

## **Waikato Institute of Technology, Wintec, Hamilton, New Zealand**

### **Gail Pittaway**

### **Stamps**

#### Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway's research interests include creative writing (poetry, short story and scripts), the teaching of creative writing, and the ritual developments in the history of theatre. She has edited two books; "Writers in the Gardens" and "Love Street" and has had stories broadcast on radio. Gail is also the Waikato Times theatre critic and contributes regular live book reviews for the Nine to Noon programme on National Radio in New Zealand. She is a member of the New Zealand Communication Association, The Tertiary Writing Network, the New Zealand Society of Authors and has been an executive member of the Australian Association of Writing Programmes since 2004. She lectures in the School of Media Arts.

#### Keywords:

Poetry – memory

## **Stamps**

My Dad was a postie.  
Most summers I'd work with him  
In the Chief Post Office;  
Sorting mail into sizes,  
Stacking parcels,  
Stamping Christmas through a franking machine.  
  
Sometimes we'd read the postcards in the airmail bin  
even though we'd signed a pledge.  
Once my own hat went into a canvas bag-  
Who knows where?  
It wasn't stamped or addressed.  
  
I learnt there the value of order  
and submission.  
Why parcels must be tied securely,  
what happens when the address is wrong;  
  
Impeccable skills for an age where  
My only letters are bills  
And junk mail is so indiscriminating  
It carries no name, stamp or address.

## **Platonic rites**

Within a walled scented garden  
Made not only for the blind  
They groped a knowledge of the sky  
From imprints on warmed flesh.  
Animals twitched, dozed, grazed, nudged,  
Unconcerned at this amiable gaming;  
Woman, man, flowers, grass, showers, sun—  
Ancient symbols; their own Illumination.  
  
“See the two air currents,” he cried,  
“How higher clouds waft motionless and lower scud on by!”  
But she, sense betrayed  
By jabbing rain on sunned flesh,  
Bite of lust and sting of lips  
Lay rapt, whipped on by another current's course,  
Blinkered to cause, effect, direction, pace.  
  
The Charioteer, who does not show a face  
Gives rein only for the passage of the skies,  
A sun to chase.

### **Shag poem**

Once near a knobby headland  
A shag flung herself to fish  
Down, direct into the shadowed sea.  
Barely a splash betrayed her plunge  
No ripples showed her path  
  
I waited longer than my lungs could bear  
To catch the triumphant rise  
But she never reemerged.  
Upon another rocky beach  
Self-flung upon hot rocks  
My tears dried even as they fell  
Leaving no trace, no stain engrained  
And I walked away quite healed.  
  
Now I cannot pass a jagged coast  
without remembering  
that shag, that shady sea,  
those tears on lichenized rocks—  
both gone mysteriously.

### **Dreamtime; Troy and Pergamon**

We sleep often, and dream much  
Here, in the ruined land.  
We greet past shades with brief respect,  
Then leave them to the longer vigils of reptiles  
To whom they now belong.  
  
Did snakes slither around the palace of Eumenes  
so presumptuously then? Or lizards bask in the Hellenistic sun?  
Were the healing waters of Asklepeion also frog infested?  
And the turtles in the holy passages; did Galen kick at their shells distractedly  
as he mused upon remedies?  
  
Reptiles lie low, some never strike.  
They have waited long for this-  
coldly, slowly, to encroach upon the powers of the past.  
Now, save the odd tourist, cow or goat, who will pass,  
they share the shadows only with each other.  
  
Perhaps this is why we, too, lie low and sleep;  
in dreams we learn from the snakes when to strike,  
the lizards teach us when to hide, the frogs to plunge;  
and the turtles teach us to receive the blows  
and still survive.

**Silber See  
(For Martin)**

We camped that night, in a rusting wood,  
By a lake called Silber See.

While dragonflies idled to the lull of the lake  
And strange night creatures called,  
Came overhead a slice of new moon  
And the ache of an uncanny grief-  
the intuition of your Mother's death.

Another camp, another night  
An oval ripe moon in ascendance,  
By a weedy backwater, enthralled, we caught  
The irregular plop of the fly-catching trout,  
The flickering of distant fires-  
and you talked with her in a dream.

Two waters, a week, and a moon in the making  
These icons I take wherever I go:  
Light on darkness, moon on water-  
the depths of pain in your Mother's eyes.

## Open Night at the School

He seems puzzled.

“Your son?”

“Yes, that’s him  
in the group of students  
showing how it’s done”.

An awkward pause;

“What brings you here?”

I ask unnecessarily  
and smile at their youngest;  
a gap after the older two,  
she’s keen to go co-ed next year.

We ramble on a little longer;  
our kids, the weather,  
the price of petrol,  
school bus routes;  
then smile vaguely as we part.

A charge of sorrow unsteps me.

I recall my son,  
within the womb,  
churning resistance  
at the hard wooden pew,  
while theirs lay still;

the tiny wooden box  
barely broaching the altar.

And the guilt  
Of bearing life  
Rising around me  
Like incense and hymns.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

Wordsworth (in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*) described poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility”. Is memory everything to a writer? Are there margins or limits to memory, or can memory be developed, supported? How is memory treated by a writer, both as idea and resource? In writing poetry, it is worth considering whether events are remembered out of strong emotion or out of the need to retain the impress, the stamp, of moments.

### *Research contribution*

New Zealand poets who work strongly in the field of individual or cultural memory, recollection, even reminiscence, include James K. Baxter, Alistair Campbell, Fleur Adcock, Janet Frame and Hone Tuwhare. This selection of original poetry, ‘Stamps’, looks to the impress of memory or moment as the source of each poem. Memory is both episodic and procedural (Sacks 2005). The poems are arranged to reflect the contrast between the two; the continuous present or past tense against the urgency of a one-time occurrence; the tension or contrast between what is learned and what is felt.

### *Research significance*

Structurally and in imagery the poetry draws on canonical and classical authors, either overtly or implicitly, for example in the Platonic image of the Charioteer (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a-b), and the *hortus conclusus* of the Biblical Song of Songs and medieval art, but with the intention of placing them within a current Antipodean locality and vernacular. This submission to *TEXT*, the A rated online journal, is a selection of poetry reflecting original work which has been performed and read at writing festivals and public readings, but not previously published. Bearing in mind that the Greek root word ‘poetry’ literally means ‘to make or create’, in each case the poetry ‘makes’ the recollection even as the recollection ‘makes’ the poem.

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