

‘YOU’VE BEEN MISSED OF LATE  
KEZIA  
IN THE STREET  
AND DOWN AT THE BAY.’

*Small in scale, it is majestic in feeling. This is  
a work of great lyrical beauty and emotional  
depth . . . an extraordinary late masterpiece.*

— Anna Jackson

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



AUCKLAND  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



9 781776 711451

IN THE HALF LIGHT OF A DYING DAY

C. K. STEAD



# IN THE HALF LIGHT OF A DYING DAY



## C.K. STEAD

IN THE  
HALF LIGHT  
OF A  
DYING DAY  
CATULLUS, 2023

C. K. STEAD

First published 2024  
Auckland University Press  
University of Auckland  
Private Bag 92019  
Auckland 1142  
New Zealand  
[www.aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz](http://www.aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz)

© C. K. Stead, 2024

ISBN 978 1 77671 145 1

Published with the assistance of Creative New Zealand



A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the National Library of New Zealand.

This book is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purpose  
of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted  
under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced  
by any process without prior permission of the publisher.  
The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

Design by Duncan Munro

This book was printed on FSC® certified paper

Printed in China by 1010 Printing International Ltd

Catullus poems first appeared in my 1979 collection, *Walking Westward*, and continued to occur at intervals through *Geographies* (1982), *Straw into Gold* (1997) and more or less vanished after *Dog* (2002). Though mine were not translations so much as ‘versions in the manner of’, there were derived elements, and Catullus’s Lesbia became my Clodia – the name of the person on whom his Lesbia is believed to have been based. So the present sequence begins with ‘The Clodian Songbook (continued)’ but soon introduces the new figure of Kezia (pronounced Key-zya), a name borrowed from Katherine Mansfield who used it for the child, based it seems on herself, in her stories of the Burnell (i.e. Beauchamp) family.

I need to thank my old friend and fellow poet Alan Roddick for watching over this collection as it was emerging and for constantly reviewing it for me and commenting.

In 2014 I was interviewed about my Catullus poems by Dr Maxine Lewis, lecturer in Classics at the University of Auckland, and that interview appeared in my collection, *Shelf Life: Reviews, Replies and Reminiscences* (2016, pp. 287–91).

All the poems in this collection were written during 2023 apart from the first, ‘Invocation’, written long ago and intended as the opening poem of a new sequence which was never written. It made a first public appearance in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 December 2023.

I think this collection might be read as a single work of fiction.

C. K. S.

# CONTENTS

## *One: The Clodian Songbook (continued)*

Invocation.....	3
History.....	4
The farm.....	8
Licinius.....	10
Odi et amo.....	11
Hemi.....	14
Time.....	16
Compassion.....	17
Creative writing class?.....	18
Uncertainty.....	19
Language.....	20
World's end.....	22
C. M. T.....	24
The good man in love.....	25
Ego.....	27
Ianus.....	29

## *Two: Catullus and Kezia*

Home.....	33
Language again.....	35
Modern miracles.....	37
Free will?.....	38
Just looking.....	39
The panic.....	41
Reading.....	42
Pain.....	43
The other door.....	45
The signal.....	47
Always.....	48
Sorry.....	49
The science.....	51
Not yet?.....	52
The silence.....	53
Gallia.....	54
Oslo.....	56
8/9/2023.....	57
The race.....	58
Last.....	59
Home again.....	60
The plum tree.....	61
A beginning.....	63
Now.....	64
Talking to the cat.....	65
For we.....	66
'Now more than ever seems it rich ...'	67
The good life.....	68
True love.....	70
Madness?.....	71
The wound.....	73
The story?.....	74
The puzzle.....	76
Catullus demonstrates a vulgar taste.....	78
A button.....	79
First light.....	80
After death.....	81

## INVOCATION

Suburb or Sabine farm, not all our hard work  
alters, though it orders, as best it can  
your rhythms that answer in feather, fin and flower  
motions of sun and moon. Look where tides  
advancing under the causeway flush the Bay.  
Sun silvers the ferns, domestic grass  
pricks up to greet the mower, and my timber house  
creaks on its jacks. That once I crossed  
the rust-red river, heard steel speak and saw  
scavengers wait on the dying; that I command  
at peace diagrams of dissolving stars  
or proceed white-coated against the militant Crab –  
such purpose commends itself. But blood must keep  
even as Caesar's your lyric measure precisely  
or lose itself among the abstract spaces  
where no bird builds, nor predator patrols  
the sandy shallows,  
nor sap rises to inform a tree.

## THE FARM

Remember  
Catullus  
the farm up north  
and the three women  
the one who was housewife  
the one who milked the herd  
and one the entertainer  
who loved and was loved by  
the boy who sang on horseback  
and trapped rabbits for the pot and  
fished for eels.

8      Their men were away with Caesar  
conquering Gaul  
and you were that boy  
chopping wood for the range  
loving the herd smell  
the working dogs  
the konaki  
that took cream to the gate,  
and deep in bush  
the sacred grove  
with its little waterfall  
and subsequent clear pool  
where small fish hung like stars  
in a secret sky.

And then at night  
lantern light  
around the big kitchen table  
the women talking  
teasing you Catullus  
pretending you were their man  
until  
candles at brass bed time  
and moreporks calling  
magic/mysterious  
out of the deep, unspeaking  
dark.

## NOT YET?

Wanting to die  
Catullus  
and ready to relax into death  
as into a soft bed  
or a warm bath  
you are called back to life  
by an idea  
for this one more  
small  
last poem.  
Is it the Muse calls you  
or just the will to live  
in weak disguise?

## THE SILENCE

In the undertaker's parlour  
today Catullus  
you wore your new hearing aids  
to listen  
beside finely refurbished Kezia  
to the Silence.  
She lay there  
in her plain wood coffin  
no more serious than you  
but focussed  
wearing that dark grey shirt we'd chosen,  
red-brown silk scarf,  
black trousers and black-shined shoes  
so small they touched the heart.  
Not a pin was dropped,  
not a tear fell:  
you and she Catullus  
were elsewhere, elsewhere  
nowhere.