with quiet of snow
shall your after-world appear:

you who see eternal things
in the blindness of your eyes,
(crowned with dust, you petty kings)
dying, shall be no more wise.

RELIEF

They gave your hands a grubbing-tool
and you have learnt to use the thing:
you thought, a man's a bloody fool
who starves when work is offering.

And there's a stiffness in your eyes
that is not earth nor labour-pain;
your eyes give nothing to the dust
though foot and hand shake out the chain:

this iron marks you man, bound low
under a mad king's blind control,
who wills you change, you would or no,
his mass-compassion for a soul.

VISION OF REST

Bird, your wings have closed me
wide and warm so warm and wide,
dark, and ease nor pain to see
the singing breath wherein I hide:

garden place of violet peace,
winds of flower and flower again,
fall of gold and guard of fleece,
sweet smoke blue off a green plain.

Bird lie deep, O vol inert,
stem and sap so life and earth;
exile's is no little hurt
so I lay to you my birth.

ENEMIES: POEMS 1934-36, 1937

NEW ZEALAND CITY

Small city your streets hold no particular legends,
your brothels are inconspicuous as your churches,
your potentates think in thousands not millions
and the nations do not quote your newspapers.

London has spawned. Here are banks in the egg,
foetus Beaverbrooks, Edens and Baldwins,
toy art and labour, the importance of children
under an unstained sky.

Yet the cloud
curdles in the wind
pitted with blue
or the cloud
returns laden, still
laden after the rain

and many overcoats
are put on and put off
and a thousand pens scratch
at desks, like rats' teeth
busy in a wooden wall

and rubber squeals on the tar
when a man goes home
at evening which must follow
any toil's end.

This is the land of new hopes
joined with a thousand years' despair,
of children with senile faces.

The shadow of Europe falls
encompassing the east
and the wrinkled edge of empire
embraces these islands.

Old and crooked Asia
is an evil glance in the north.

And eastward is the white madhouse
where they breathe nervously
the air-conditioned air;
dollar by dollar is told
the good man's rosary.

Serf to them all
for pleasure or pain;
betrayed to the world's
garret and gutter,
bought at the export
price of butter.

RECALL TO EARTH

Together let us regain the earth's friendship.
The poplar spire topped by no cross
may be our temple tower, of delight in wind
and of roadside riches no loss.

Fear, iron-eyed chauffeur of ambition
drives daily to the gold-lettered door
a man of rapidly increasing income,
successful, admired, damn'd and a bore.

Monkey-chatter in the newest manner
offends your spirit, foolishness harries you.
Will you play bridge? – The talk cuts and flays;
dead handshake, rhetorical How d'you do.

We shall put up with it as long
as the spirit endures, till life gets to its feet –
excuse us, the wind is waiting and stars
wait up for us in another street.

CHIEF END

Drag a star down to the office table –
what sort of light is that to work by?
Rising wind will confuse important papers
not contributing to efficiency.

Get up at daybreak, seek bed at dusk?
So little time there would be for pleasure.
We shall save money and buy a car
and cultivate a right use of leisure.

FACTORY AT NIGHT

This light a burden, this light a whip, to eyes
wincing and not remembering soft glory
of wide-arm'd sun at morning, leaves warmed through
and green blood quickened.

Never can you
gratefully lose sense as day dies
nor follow meaning of the living story;

but a mock'd day dawns on the plaster,
strokes awry of an idiot's brush;
oil streams, steel slides faster
and hosting shadows rush
under the whipping lights, under again
the dry electrics in a net of pain.

COLONIAL OUTLOOK

Night, will not night identical draw down
merciful shutter on our unimportance
as (one imagines) mountainous dark does drown
organic millions in dreamy lewd pretence
of works relaxed by deathly creeds, in sleep?

So many thousand fewer paved miles
so many fewer turns of shuddering tyres
so many fewer strong, remote smiles
(with us) shield rout of refugee desires;
insignificant conflict, late begun,
and comic disaster – surely bitterness
and fear have here as central impetus?

Our beds empty, streets a desert no less
than in the other province of the sun:
yet we remain, dog-at-heel, obsequious.

A WOMAN IN MIND

[WRITTEN AT VARIOUS TIMES]

I

I have lit a single lamp
and laid my fire beneath
for cold faint-sun days
of frost and cloudy breath.

Her eyes my early lamp
in this winter of the heart;
her body, limbs burning,
holds bitterness apart.

Shadows prank my walls;
ere my light and my fire die
outside, rain is flying:
ere my light and my fire die
I too shall be dying.

2

Your face between my hands
and your eyes open to me,
it is as if I stood
beside a great sea;
for nothing is so still
or of such lovely pride
or such deep motion, as
the flesh I stand beside.

3

My hands worship
you with suppliant touch
in whatever part seeking
to know you bodily.

Nothing is with-held
from us in our free
city of love, we conceal
not from any sense.

To shrink from flesh
is to offend the spirit –
who can divide them
one from the other?

Now you receive
hand at breast and thigh
I suppliant; but soon
equal communion.

4

As the green music compassing
all earth that listens in the spring
so is the vision when your nearness
shakes taut and void to broken clearness
and music, music cries to be
about the way you walk to me.

5

Who am I
that I should own
so fair a field
and meet, for yield?

That in this earth's
deep, sweet warmth
my seed should stir
(the sun loves her)

drinking bright rain
in womb of tenderness,
God's gate, the same
Mary without blame?

Since it is mine
this earth, her flesh,
bears that which I
wanting, should die.

6

By pain outspoken
a precious thing is broken,
peace destroyed by pain
no words can bring again.

May sun never bless me
and loud winds oppress me
if from me is heard
a destructive word.

Shut my mouth upon your breast;
now I have confessed,
on my lips may move
breath only of love.

7

In the time of your conceiving
which shall be in spring
we shall laugh with flowers, together
in all our blossoming.

A rose shall ask your lips
close, as never before
when summer has deepened
and life is at the door.

Autumn shall bring us then
leaves' grace in falling,
wind-lightened, lost suns
without pain recalling.

Winter, not an enemy
to earth's true lover,
but womb of new sowing,
shall cover us over.

MOUNTAIN RHAPSODY

[A SYMBOLIC ELEGY]

I

Immaculate wing unfolding slowly enfolding
white light, sun wakening the great bird roosted
on the broken edges of a thousand feet.
Portent of flight till mountain dawn withholding.

Nightlong dreamless motionless among intermittent
huge migrations of wind, loud hosts in passing
leaving louder silences, bird upon the cliff
feels morning in each cell, light palpitant.

Morning has no audible herald at this height:
all is translated, song into flight;
trumpet note into arrogance of light
bannered fiercely through the passes,
as striking fire from new-split gem
leaping at haggard eastward masses
cracking gold from the heart of them.

2

Voiceless but the only articulate
motion on earth's frozen lip,
beautiful for invisible mate
the wing trembles to the tip;

If dumb space did not intervene
drowning familiarities,
could be heard lightly the dark lean
claws finding grip to rise.

Ascending cry across the blue.
Upward the wing'd glory breaks
and suddenly morning is in view
which is not till the creature wakes.

3

The eye is now withdrawn, extreme reach of self
and extreme sacrifice, in rhythmic reasonless flying;
nothing heard or seen, everything heard and seen,
that topmost life realised once in dying.

Life has crept above the broken edges, has leapt
assured into remote clasp of snow and sun
which after all live but by living blood, waiting
on the reviving wing for their day begun.

4

Smears of a dark hand,
piecemeal evening
swarms from lower land
to the breach hastening,
shuddering wings

forget high-noon fire,
on low crag at rest
searching no higher.

Sapphire clouded
white garment torn
young flesh shrouded
bright hair shorn.

Slowly
enfolding light
only articulate
nightlong
dreamless.

Death is most in mind
in this mountain evening without wind.

ENEMIES

Detestable gutter child, if you knew
how we hate you, I and my kind,
you would scramble bawling with terror
to that refuge behind
the sodden stinking privy at the back
of the two rooms stuck by the railway track.

QUASI-SLUM

Walking in the garden of our Father
I find evil places; it is rather
as if honouring death we
had planted here Gethsemane.

Though Christ came from God, he
taught us the love of death and agony.

The garden wall is iron, its soil
is dust choking those who toil;
boards rot in the shadow, some few
are aware of a heart rotting too.

Christ loved mankind it is true,
but said 'the poor you have always with you.'

Almsgiving knows not pity;
charity collected in the city
is self-defence of deep hate
bribing the enemy from the gate.

As Christ taught we feed our enemies
fearing the unblunted enmities.

Between the factory and
the filthy house I stand
a moment, seeing a woman sitting
glancing at me over her knitting;

better forget sixpenny charity
when the poor carry their hate honestly.

We have agents behind the lines,
expounders of truth, seers of signs,
preaching that the starving should not covet
good things, bringing Moses' law to prove it:

yet Moses' case is scarcely comparable
with these who have no manna for the table.

Walking in the garden one sees
so many of our enemies,
hearts fix'd strength undecay'd,
that I wonder we are not afraid:

but we are safe until the day
our weapons show obvious decay.

REMAINDER

I go home with my wife
and we talk about you
who go home with your wives,
possibly mentioning us.
(Our modesty if nothing else
translatable into verse.)

We all went into the sea
muddy soup stirred not
only by feet but wind
also, long ladle of ocean.

Up again Aphrodite
neat in wool and rubber;
lumps out of the soup,
shake off the drips.

Such is our contact;
faith our mainstay, you
possibly mentioning us.

DAILY BREAD

[FRAGMENT]

With sense sewn tight with thread of sin
to us no vision enters in,
no thunder of uprearing light,
broad havoc wrought upon the night:

click, slide and turn – bed, desk and meal –
trussed on the world eccentric wheel;
clock-pattern'd pulse, time-beaten breath
that draw the soul and spin the death . . .

ORBIT

With so great wonder, at times fear,
I hear and see the distraught people
in twitching panic tread the collapsed hours
(time's rhythm wrench'd, rush'd with pale speed,
time in time machine-maddened): I must keep
heart's beat by you who follow the sun
whose blood keeps time of the sun the governor;
spite of chaos' steam and steel writhing
heart learns of you right motion,
season's swing, curve of rejoicing comet,
remote, holy obedience of the stars.

THE LEAVES DEAD

Drained flesh and hardened
by winter wind and water
leaves fill, with poison
part of their own nature;

blown from safe mooring
above heavy water
up heaven's wind-tunnel,
leaves fill the chamber
of sight, with death-yellow
spume lightly hardened.

Mud, leaf-rot and water
mix under a tree,
dissolution found in them
part of their own nature.

PAID WELL

No more burns the fire within the word.
Use stiffens the rhythm, effaces the soft image
which came and went like flame.

Great waters
are come upon the world, all cold
untroubled by birth and death alike.

First Versions of
NOT IN NARROW SEAS
FROM *Tomorrow*, 1937–38

RATS IN THE BILGE

(Unfinished)

PRELUDE

The water is burred with rain;
against iron men scrape, squatting
on the slung plank, setting
knee and toe to the ship's flank;

rust and dust and the keen
wind strapping the ankle;
chips from the chisels sprinkle
down to the blue mud.

There are five wharves.
Today the port is quite full.
They will load mutton and wool
as soon as the rain stops.

The Minister believes
the price is sufficient to cover
labour costs and something over
for a radio, perhaps a car.

(i)

Eighty years since salted sails
dropped among these hills
and the iron water closed on
the anchor's dry iron.

Bedding and tents and stores
littered the frontiers
of a country taken
to be stripped and broken.

Not leap of capture theirs,
but as who safely dares
seizing without sword
front garden and backyard.

(ii)

Strut on the beach loos'd sea-nerv'd limbs
and they praised God with bad hymns
quavering in a huge volcanic crack
with the iron water at their back.

Doubtless their liturgy had prayer
for stablishing truth and virtue there,
for the wind clipping the reverent scalps
howled the joke to the high alps:

“We shall not blacken this land O Lord,
Thou hast given us without sword;
our weapon and our lust lie at home
and in peace for peace we are come.”

(iii)

Escape in seeming from smoke and iron,
the hammered street and the hot wheels,
clanging conquest of the deep-rich hills;
left behind the known germ and poison
breeding and soaking in decrepit soils.

Jerusalem is built as a city
that is at unity in itself,
built with liturgy and adequate capital,
dwelling of the elect, the selected immigrants.

No bale of all the cargo marked poverty,
no consignment of oppression.
Who observed
the rat scaling the bow-lines and another
lodged in the forward hold? Who saw stirring
in the dark bilge the devil's pioneers?

* * * *

Allen Curnow

Tomorrow, 9 June 1937

THE POTTER'S FIELD

“... and the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, It is not lawful for us to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in...”

[To be read as continuation of 'Rats in The Bilge' which was given as a random title to verses in *Tomorrow*, Vol. 3 No. 16.]

(iv)

Iron, first introduced to these islands when ships dropped anchor off shore, soon becomes more firmly established. It must be noticed that the traditional courage and enterprise of "pioneers" become, in social terms, merely the furious sorties of man confronted with the unknown. Frustration drives man to seek a new country; but the savagery of the new country threatens an even more terrible frustration; so that fear swallows creative effort, and the only desire is to conserve and extend the illusion of life in the old world. So the cycle is completed in time and the old frustration is perpetuated.

Blood in the climbing limb,
no fear checking the pulse,
pulls mountains down flat,
erects cathedrals:

the superior race, Lo
the pass in a twinkling
yields the advancing column
a top-gear incline.

Green grows the bungalow
at the courageous heels,
valour makes home for fear
under hesitant sails:

a beginning a beginning
a fresh start in life,
with a blue-new shovel
and a rusted belief:

iron for axe and hammer
iron for rod and nail,
iron for the door-knocker
like the head of a bull;

where the first anchor's cable
slackened into sleep
iron threads rock for prison
bars on the harbour slope.

(v)

The Church is quick to follow the imperial lead. Shrewdly, she acquires property. Ownership is thus sanctified. The Gospel, it might be imagined, might find realisation in the building of a new nation; but the Church is chiefly concerned with re-establishing an order in which she has learnt to flourish. Any departure from that order is disquieting to her. Religion, she is aware, thrives among the poor in spirit and in body.

The Bishop boundary-rides his diocese
carrying the Sacraments at saddle-bow;
the Church Equestrian christens peak and river
where land is cheap and the reapers are few.

Years after where his lordship braved the ford
less hardy saints cross bridges in a gig:
good rents assure their stipends, not even
Judas so providently kept the bag.

A faith worthy of empire: ere the four
earliest migrant vessels put to sea
the wise Company granted God permission
to work His passage to the colony.

Guaranteed seed in a prepared soil –
what land would not bring the approv'd return?
Here's no renewal of the world's youth
but age-soured infancy, a darkened dawn.

(vi)

*The pleasant work of exploring and building proceeds, making the
country fit for civilised people to live in.*

Woman who wakes beneath casewood and canvas
salutes sunrise excellently painted,
warm familiar among unfamiliar
to which heart unwilling consented:

waking next morning moving curtain, she
sees front plot fenc'd, path in place,
the cloud, the mountain-terror tamed now,
framed to taste for parlour chimney-piece.

Not lessened the offensive against fear,
eye cracking distance, foot on ford and steep;
each to his tool his trade and his journey,
restoring reason, the known scene and shape.

(vii)

For the young child a different destiny is expected. His surroundings are clean, hardly broken country. For that reason it is supposed that he has a rich, unassessed heritage. In fact, his heritage is already bought and sold at market price. If there is any gain, it is not here. Ownership and trade have established the old evil, which is even more powerful where there are fewer traditional "escapes" from economic necessity.

Child of the stolen country
tumbling on the raw clay,
by the fence of green wood
given to play

with terrible idle earth,
mountains, and two seas
opposing with patience
endless enmities –

child, old evil sprouts
along the new track
from home's front door to
privy at the back,
and where scrub is cleared
round the neighbours' shack.

Not your destiny nor
this land's your shaping:
the sowing yours
another's the reaping;

the seed itself tainted
in the excited soil,
yellow the trampled ford
where the floods boil.

Cancel the vision, and
wipe prayer from lip:
God comes not to market
nor saints by ship.

(viii)

In a brief dialogue, the Elder explains to the Novice the meaning of Empire. God and the Flag are one, national pride being the solution of all opposites. Only the wind remains to remind the patriot of the fight fought in the past. The Novice, dutifully convinced by propaganda, is still somewhat corrupted by the wind. The wind, it will be observed, has the last word.

ELDER:

Haul the flag to the top of the mast,
let it break there proclaiming brightly
the imperial message, for this is the day
for remembering the Nation our Creator:
honour the Motherland as privilege and duty.

NOVICE:

See how the racing gusts out of the mountain
snatch at the flag as if they hated it.

ELDER:

Do not speak of hatred of the flag:
It has God's cross, see, in the white and red.

NOVICE:

It is a sinful wind that does not love
the flag that bears God's cross.
Eighty years ago this flag was brought
to struggle upon the pole today
over a million heads, microcosm
of the Nation which colonised these islands;
a greatness not to be straitened,
not by wind and ocean beaten off.

ELDER:

That is the lesson for today.

Come now

and see the convenient state prepared for you
from the field the mountain and the shingly river;
walk by the sundial in the front garden,
the double garage the gravelled backyard . . .

THE WIND:

The flag rides rattling at the hoist
at prison and at madhouse door;
I swelled their sails and what's the end?
The poor insane and the insane poor.

(ix)

This new country is nothing more than a flattery by imitation of the older world. Being a flattery, it tends to imitate in the grosser respects only. The street scene, the cheap entertainment, are all faithfully reproduced. The virtues whose death is celebrated everywhere under buildings of iron and concrete, are not apparent. There is reproduction, never resurrection.

Reproduction, reproduction
of the curved the angled the tangible
street measurable block by block:
never resurrection
of the entombed pity, only discernible
vanity of the practised trick.

Sensitive the film senselessly
unrolls the death-embracing images:
island and ocean a theatre
screening a weary self-flattery
where colour and where courage is
costumed secondhand for character.

(x)

Having matched itself against the rest of the world in a game at which the rest of the world is naturally superior, the infant nation suffers an increase of frustration. Therefore it necessarily assumes a proprietary pride in the natural phenomena of the country. These, as well as the fruits of the soil, must be sold, to enable the nation to continue living just a little beyond its means. Foreign films and motor-cars (without which life is obviously intolerable) must be paid for. Mountains and other pleasant

places must be, if necessary, blasted with tourist facilities, to satisfy the scenery-swallowing appetites of wealthy visitors. With such assets, the Government and the local authorities may borrow abroad to provide ever-growing facilities for civilised comfort – no other interpretation of civilisation is admitted.

Paradise O paradise of the South
come O come Emmanuel to save us
to dine on our high snows
the eternal iced cake O come
with adventurous traveller's cheques
in convenient denominations.

O fizzing geyser rise
that they no more despise
our wounds our isolation;
the jets and thunders
of thermal wonders
proclaim a nation.

O come fat purse and idle eye
there's a price on the noble head
of the immaculate peak. 12,000 feet
h. and c. water and steam heat.
God for universal exhibition
we are privileged to present.

Naked goes the land
under the sweating hand
of the lover of a night
while the procuress
has eyes on a dress
of innocent white.

You are on a holiday trip sir
and what do you think of our country?
O God tell me it's beautiful
(pity our littleness)
tell me our alps excel
Switzerland and the Rockies.

Interviewed by "The Blast"
M. Arturo classed
our mountain scenery
with Switzerland's best
was deeply impressed
is at present the guest
of Dean Bone at the Deanery.

Prosper our publicity O lord make fast
thy mercy of deep river and steep rock
O lord lift up our standard of living
stabilise the price of milk and honey
sell the stuff and give us the money.

The young athletes ran
nowhere at the Games
no sporting year-book
lists their names
overseas visitors
are nevertheless polite
they arrive in the morning
and leave at night.

Spirit O spirit of the first-comers under sail
where lost, you spirit?

Under a movie-theatre seat
later disposed of by the police at auction.
However there is ample pleasant distraction
many arts of frustration to emulate
at 3½ per cent on a borrowed smile.

Julian

Tomorrow, 4 August 1937

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Bring me an axe and spade
For this is insolent country
James Cook's pig-farm
Without rule or road.

Bring me a winding-sheet
For the brown singing people
Affront with death our triumph, an
Unangry death without fight.

When I my grave have made
I shall write to friends at Home
And with an English accent
How shall I be afraid?

Let winds and tempests beat
On 1000 bungalows,
To our suburban burial
Slouch followers on foot.

Down I'll lay
As cold as clay
Thank God true love
Does pass away,
The empire and the empty lands
The iron and the golden sands
Dredged and dumped
With the wheezing sea clay.

Allen Curnow

Tomorrow, 13 October 1937

PREDESTINATION

Where Van Gogh stuck his seed
Flat France twirled with pain:
To these Pacific boulders
There will come men

Put to such planting
After the rusted harrow
Mining among mountains
With their seed of sorrow:

The vertical ice, the dry
Shriek of the kea
A howl of misery like
The cornfields of Auvers.

Allen Curnow, July 3, 1938.

Tomorrow, 17 August 1938

A LOYAL SHOW

Jaunty hopes that play
Against the cynical scene:
New land New Zealand
Dancing before the Throne.

Now while the gilt is fresh
In our intimate theatre,
Listen and you shall hear
The old old gags recur:

Apprenticed to this stage
We thumb the greasy script:
Here we foreknow laughter
There we shall have wept.

Who tinkers with the lines?
There's no difference:
The old play that catches
Nobody's conscience.

Allen Curnow, July 2, 1938.

Tomorrow, 31 August 1938

MAGAZINES & JOURNALS, 1930S

Kiwi, 1931

FOR A YOUNG CITY

It is not very long ago
That here unburdened winds could blow
Sweet breath from off the misty sea . . .

Now busy men have laid this crust
Of grime upon the primal dust;
These paper palaces, whose strength
Will perish wearily at length;
Sweepings and scourings from the old
Worn nations whose poor days are told . . .

God! burn the dirty streets away
And give us beauty in our day

Allen Curnow

THE EYES UNSEEING

(Prize Serious Verse)

The sombre loveliness of evening
Lightened, as if the shadow of God's wing
Rimmed all the sky, burning and magical;

The day was very beautiful in death,
The last wind vanished as the day's last breath,
And all the sky was gold and magical.

Then nothing in that pathway of rich light
Seemed not a fair and long desired sight
Till all the sky grew pale. And magical

Pale clouds slept low above the earth bereft
Of light; the last lamp that the day had left
Dimmed – and the dark came, deep and magical . . .

I thought how men with souls, and eyes to see,
Had passed by, wondering what there was for tea.

Allen Curnow

“ . . . AND THE PAIN OF FINITE HEARTS . . . ”

I wished, like a child, for the moon
 Where it hung soft white in the sky
And following the sea-frothy clouds
 Like a busy and beautiful eye.
I wished, like a child, for the moon –
But my body was ready to die.

It was far, so far from me
 That it spoke of things past desire;
Though my child's heart was crying to be
 Close, close to its cool silver fire,
It was far, so far from me
 That my soul knew hope was a liar.

Allen Curnow

WHAT BETTER WISH?

There is loveliness that waits for me
In coming days;
Skies that might wake the songs in me
Now deeply sleeping –
Songs for men who have wondered, and spoken
In praise of beauty;

Sorrowing seas to speak to me
Of all old sadness
Whose plaint I might tell to the mournful men
Of silent grief;

Nights when I might know sweeter love,
Passion supernal
To make music for the true lovers,
True as their hearts;

Loneliness more near to soul's rest
Which men desire,
Whose story would be kind to them,
Giving them peace . . .

Life would be good in the singing thus
The oldest things,
So old – yet my end is to give them
To empty lives.

Allen Curnow

“TELL ME NOT IN MOURNFUL NUMBERS . . .”

Winter was upon the town,
And men's little wet souls
Moved earnestly
Before the window, up and down,
Eyes as high as tramway poles –
All they would see. . . .

Grey and raining the day long,
And clinging, uncomfortable water
On hands and face –
That is outside; but some belong
To a nicer world! They have sought a
Pleasanter place

Where are lights of their own making
And heat not of the sun –
And they are glad,
Warm and unworried; they are taking
Leisure and tea. . . .

When all is done
Life's not so bad.

Allen Curnow

IN THE DAY I HAD SEEN IN A WINDOW
A FIGURE OF THE PRAYING CHRIST

Stammering wind this night
Utters gustily
Its hesitant breath
And the rain,
The rain is urged unwilling against the windows:
There again, there

Someone alone without, sighed
The scrabbling sigh of harsh unpartner'd pain . . .
Dark it is, and dark within my heart
And still the sighing, and the rain
Dropping . . . dropping . . .
The bloody sweat down-dropping,
O God,
Poor, poor God,
Strange God to ask man's pity.

Allen Curnow

The Phoenix, 1932, 1933

EGOTISM
(AS THE HEBREW POETS WROTE)

I am higher than the cloud over the earth:
All the world is away below me.

If God lift His might above the cloud:
Then so much stronger am I.

My passage among the stars is unseen of Him:
My eyes have looked at the uttermost distances, and my
journey has been beyond His kingdoms.

The earth is God's and all therein:
But the earth does not contain the passion of my soul, for in
my strength I have destroyed the sea and the mountains.

There is no place for an Almighty in the sight of my soul:
Be merciful to me, my God, because you are mine; only my
shadow, cast by my waste desire.

It is indeed a dreadful thing to have power over God:
I have felt the weight of the worship I have taken to me.

The time has come when I am weary of this burden:
There is no way to be relieved of it.

For my heart is mourning in the vast temple of my soul, crying,
there is silence where I long for music:
And night and day my heart maddens me with weeping.

Yet I can make no music:
Since the passing of the mountains and the sea I have not
heard any.

The song of the wind in the mountains, and the choir of the
sea, are stilled:
There can be no music to comfort my heart.

All beauty went beneath my feet:
The flowers and green trees I blighted in the flame of my soul.

I tell you I am tired of my glory:
I want no more to see or hear, or understand.

O let me worship myself again, in the beauty of weariness:
For fear I go mad on my throne in the centre of nothing
without an edge.

It is my great fear that I may become a madman:
O my soul, I must give forth love, before everything else is
gone from me.

Allen Curnow

The Phoenix, vol.I, no.I, March 1932

CALM

Flower to delicate flower
And as the wind over the leaves
Wandered a long hour,
I leaned my heart
To your sweet-smelling heart;

While now the wind has fallen
Asleep and lies with the dropped petals . . .

In the calm time
One might pass this way
Never knowing
How the wind stirred so,
Shattered, and laid asleep.

Allen Curnow

The Phoenix, vol.1, no.1, March 1932

DRAWING-ROOM WINDOW

White blinds, and teeming Spring outside,
swelled breath of birth in the bare green:
see – I have blinds about to hide
love's business that is best half seen.

The swell of breath is best half driven,
new life best calmly got within
where nothing's all and hotly given:
but half a rapture, half a sin.

. . . But, Lord, what poor brood of our whoring
we send the Spring's ecstatic prayer:
the vital green, and blue winds pouring
will drown them in an unknown air:

They shall lie husked as I am lying
sick for the fount unloosed in me,
failing whose blessing I am dying
in close white-blinded sanctuary.

Allen Curnow

The Phoenix, vol.2, no.1, March 1933

Canterbury College Review, SEPTEMBER 1934

METAPHYSICS

O boy it was a thrill, she said,
I adore aeroplanes, she said:
the cosmos stood upon its head
at this incredible gyration
of the first lady of creation,
the apologetic Paraclete
was conscious of unwieldy feet
It fell at last to me to break
the tension: it was my mistake.
She told me not to mention it
really she did not mind a bit
she was writing poems about flowers
she said I gaze at them for hours
and feel the most surprising things –
the Paraclete, who'd spread His wings
And preen'd His Godhead once again,
went mad and smashed a window-pane.
I stirred the fragments: one by one
they sparkled at the guileless sun.

Julian

THE FOUR LAST THINGS

HELL

She slammed the broom against the wall;
the dust was thick, the flies were bold,
her seventh child awoke to squall;
both dust and din rose uncontrolled:

head down hands up and over eyes,
Lord how she howled; the old cat purred,
the infant yelled, and droned the flies,
the whole affair was quite absurd

for this was no high tragedy
no loving heart in sad decline,
such rich transcendent misery
as sanctifies your tears and mine.

It may be that her husband drank:
my dear, poor woman, but how sad –
no doubt she had herself to thank
that Jim was going to the bad.

HEAVEN

More tea? Thank you my dear. You know
the tenth is to be judgment day
I hear they're busy down below
– no sugar – I was going to say

I trust that Heaven won't be crammed
with sinners. No, I'm not a cat
but don't you think they should be damned?
I'm sure they're happier like that.

DEATH

And still the baby screeched. She rose
and put a dummy to its lips
and smooth'd her unbecoming clothes
with blunt and greasy fingertips.

Big Jim came home perversely drunk;
she nagged, he swore and slugged her one;
she died against the old tin trunk.
You'll get no more – her story's done.

JUDGMENT

When you and I come clothed in glory,
might and respectability,
we'll deal out peace and purgatory
with righteous equanimity:

with deference magnificent
the footman gathers hat and coat,
the Wisdom unapproachable
can well distinguish sheep from goat.

Allen Curnow

(This poem gains the prize for what is considered the best contribution.)

ETHICS

A pit was dug by lantern-light;
 God put the spade in, and the devil
loosed the carved ray upon His labour
 and grinned that Good took help of Evil.

The Arms bent to the narrowest dark
 and tossed a new thing from the earth,
thrust with the spade and swung again
 and cast it upward for a birth:

The devil clack'd the shutter wide
 to see what this new thing might be,
and 'God be praised,' with twisted lips,
 and 'here's a game for two,' said he.

This was the hour when I was born
 of dust and God and devil in one,
with a man's heart to utter pain
 and weak eyes withering in the sun.

Brought out of earth with power of breath,
 they laid me on the devil's cart;
the scuttering wheels slid down the night,
 life's tall hearse trundling to a start.

In ears that shook with the loud wheels
 sense, strength and pain spun down away:
God hack'd His chaos sullenly
 and turned His thought to other clay.

1932

Julian

From TOMORROW, 1934-38

DAILY OFFICE

Lord, save Thy people, sang the Vicar:
I saw one altar-candle flicker.
The flat flame wink'd, the parson whined,
and on that instant I divined,
full-faced between the candle-sconces,
old Mammon mouthing the responses.

Julian

19 September 1934

LUNAR PROSPECT

Moon, you have taken post impressively
behind our branches and
the daintiest ethereal underclothing
of the wind's cast-off cloud.

Only a mannequin pose, moon,
so much be-poemed and be-painted
that I might almost be assisting
at a celestial fashion-tea:

I take my tea with the correct graces;
this style my dear the latest thing
from Paris.

The glory of the firmament
struts by on high-heeled shoes.

Allen Curnow

19 September 1934

PARABLE

This world of ours is very like
a slot-machine, I think:
you slip a soul into the slot
and out comes food and drink.

Julian

3 October 1934

THE NEW BETRAYAL

Why do we utter such deceit?
The rain is not the tender beat
of angel hands at human doors,
as I was taught, as I was told
when I was not yet ten years old:

It is machine-guns in the air
and death a-wing, now here, now there;
it is the crazy, choking sound
of death in spilling bloodstream drowned.

Why do we work our children's pain
with such thin lies about the rain?
How will they look with opened eyes
on us, who broke their hearts with lies?

Rain, wind, and spring in tree and flower,
wild beauties in an evil power –
it is our will thus to transmute
resurgent life to lust of brute.

Julian

21 November 1934

COMPLAINT

When will this voice be heard?
It is the voice of a bird
awake before the light;
and the people love the night
and if they hear at all
turn blear eyes to the wall
from the song and the new sun:
their day has not begun.

Julian

20 February 1935

RENUNCIATION (II)

(I)

Under the arch threaded by dreams,
the depth wherein heavy stars sink,
the blue door of last knowledge seems
swung backward from the timeless brink.

There are few whose eyes are washed clean
to see time run naked with sure vigour
wing'd with stars' strength and the Spring's green,
and these faint with the pure vision's rigour.

(II)

Who has stood within the gate of the city
and seen a dream, sword in hand,
guarding the ways, he will have pity
on the many prisoners of this land:

here no angel with a slim reed
measures the jewelled city ell by ell;
but their mean power has debased their need
and each has measured out his cell.

* * * *

Song For Her Approach

As the green music compassing
all earth that listens in the Spring,
so is the vision when your nearness
shakes taut and void to broken clearness
and music, music cries to be
about the way you walk to me.

Julian

27 February 1935

ABSOLUTE IDEALISM

Not in six days but in an instant
on the first opening of child eyes
the earth is made, and after that the sea,
winds fill the morning and mountains rise.

Julian

13 March 1935

FACTORY WEIGHT

In the best of all possible worlds
everything is of the best –
motor-cars, cigarettes, flannel-trousers, fancy religions
and a brand of cotton vest:
all this on the manufacturers'
printed authority;
but did God put up some filthy poster, advertising
Unrivalled Scenery?

Julian

20 March 1935

EXPERIENCE

As a man sits quiet in his prison
Who once would pace the stones and rage,
So voices fail that would cry out on
The smooth agony of this age.

Julian

7 August 1935

MONODY

The East shudders with no new glory
the writing there is a worn story,
though the letters leap like flame
there is no reverence of the name.

*Night without dawn, day without end
soon is the world's death, God send.*

Dust alone rises with day
and the journey is in a barren way –
thus is the dying of an age
without tears or splendid rage.

*Night without dawn, day without end
soon is the world's death, God send.*

Through steam of a morning cup of tea
at a rainy day-break I see
mud and ashes, the ranked rain
treading the cities of the plain.

*Night without dawn, day without end
soon is the world's death, God send.*

Where Sodom burned no grass will grow,
on the blind plain the winds blow;
see, on this salt and barren sod
were two great cities cursed of God –

*Night without dawn, day without end
soon is the world's death, God send.*

Julian

28 August 1935

MEDITATION ON THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

I see no earthly reason why
a lot of people should not die
because they're neither wise nor funny
and have such large amounts of money.

Julian

4 September 1935

ATTAINMENT

No pity no slowing of pace
in the glorious chase
that is brilliance and pride for the red
coats that crowd on the dead
who cringed and found peace
and release
and a timeless bed:

war, a wild ride, a hunt
this life – see, to the front
the red-clad, the winners high chinned
but fast as the wind
though they ride, there abide
those who died
knowing Christ had sinned.

Julian

18 September 1935

THE USURPER

The factory whistle at noon
spits upward at the sun
calling the men from work
whose work has not begun,

shrieking, "I break their sleep
and rule their bodies too,
you big bloody gaslamp,
what use have they for you?"

Julian

18 September 1935

APOCALYPTIC

Straddle the gulf, colossus,
link cosmos lip to lip,
the censer stinks of petrol
and God's on a week-end trip.

All the world's a stage
and all the men and women
merely scene-shifters.

Author! Author!

O he's dead, Shakespeare's dead,
his hour's had and his say's said,
the goose is plucked and the pigs are fed
and life's a feed and a feather-bed,
and God's on a week-end trip.

Times are hard and trade's damn bad,
there's little money or fun to be had

but here's a laugh from a man going mad –
Oh, Mr. Snufflebuster, isn't it sad?

Stand on your head, colossus,
cosmos is slipping loose.

Author! Author!
Shakespeare's dead and we are not,
it's hold like hell on to what you've got,
it's fear, white fear that you'll lose the lot.

National security
collective security
new peace proposals
accepted by Powers
hundreds killed in air raid
churches pray for peace
national honour
And God's on a week-end trip.

Allen Curnow

29 January 1936

Pull the blind on the country scene
green light gathering woven fantasy:
hold no impertinent lamp
(dead brassy eye like bulb in socket)
beside God's golden eye.
Your day's actual darkness confessed
twisted phantoms may not haunt your bed.

Allen Curnow

15 April 1936

WICKED WORDS

Honour –

No bloody swords at daybreak Honour needs
but million-slayers, treaty and machine:
did murderous Honour ever use before
such monstrous trickery to keep it clean?

Industry –

Observe that man shovelling spoil all day?
He's hard at Work (or so he fondly thinks):
but not so hard (just count his weekly pay!)
as Mr Hardcash Hereford on the links.

Faith –

Faith, for which once the Christian martyrs died,
was recently dug up (at great expense),
slicked with a lick of paint on the outside
and marketed afresh as Confidence.

Hope –

Hope, commonly supposed to spring eternal
in human breasts, is very far to seek:
Hope springs (no doubt) as ever, but the infernal
truth is, the human breast has sprung a leak.

Charity –

Behold, a paradox of our society:-
obviously there is no need to prove
that more than half the world can live on Charity
yet, all admit, it cannot live on love.

Heaven, Hell and Pleasure –

Safe in the arms of Satan let me lie
if Heaven is all Pleasure – Heaven the swell,
the eternal necking party – ere we die
pray we each day, God bring us safe to Hell.

Julian

27 May 1936

WORK AND PRAYER

Drag a star down to the office table –
what sort of light is that to work by?
Leaf-specked wind will confuse important papers,
not contributing to efficiency.

Get up at daybreak, find bed at dusk:
so little time there would be for pleasure.
We shall save money and buy a car
and cultivate a right use of leisure.

Machines wait: run, run and catch the train.
Machines insist; go or it will be late.
Machines endure; wheels flog the sullen earth,
and irrelevantly, gear slipped or drive broken,
distantly, life's dim once vivid token
given for guide in the dark after birth,
the receding clamant seasons alternate.

Julian

22 July 1936

FLOTSAM

A twisted man, trying to sell me bootlaces;
a beaten man with a wad of lottery tickets:
scraps among drifted dust, faces
slipping away just in time through thickets
of rank noise and mass. My hurrying
will not deceive or dismiss these ghosts,
nor any tide of labour escape bring
from the pitiful people of these coasts.

Julian

19 August 1936

ORBIT

With so great wonder, at times fear,
I hear and see the distraught people
in twitching panic tread the collapsed hours
(time's rhythm wrench'd, rushed with pale speed,
time in time machine-maddened) : I must keep
heart's beat by you who follow the sun;
your blood keeps splendid pulse of the
heavens,
spite of chaos' steam and steel writhing
heart learns of you right motion,
seasons' swing, curve of rejoicing comet,
remote, holy obedience of the stars.

Julian

20 January 1937

UNEMPLOYED

TRUTH is sacked and hangs about the doors
Silent-swung against the unwanted caller
Doors doors teeth in the mouth of a tower
And the oil company on the top floor
And the nesting lawyers EIGHTH floor seventh floor
Going DOWN children's frocks mantles show-room

Truth has no glitter to match chromium
Seeing himself in doorplates of that metal
Observes unshaven jaws the cadged cigarette
Soaking between yellow lips.

Tall lies outshine him a city garnished
All ways with the bright metal of a lie
Protective colouring of the men of prey
And cheerful cloak for the sins of the board-room.

We do not stay his passage to the sea
Who now paces the beach awaiting
Resolution for the dreaming death.
What passer among the dunes in evidence
Identifies the bundled garments of truth?

Allen Curnow

13 October 1937

INTERVAL

After no prayers to the bomb-shelter, bed,
The unredeem'd limbs and the defeated head:
Streetlight fluid glazes the coverlet
Striping the dusty sill where
Book aspirin and cigarettes are set.

Run ribbon through his brain by night
Hammered street the wheels the barren light;
To what from what retreats the spirit when
The thumb'd switch signals sleep again?

Swing street bind sheet around him
Who after wreck recalls not
Night panic boat foul'd in falls
Nor what sea has drown'd him.

Allen Curnow

10 November 1937

THE DISINTEGRATING THOUGHT

Stare upward in this cloudy tree and hear
The bird Eternity make soundless song:
The senses cringe by night: images slashed
In sweltering iron crack the eggshell hour.
Now jawless space devours the flesh unfleshed
And time leaps crazy in the rotted lung.

Allen Curnow

24 November 1937

“O CAN YE BREW POISONS – ?”

O can ye brew poisons
For your King and Country?

*Aye, my lords, have patience,
We brew them cunningly.*

God speed you, Masters
And God defend the Right –

*One gas will raise blisters
Another destroys sight.*

Ironfounders, what speed
Makes the King's work?

*A gun to vomit death
Like rain in the dark.*

Mark for His sake
Each weapon with a cross:

*These will shatter concrete
As a hammer glass.*

The reflective God
Approves our war:
Bind the sacrifice
In the public bar:
Stun him, blind him
With the black type
And the broadcast; unmake man
Another shape.

Allen Curnow

8 December 1937

THE LAST PHASE

Creep in your chromium palaces
Whine, weep in the shining places
Where smoke and smut
And din enter not
Nor parched boards eat their own excreted dust:

Altogether astray is the righteous
Even he who reaches
After that no man
Nor lusting woman
Read advertisements not covetously.

When all is all healed
Pavement nor plough defiled
By the self-eating
Sore, and waiting
At placement office snuffing new varnish

When home a chromium dream
Breeds no more halt and lame –
Do you smell dirt
In the steady heart
Dung on the dustless roads of the mind?

Allen Curnow

8 December 1937

SESTINA

Keep on looking and you may find mountains
As they told you in childhood at a fireside question,
Not shadows of Alps not clay maps under glass,
Not frosty sweating in the witless climb,
But uncompar'd confident heart-helping ranges
A sort never displayed on railway stations:

By rutted shingle and by railway stations,
Reach how you will you will not come at mountains,
But floodlit phantoms all the pasteboard ranges
Uncomprehending magnify the question;
Bright ridges blind the vantage of the climb,
Foiling the lens, the film and flattening glass.

Imitated dully, darkly in a glass
We build our cities about railway stations,
Thinking beyond the railhead rust to climb
The bouldered doorstep of the house of mountains,
By tunnelling to tear apart the question,
With unrent hearts to rend, offend the ranges.

Now to the traveller, "Come and see our ranges,"
The snow-black photograph behind the glass,
Salesman of sham novelties. Still the question:

Masters of two-room one-way railway stations,
When is train that takes us to the mountain?
What is the spirit's fare for the big climb?

With axe and pack and primus who will climb
Without a guide among the virgin ranges
And first reveal the majesty of mountains,
Freeing eyes from film and camera's glass?
He will not set out from railway stations,
But closed in a room may resolve his question.

At Christmas or Easter consider the question,
Bank-clerk and musician contemplating climb,
Before road-map or meeting at railway stations:
Do there exist tracks among the ranges
Only the dead know, that on scree or glass
Slipped, and were suddenly aware of mountains?

Allen Curnow

11 May 1938

HOT AIR FORCE

*Lines on reading an account of the New Zealand Royal Air Force
Display at Rongotai Aerodrome, Wellington; and being impressed
neither with the need for instructing the young men of the Dominion
in the art of military flying, nor with their proficiency in that art:*

O may I see before I die,
Wigram attacking Rongotai,
The Vildebeest and Baffin too
All grappling in the central blue:

The N.Z.R.A.F. careering
Above the music and the cheering,
Shooting itself to smithereens
Inside its obsolete machines.

Or would they scatheless homeward fly
To Wigram and to Rongotai
(A victory each beyond disputing)
Delivered by their own bad shooting?

Julian

22 June 1938

THE SWORD AND THE BOMB

*(In imitation of W.B. Yeats who, well past his seventieth year,
has lately referred in a poem to the fear of air bombardment.)*

That old man who raised ancient pageantry
Now finds it in his heart to cast a bomb
Boldly into a line. Maeve and Cuchulain
Clutter old folios. That storm is past;
Whoever conjured with the tight-strung wind
And fought with heroes in the volleying rain,
Hangs Sato's blade above the mantelshelf,
Sweetens to tragedy with powerful rhyme
The formless horror of the modern wars.
What shelter has old age against the times
When Yeats can hear the siren and the shell
Beating about his tower of centuries?

Allen Curnow

17 August 1938

MOTHER AND CHILD

Let us be what we are
Napkin or nothing
The buttocky baby
Puffed with teething,

Not that retarded boy
Who veers and snickers
Dressed in old gentlemen's
Knickerbockers.

O then shut sleeping
That slab trout's eye
From the bitten brain
Will never look free;

O hush thee my baby
Never had a show
Thy father a steward
Thy mother a pro.:

I'll take him to town
Though the girls look sick as
His knees go knife
In his knickerbockers.

Allen Curnow, June 1938.

14 September 1938

DEFENCE POLICY

iMaginot imagine
how lovely to defend
the Cross from cruel Jesus
the glove from the hand
which treasonably seizes,

save from the evil egg
the softly cunning nest
protect the delicate bullet
from the aggressive breast
Defend

PITY

DEFEND

o gun in the bathroom
save in bloody stand
the raspberry from the rum
uphold the threatened rights
of the tremulous bomb
against the gasproof baby
DEMIC

DEMAEC

DEMOC

NOW FACES INTERNAT
DISAST IS CONFRONT
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN
tea God O aircraft autumn fashions
(the first Wesleyan pastor)
the FALLING LEAF in sunshine
they loop and dive for patriots
see how they loop
SEE how they loop

where high the heavenly clubhouse stands
the windsock claps its bloody hands
the squareroot of a cigarette
swims home and pays the chirping debt

the vacuum-tank is dark with shame
THE DOG DENIES HIS MASTER'S NAME
the dog denies (your mother's eyes)
or ever the winking hambone came.

Julian

28 September 1938

MAGAZINES & JOURNALS, 1940S

Horizon's hatred smites Magellan
Parched in Pacific, scurvy-swollen;

Men & ships all the mild weather
Share one rhythm and rot together,

In festering flesh, in softening wood,
Brine is sap and brine is blood;

Vain the Virgin on clotted tongue;
The dead dive where the dead belong

Whose mutinous limbs dissolving down
Lighten the keels of Christian Spain:

Pluck wave at plank, blaze sun in sky,
Magellan shall have land with joy,

Shall forge for fetter on the seas
Tally of his tormented days.

Book: A Miscellany, 1, March 1941

MUSICAL CRITICISM

"The innermost Beethoven" in the uttermost isles
Makes the whole sea his base, if seen to take
Off is engineless, warps no wing, no smoke
Tangles him with roofs, rocks; this ceiling smiles;
He outclimbs all. Your room contains controls
To catch the colour of both wave and wake,
To pull his signals down just where you like,
It happens, among these unconnected hills.

The stone-deaf islands may resolve their pain
Easily, however distance howls them down,
By adaptation towards the albatross;
To rise on rigid wings or, on these tuned
Strings ride gales to patience; or, to cross
Motionless horizons as if not marooned.

New Zealand New Writing, 1942

FOUR PACIFIC SONNETS

*Thy (else Almighty) beautie cannot move
Rage from the Seas, nor thy love teach them love . . .*

Donne: ELEGIE XVI

I

Tasman whose rigid prows' pressure at the hinge
Swung on its horizons back the cavernous-
Solid South, no more of winds woven a canvas
Unfurls like years unfolding crests of change;
Clapp'd shut by polar thunder behind the plunge
Of daring timbers, new mountains over us,
New plains, new peeling surfs, show up sheer loss,
Bland littoral similitudes the more estrange.

You, flying Dutchman, storm within this storm,
Blow screams like petrels where the Poles hang open;
Time's maelstrom of triumph and alarm
Disgorges islands, hulks, the daily dead gripping
Split spars, whirl'd on a wave far, hurling over
Star-blind parallels, discovery to discover.

II

O rational successful hands that swept
Up the last ocean coin, fumblers in fog
For precious pieces, where are sands harsh, seas big
Enough to wash your red ones green? O kept
In suavest history, gloved, quite dark how dipp'd
Palms down in coral pools printing your flag,
Holy and washable trademark. Here in the vague
Currents where cables mumble murder has slept

And sleeps, but dreams, hands that will not come clean
In perpetual dumbshow utter what they did,
Because it was a rational violence
To think discreet discharge of cannon could add
Island upon island, that the wide sea would fence
And Time confirm them, in a change of scene.

III

You had not heard that we still eat each other?
You we greet garlanded give beads, give knives,
Give poxy loins, give bright garments, give graves
To deck the balmy foreshore. Come up no farther,
Blood starts at a feather O stranger, neither
Tamper with noon-blood in its bottle of leaves
Once burst, seed, root and foot will swim together:

Figuratively, figuratively you understand,
Unto this third, almost fourth generation,
The custom of feeding on the slain enemy is
Though sacred, safe. These self-devoured devotion
Reserve for strangers, recalling anguish'd bays
Some screaming 'Horrible' fled, afraid to land.

IV

I swam between the northern and southern teeth
Of the marine hemisphere; spine, rigged thread
Shuttled on meridians but in Time hung my head;
My eyes bled reversed stars, and heart beneath
Beat fast as tides; sandy my nerves' sheath
Steadied in storms, in thoughtful eddies spread
Rock and frond making the oceanic dead
Blossoming in air or water their surf's wreath.

Magellan a miracle swollen the size of thirst
Burst in my day's air like fish those shocking
Depths throw up, a murdered Dutchman's scream
Rocketed, planks that panic dawn dispersed
Feathered me where Cook with positive prow drove mocking
The double dark of Time's and my blood's stream.

Book, 5, February 1942

EZRA POUND

*You are very idle, my songs.
I fear you will come to a bad end.*
Ezra Pound, 'Lustra' (1913).

*It is, and is not, I am sane enough.
Since you have come this place has hovered round me,
This fabrication built of autumn roses.
Then there's a goldish colour, different.*
Ezra Pound, 'Ripostes' (1912).

Ezra, the game is up; all up, poor Pound.
Short weight, deranged. Poising a case for treason,
The law's contempt, not pity, weighed and found
Your state unfit, wanting both rhyme and reason.

You whose amusement was 'the public taste',
Messer Pound, what have we to do with you?
How is the 'strange rare name' you boasted based?
Greek howlers in your verse, translations too

Held suspect, came to judgment long before
A few sad insolent lines escape this doom.
'Goldish weft', mutterings behind the door
Of Smart in Bedlam, Hoelderlin's high room

– A flattery, that, after your own vain heart!
'Yet I am a poet' – there let judgment start.

The Press, 2 March 1946

A LETTER IN WARTIME: ALLEN CURNOW
TO DENIS GLOVER, 15 NOVEMBER 1942

Dear Denis,

You like to know how we continue here.
We are all of the South where explosive Japan
Hangs by the hair of a lucky shot; have felt
The distances press on us. You now
Fight with geography at close quarters, I
Still working on the old defence system
Which the day may prove utterly impracticable.
O near or far, neither of us contends
With principalities or powers, only
The doubtful stormy destinies of islands
Involve us, whose birth was no promising
Enterprise, into a tentative city
The next spring tide might wash away; not half
The proper size of citizens, wearing
De jure independence with a diffident air,
Feeling that after all under our loud health
Some irremediable handicap, disease
Or poison of triviality worked within
Certain to destroy our time, though mocked with sons.

Older, more bloodily disputed seas
Surround you; now that you explore disaster
On a metropolitan scale, I must admit
The communique tells nothing I can share;
History is private to the participants.
Even our technicolored scene of battle
Where the coral isle sweats like a filament
And the poster-picture ocean like a torn page
Of the Geographic, blazes and blackens,
Is screened off, still another's pain or death.
With Pilot Visscher I can only conjecture,
Divers strange things will doubtless be
Revealed to us in the Salomones Islands.

Better to bring you back to common ground,
Call Wordsworth back from France, and carry on
The garrulous Prelude to our lives.

It has been a windy spring, lately
A succession of nor'westers and little rain,
One day the Port Hills rusty under the grey
Quilting of cloud, the next, the thin
Tussock and grasses sharpened to yellow by sunlight
And the Cashmere windows winking back at the sea.
Of my routine days and nights there is nothing new,
My bed and table at home are the relief
From the familiar dull sub's game
Of making news look like news.

Leo has plenty

Of publishing; the Factory Controller
Is letting Fairburn through, and Hervey,
And the last Backblocks Hospital sells well.
Copy is ready for a Christmas Whim-Wham,
But permission not yet through from Wellington
(These days the Factory Controller demands
To see all copy, but who reads it for him
I can't imagine).

I hope you have your BOOK

No 6. We hope to have a No 7
Out not long after Christmas. Luckily
There's decent copy coming in: Burdon, an article,
Margaret Birkinshaw an article (I hope)
And a couple of good stories. Helen Shaw
Has sent one of the worst stories I've read,
Infantile-would-be-stark, of which I can't forget
One sentence running: 'Beautiful beautiful
Pink Camelias! O how pink! How pink!'

The other day I met for the first time
The incredible Bertie Whitcombe:
He got at me through Chaffey, not disclosing
What he wished to see me for. He wasted half an hour
Of my time trying to persuade me

That I was both able and willing to compose
Verse mottoes for his Christmas business cards.
Magnanimously said, Of course he'd pay me;
Repeated his old grievance about Holcroft
And you and the Deepening Stream. How that must rankle!
Gave me a quite untruthful account of the transactions,
Which Chaffey cheerfully admitted afterwards.
He (Bertie) had been out drinking, Chaffey said
With Waino Sarelius.

Lilburn, whose eyesight
Exempts him from service in the Forces, except
The E.P.S. (Public Hygiene Section)
Writes music every day and half the night
In his old room, looking across the Avon,
The lawns, the young trees, and the Bowker Fountain
(Now happily browned-out). He's made five preludes;
And played me one, slow, with that fierce tension
Between ancient and modern, a liquid discipline;
With the left hand a sarabande beat of surf
And with the right the peace and pain of islands.
We shall hear all five when [Newson] plays them
At a concert next month.

And there's my Tasman poem;
We hope to get a reading broadcast, with music,
Prelude, two interludes, and finale with it,
Composed by Prof. He's done two parts already;
And the poem itself, I hear from Beaglehole,
Should be printed very soon. There are revisions
From the copy I sent you.

Now and then I look
Up Brassington on blessedest Saturday
(‘Blessedest Thursday's the fat of the week’) and get
Away to the Carlton if we're lucky. Brassington's
Sonnets ‘for private circulation’ are in the metal;
I have seen the one about the Godwits and the Tartars
Which Leo has made a nice page, with Perpetua.
I shall never be a household ornament in that family,
Beyond accepting the inevitable invitation
To admire Gabrielle's goldfish, or the asparagus.

Holcroft has been in Christchurch, and gone again.
Lund was called up, the firm's appeal turned down,
So Monte's acting-editor for the duration:
Has some hopes of getting 'The Waiting Hills',
The current book, done by the Co-op people,
Or with a couple of backers – I'm not sure;
Haven't written him lately.

Sargeson's

Not very happy, but seems to think he's going
To begin writing in a different way. I find
His letters alternate between flat proletarianisms
And utterly enigmatic observations.
I understand Houghton and Mifflin, America,
Are nibbling at a novel by him, unwritten,
And asked for a sample chapter, which he's sent.
'That guy can write like a fool' was the comment
Of Houghton Mifflin's reader; he said too
'I'm crazy about Sargeson'. So what now?

Frank Birkinshaw and the second Mrs Birkinshaw
(A lean, moderately well-bred mare)
Passed through last week, going to Dunedin.
Frank, to my mind, almost unchanged;
He and his wife seem to have settled down
As cultural leaders of the Coromandel:
He writes pantomimes, Noel Coward, etc
And they produce them in the old Thames theatre
Surviving, they tell me, from the prosperous days.

(God knows whether this is any more intelligible
Or any less prosy than my prose correspondence:
I only hope it's a change; you may find patches
Enough to make the rest worth while. Blank verse
Isn't after all suited to the gossip column:
Octosyllabics would have been better perhaps:
But partly, you are suffering from my insistence
On hammering out a measure of sorts – blank verse,
With my own impatience stirring in it:
One day I shall write plays as a result of this,

Dreadful verse drama, and everyone will say,
What a pity he didn't leave it alone; but probably
No-one will even print them. Not quite relevant:
But I recall that Eliot in an address on Yeats
Suggested that what Yeats did with the Drama
Might in the long run have more influence
Than Ibsen and Shaw. But very few seem to agree).

Saturday. At five o'clock to the Carlton,
Rossall street, Rugby, Naseby, Merivale Lane,
Winchester, Andover, Salisbury, Carlton Mill,
With the grey rucsac and the jar against my elbow,
Walking under the nor'west quilt that is tucked
Round every visible edge; the thick, still, stage
Of the nor'wester, contemplating rain.
Out by the Park and the humped willows.
A few cars still behind the Mecca; I cross
Somebody's bumpers & enter, turn right
Towards the glass doors; through into the buzzing bar.
There are still sportscoats among the battledresses,
But fewer and older.

Times and coats may change,
But not Charlie in the grey cardigan, he
Serves them all. Come in khaki, come in flannels,
Come spats and sweaty caps, he serves them all,
Bends, strides, and pulls a pump, and fills a handle,
Pushes the bottle over, wipes, rakes up
Silver and notes and bangs you down your change.
He serves them all. First come, first served.
This handle – is it the one? – bears many washings
And is no different for your drinking from it
When we leaned here under the wicked neons
And introduced unpopular Poetry
Into the congress of the hole-in-one,
The double chart and the young girl of Madras;
Though we too could admire that famous lady
And her vivacious Finger.

The jar is filled,
Half a gallon for three-and-nine (it's sevenpence

A handle now – I can't say, 'Sevenpence in').
I come up into the muggy afternoon
And look along for trams. Nothing but a few bikes
In Victoria Street, one being Hervey, riding
Like a death'shead doll sliding on a wire;
At the invisible signal that I'm ready to talk
He topples stiffly off, leans on his bicycle
Propping himself. I wouldn't like to say
Which could stand up more easily alone.
He suggests the Waste Land – not Stetson or Tiresias,
But the corpse planted last year in the garden
And just begun to sprout, or 'flowering judas'.
But he says he's feeling better (Leo's printing
Another book for him), has a house by the sea
Not far from the Bishop's and goes there by himself
Just when he feels like it. 'Have you been there lately?'
He asks me, and says I should see the rifle-pits
Everywhere. You must come down, he says,
It's wild, just tracks and places you can lie
In the open and be quite alone. Cooks for himself
And permits his wife one patch of garden
But loves to have the rest 'uncivilised'.

I myself somehow keep up the stubborn
Journey through the level jungle of home living,
Keeping my temper more than losing it,
Sometimes dodging and sometimes hacking through.
Bets is big, nursing the life in her womb
Up the long hill, but the last pinch now, to birth.
Wystan makes cakes of sand under the bamboo
At the corner of the garage, assures us
That he will not wet his bed tomorrow,
Runs barefoot after blackbirds, and in bad weather
Delivers coal to every corner of the house.
In a casual way, displays inventiveness
In playing with words. The other day, in a rage
With Bets for telling him to eat his vegetables,
Shouted, banging a spoon on the table,
'I'll blow you out in the weather you dirty old cactus'.

Good rhythm and phrasing, so he seemed to think,
Because he repeated it half-a-dozen times.

I walk to the Bryndwr bus
By the Wairarapa Stream
Where a boy too young for an angler
Hooks trout too young to take;
With a Handel air in my head
(The radio just turned off)
And a book I shall not read
Because of the hills that hang
In the east, the shreds of thought and
Hopes that hang in my head.

I think, as I do now,
What do you think of islands
Who have made the formative journey
From antarctic to arctic;
Have laid yourself in the breach
Of this time's gun, to be fired
Into God knows what target?
In all that violent process
You follow the arc of islands;
The seas are shaping something.

In the bus rounding the river
Which the English think looks English
(Not reading between the willows)
I gaze through the jumping window
Not expecting a Yeatsian symbol
To join our thought or reclaim
The undeniable oceans
That freeze or flame between us;
But you were the pine in the park,
The toughest that we admired
But could not establish the name.

And stopping between the colleges
Where over the mounded foliage

Of chestnuts the six miles
Off hills shoulder the sun,
I wonder if half our worries
Were 19th century Gothic:
These were the stones laid on us;
Did our borrowed imaginations
Serve us no better than Samson's
Wrench, raving the roof down,
For building the City of God?

I did not expect a symbol,
Quite sure no sign would be given;
But the clock has stopped in the tower,
The ivy is stripped from the walls.
I have only to walk to work:
There is neither time nor money
For putting up sham pavilions;
Only the night's work
For me, battle or boredom
For you. O there will be poets
And there will be wars, and work,
And a child; you will return.

You wanted thoughts like the Arrow
River, and luminous
But never cold; you will have them.
'There is only hope for people
Who live upon islands' – [MacNeice]
Thinks so, another Irishman.
All I can add in our case
Is, We do not choose our islands
But mountains are magnets where
Our fathers sailed in under,
Heroes or hangdog exiles
Or (it doesn't matter) marooned.

The ivy is swept and burnt
And the sallow clock is stopped
That would never keep good time;

A generation of exiles,
Two more of amphibious hauntings
Of beaches, and now this other
We needed to keep so badly.
O I could go down to harbours
And mourn with a hundred years
Of hunger what slips away there,
If that were not fearing the future:
Any day you may return.
Any day you may return.

From CORNISH REVIEW, 1951

CORNWALL

TWO POEMS

I. SEA TRYST

Curnow of Anlebra farm at Nancledra, Curnow the sweep,
Curnow the mercer and councillor, Curnow the barber,
Curnow of Gurnard's Head over by Wikka where deep
In the scoop of the Western swell is your grey hulk's harbour

Death, fisher of men, your nets of granite and foam:
Surely you haul us all in, the shoal of our lives,
Mine of a strange sea native, Pacific my home,
And my tribesfolk, men of your tetrarchate Saint Ives.

I hear in a winter mist the drowned moan over the moors
And the Zennor Maid sing scorn on the Body and Blood
Green-lashing the moon in her hair and the souls of her wooers,
The beast-girl's image graven in the house of God:

Lithe-tailed Lilith we loved in our sea dreams;
The Cross in her sea-glass dangles upside down,
Down, down, deep as the locked Antarctic streams
And the blind isles where the bread of my birth was thrown –

Void as all voyages for the mast of her mirror
Chases and faces; all constellations glitter
On the surf of her song, the tide's tongue of her terror
Since the gadfly God-word skimmed her curdlipped water.

Six bells of Saint Senar Virgin chime like bubbles
In the girl-fish's belly. Strong salt leching kisses
Of protozoa stung us to Death; our doubles
Are saved or damned, our souls twine in her tresses

Already. Swirled in stone-hinged gates of the sea
Souls can curl in a cry blown high through the mist,
'O flesh fall home to her, precious her foam and she,
Older than granite glitters the grain of her breast!'

Haul in my hundred years. What's this in the net?
The sea hath its wrack and scum at a turning tide.
Haul in a winter mist. One grasped too late
At a glimpse of gold among reefs, and grasping died,

But out of a dying hand on a dying wind
His tackle hurdled the antipodean wave.
Lines that the damned spun here of the yellow sand
Hold the soul fast. Neither by magic nor love

The wicked and the saints who died before Christ,
Joe Sligs, Jimmy Gooseturd and the barber of Saint Ives
And I no Galilean swimmer keep tryst
With Death and his Maiden of the western waves.

2. ZENNOR MOORS

Babylon could have come to a muddy doom.
Foundering stone in a wet wind might sink
But never deep, and the bitten gorse bloom
Rooted above ground in a field-wall's chink.

Desolation has its own discipline.
Those topless chimneys needing no command
Stand up and stalk me limping through the rain.
This is in order. We both understand.

They should be lungs of lifeless mines but are
Field-wise as any footless ghost
Familiar as the prickle of death. Once there
Were giants to gasp at camped upon this coast

Kneedeep in storm bowling stark uptorn crags.
I saw none. Very likely it was a tale
Told at the Tinner's Arms by one in rags
Mumbling old magics for a pint of ale.

London, January 1950.

THE HUCKSTERS, 1957, 1958

THE HUCKSTERS
&
THE UNIVERSITY
or
OUT OF SITE, OUT OF MIND
or
Up Queen Street Without A Paddle!

A happy little POEM for all the Family
by ALLEN CURNOW
*Read by the author at a public Poetry Reading
in the Auckland City Art Gallery
on 24 May 1957*
PRICE ONE SHILLING

Huckster. – A retail dealer in small wares; a petty trader; (fig)
person of mean, haggling, mercenary character.
– H. C. Wyld, *Universal English Dictionary*

Come all you Citizens of this Queen City
And listen to Something new.
This Queen City is a mean City,
With the Soul of a Yahoo.
As lovely as Air and Land and Sea
Could ever prepare the Scene:
And as ugly as Ignorance can look.
When the business Heart is mean.

And what does that matter to you or me,
In the Middle of all this Art,
If the Council that runs this Gallery
Is rotten at the Heart?
What does it matter if Learning and Truth
Must beg for a Seat in the Town?
For your greasy ha'pennyworth of Rates,
You'd pull your Churches down.

Oh, don't make Room for a Poet here,
Don't let him open his Mouth:
It was here that Eric Westbrook talked
Of an Athens in the South.
And your Council purred and they gave the Word,
And the Stocks of Art went up –
But all the while, in Athenian Style,
They mixed their poison Cup.

For a greasy ha'pennyworth of Rates,
They mixed their Poison black.
They smuggled it up to Princes Street
And sneaked it in at the Back.
Cumberland carried the Mixture in –
'Twas to save sick Learning's Life!
Robinson stood with a Bowl for the Blood,
And Surgeon Robb with a Knife.

And round the Bed and behind the Door,
Lurking to snatch the Loot,
Were your City Fathers as cool as Judas
And a good deal more astute.
With one Fish-eye on the Invoice Sheet
And the other One on the Rent –
So long as the Truth stood out of their Way,
They didn't care where it went.

Hunter, who spoke for the shopkeeping Gang
With a Piece of his shopkeeper's Mind,
Coal-merchant Carpenter, Curran and Dyson
The Apes who followed behind:
"Get yer University outa our Yard,
We don't wancha Learning or Light;
We don't care Where if it's outa our 'Air,
And outa our Customers' Sight!"

And the Queen Street Business Mongrels yelped
To be in at the Death at last,
There was ringing of Tills and thumbing of Bills

When the Council's Vote was cast:
While the rent-roll Rats laid Plans for Flats
To fatten a Queen Street Shop,
And Fletcher figured his Contract Price
As a Hangman tests his Drop.

Remember them All, your City's choice
And your City's lasting Shame,
For the Huckster's meanness, the Huckster's hate
Of Learning's very name.
The Howl of the Lout who throws a Bottle
And the City Councillor's Vote
Are no further apart, than the Huckster's Heart
And the Sleeve of Ashby's Coat.

Come all you Citizens of this Queen City,
A Queen (Street) City indeed.
Do you think your City is a clean City?
Do you prize the huckster Breed?
As lovely as Air and Land and Sea
Could ever prepare the Scene:
And as ugly as Sin in the Streets within
Where the business Heart is mean.

MR HUCKSTER OF 1958

*another and still happier little POEM for the family
circle by the Author of that ever-popular Ballad*

The Hucksters & The University

admiringly dedicated to Mr J.W.M. Carpenter
for his brilliant and succinct exposition

The Queen Street Theory of Higher Education

at a meeting of the Auckland City Council on 4 July 1958
when he spoke of a University Site on Princes Street as

a Cancer in the Heart of the Town

Come all you Citizens of this Queen City
And listen to something more:
How the Hucksters stirred with a greasy Spoon
Their Mixture as before.
Our University sick to Death,
They offered back their Poison neat.
They sought to kill the Queen of the Hill,
The Widow of Princes Street.

The Dead-end Boys of the Cook Street side,
The Rag Shop Earls of the Town,
They lay in Wait with a greedy Hate
To strike Dame Learning down.
They struck again, with a coarse Disdain
For all but the Town's Affairs –
Usurping the Name and blotting the Fame
Of a Greater Auckland than Theirs.

Robinson mumbled his Old Cracked Magic
As the Huckster's Draught was poured.
'Strangler' Ambler stood by for a Try
With his best Pyjama Cord.
Kingston, Armishaw cackled and crowed
Like the Witches round their Pot;

Hunter and Buttle were soft and subtle –
But that's not quite the Lot!

Not by any Means – Oh dear no!
Carpenter is my Theme,
Coal-yard Carpenter, John o' Newmarket,
Carpenter, Pride of the Team.
A CANCER was what you called it, John.
We'll think of that Word again.
Was it Cancer, the Knowledge YOU found at the College?
It wasn't, for better Men.

If That's what you find in the City's Heart,
Then what of the City's Brains?
There are Clots in the Head, if the Truth were said,
And Bile, not Blood in the Veins.
What Stomach Ulcers has Auckland got,
If Knowledge makes it spew –
If Learning it sees as a foul Disease,
What's wrong with the Point of View?

Savory, Skoglund, here I praise
For facing the Hucksters down.
One plans and prays, and the other One PAYS
For Health at the Heart of the Town:
Gardens and Towers for the best-spent Hours,
No catch-penny Car-park Ramps,
No medical Scrum for a brass-plate Slum
Where the footsore Patient tramps!

Shoulder your Coal-bags! CANCER, Johnny,
That's what YOU think of Learning.
I wouldn't have called YOUR business That!
John, are your long Ears burning?
Councillor John, my fine fat Friend,
You've won, though your run was late.
Come All and applaud while the Palms I award –
MR HUCKSTER of 'fifty-eight.

But don't get proud, or your Head in a Cloud,
Johnny, if that's your Style.
'Twas a last-lap Burst that placed you First,
But you're not the Worst by a Mile.
Ill must the City of Learning fare,
That no brave Destiny shapes –
That Fools have betrayed, their Counsel swayed
By the Craft of huckstering Apes.

From 'FIFTY YEARS ON'
IN *The Years Between: Christchurch
Boys' High School, 1881-1981, 1981*

Notes for an unwritten poem

At least we were grey stone
until 1926
when red brick and Riccarton
replaced all that
early gothic colonial
and the School moved on
leaving the School standing
where the School had stood
fifty years

with Rolleston's
effigy and avenue those words
incised on the lintel of
the Museum porch

Lo
these are parts of His ways
but how little a portion is heard
of Him

the college clock
striking as if time were
an unheard-of novelty here
and the First Four Ships not yet
sighted

other detail
of the design for a city
painted on china

my father
born the same year as the School
had a mind that could mend
broken designs his wholeness
delighted in fragments

the spire
still tops the Square the wall

make do with the tail or the sleeve
for a blackboard wiper

Henry Dyer for instance
(bless the memory) on frosty mornings
perched himself on the steam heating
gathering his gown round his knees
having opened all the windows wide
to the winter sunlight
and given the order COATS OFF
to the shivering class in our grey
flannel shirtsleeves and navy-blue shorts
thinking 'Lucky old Henry'

old? was he even 40?
lucky? among all those things
we had yet to learn
was that deafness and bad sight were not
the best of luck when your job
was fifth form science and maths
and excellence bothered you and
you knew damned well what it took
to get anywhere near it

and besides the tactics of Rugby
still a game in those days
Henry understood the genetics
of daffodils and himself alone
created new varieties a delicate
science beyond the smelly
pedagogics of the Bunsen burner
the Florence flask and the Kipps
apparatus

beat that for creativity
you authors of poetical macrame
and the short (winded) story!

*

Big Dick Doggy Holy Joe
Pup Tup and Krupp
50 years on would anyone know
if I'd made them up

nicknames being tribal magic
for us one way
to master our masters and keep
those adversaries at bay

John Henry Erle Schroder
was Krupp for the obvious reason
World War One wit being
not yet out of season

but what could a name like that
have to do with JOHN
my teacher editor exemplar friend
50 years on

who forgave me my bad Latin
suffered me not ungladly
and for whom I tried and still try
not to write badly

*

Holy Joe had been
a missionary in Latin
(the other sense) America
the connexions of the images
of Holy starch-collared and gowned
traversing the Andes
and Cicero may appear obscure
to readers of another generation
and School nevertheless they existed
if tenuously digressively
from Latin (classical) to Latin
American and apostolic

travels

good men have been
remembered for less

*

Doggy who taught me
something I forget
once tugged me by the front hair
and chalked my chin for
Inattention

Doggy
wasn't much loved by 3A
but don't we know those teachers
who waste much precious time
getting themselves loved and learning
comprehensively despised
the heavyhanded foot-stamping
classroom style
affected by Doggy I suspect
was nine parts affectation
and the tenth part something
World War One did to him
or maybe no more than the nature
of a man who enjoyed playing
the brute he wasn't

*

remember STUMP
stocky headmaster figure
squashed-square-faced
fished in his waistcoat pocket with
chalky fingers for chalk
to cover a couple of green
blackboard metres with
algebraical proofs
turning then to the class *Get that?*
pointing to me *Get that*

Curnow? and I lying *Yes sir*
Stump being absorbed in such
a *beautiful proof* seemed hardly
to mind if I got it or not

*

Brasso and a couple of others
built a petrol-can raft
launched it on the flooding Waimak
which casually smashed it
two of them drowned

Brasso

that Monday back in class
(5B English 1926)
had a bruise and a black eye
to prove the story true
in the day's newspaper
mad all three of them everyone
said but 5B English
were deeply impressed

another day

I showed him an exercise book
full of my schoolboy Byronics
and he didn't discourage me
something in the way he didn't
sends me back to School again

*

so much by way of prelude
to an unwritten poem
consisting almost completely
and I mean almost
of omissions.