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LOADING THE IMAGE

A critical and creative thesis presented in
partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

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Abstract

This Master of Creative Writing research project consists of a collection of lyric and prose poems, *Sea Glass*, and an accompanying exegesis, “Loading the Image.” These works were written to explore the creative and critical opportunities inherent in a photograph album. Both exegesis and poetry collection reflect my research into the ways in which the contents, form and meaning of a personal, family photograph album could be represented in a series of auto/biographical and ekphrastic poems. Specifically, I asked how an emotional response to certain kinds of photographs could be reflected in poetry and how a sequence of such poems could be ordered in a collection so that the experience of reading the poems resembles the experience of viewing an album. The poetry collection accounts for 70% of the thesis and the exegesis for 30%.

The exegesis investigates photographs and albums within two contexts which are in turn reflected in the collection in individual poems and in the sequencing of the whole. The first context is concerned with the concepts of *punctum*, *studium* and *that-has-been* described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. These concepts, and my reading of other theorists interested in the relationship of the photograph to its subject and how this relationship is perceived by a viewer, suggested analogies between photographs and lyric poetry. Parallels between the experience of looking at a photograph and reading or writing a poem about a photograph are explored in the exegesis most specifically through an analysis of Ted Hughes’ poem “Six Young Men” and, in the creative component, through the lyric and ekphrastic poems I wrote for inclusion in *Sea Glass*.

The second context is concerned with photographs and photograph albums as instruments of social history. Here, critical writing from authors Annette Kuhn and Martha Langford on how albums and their contents provide connections with the past through memory-making offers insights into the use of photographs for life writing. These insights are explored in the exegesis in reference to selected poems from Lyn Hejinian and Kerry Hines and in *Sea Glass* through auto/biographical poetry and in the sequencing of the collection.

My research into theoretical responses to photographs and albums inspired me to develop a creative project for which I wrote a series of poems to represent individual photographs and the experience of viewing them in the context of my family album. These poems include ekphrasis of the photographs as well as prose and found poems which are meditations or commentary by a speaker who represents a present-day viewer of the photographs. My reading of Barthes, and in particular his insights into how a photograph might evoke an emotional response from a viewer, encouraged me to consider how ekphrasis of a photograph could itself evoke such a response. The collection is structured so that it reflects the way in which the implied author of the poems comes to understand the contents of the album. Here, Langford's discussion of the role of a domestic photograph album in the recitation of family stories suggested how *Sea Glass* could be sequenced to tell the family story contained within the poems. By drawing on these contexts I aimed to replicate the visual storytelling capabilities of an album in a poetry collection where poems represent the photographs.

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LOADING THE IMAGE

“Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination”

(Barthes, Image, Music, Text 26).

Introduction

My maternal grandmother Ida Evelyn Row stands on a windswept beach holding a halved apple in each hand. She is the subject of a post-card sized, black and white print mounted in a small album of family photographs all dating from the first three decades of the twentieth century. This photograph and its album provided focus, reference and inspiration for *Sea Glass*, my collection of ekphrastic and auto/biographical poems about Ida, and the accompanying exegesis “Loading the Image.” Both creative and critical projects reflect my interest in, and research question about, the creative possibilities that arise when one considers the relationship of photograph to poem and album to collection. Specifically, I set out to investigate how the visual attributes of a photograph could be represented in poetry and how the story-telling properties inherent in a photograph album could be replicated by a collection of poetry about photographs.

Photographs and albums are usually interpreted as artefacts of art or social history. My research into the way these contexts might influence a poetry collection suggested synergies between photography and lyric poetry and between albums and collections of poetry in which aspects of a life story, either biographical or autobiographical, seem to be revealed. The art-historical context is represented in the exegesis by my investigation into selected work of poets who, by responding to photographs, appear to evoke the theories of photography expressed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. This context is reflected in my collection by ekphrasis, in which my poems respond to photographs as visual images. The social history context is represented in the exegesis by research into the work of Annette Kuhn and Martha Langford on the significance of photographs and albums as repositories of memory

and in the performance of the act of remembering. Here, I investigate selected published works of poetry in which there is a component of life writing associated with photography. In my collection, this context is represented in two ways: firstly, by poetry in which the subject of the photograph or a present-day viewer of the photograph is the speaker of the poems, and secondly, by the way in which I sequenced the collection to resemble a photograph album.

The exegesis and creative work were written together; discoveries from one component inspiring the other and vice versa. In both exegesis and poetry collection, I set out to demonstrate how elements of a photograph could be represented by ekphrasis, as well as how the visual storytelling properties inherent in the images, layout and captions of a photograph album could provide a form for the sequencing of a collection that has elements of both ekphrasis and life writing.

The exegesis which follows this introduction is divided into four sections and describes the critical and creative research I undertook while writing a collection of poetry which used mostly visual artefacts as background material for understanding the life of my grandmother and constructing a partial biography of her. I begin by describing the primary historical album I was working with, its significance to me as a memorial to my grandmother, and why I chose to use it as source material for ekphrasis and life writing.

In the next section “Ekphrasis as *Punctum* and *Studium*,” I investigate the photograph first as the subject of ekphrasis and then as the subject of the theoretical writing of Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, John Berger in *Another Way of Telling* and Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. While Sontag and Berger enabled me to see how both lyric and photograph share attributes because of their relationship to moments in time, my creative project is principally concerned with “what

photography is ‘in itself’” (Barthes 3). I investigate how poetry written in response to photographs might reflect Barthes’ concepts of what a photograph is, in either form or content. These concepts are *punctum*, that aspect of a photograph which pricks or wounds the viewer, is poignant to them; *studium*, the generally interesting aspect of a photograph; and *that-has-been*, the essence of what a photograph represents (26, 27, 77). As part of this research, I apply these concepts to an analysis of Ted Hughes’ poem, “Six Young Men.” I ask how the concepts Barthes attributes to photographs might be discernible in an ekphrasis of a photograph. I extend this research by writing poems in which the notion of *punctum* and *that-has-been* are the conscious drivers for my responses to the photographs I was using. I conclude this section on lyric as ekphrasis by considering how the various first person speakers or personas of the poems in *Sea Glass* interact with the photographs from the album. This examination of point of view also considers how the first person “I” is represented in lyric poems and in life writing.

I begin “Photography, Memory and Life Writing” with a discussion of the use of photographs as background material for life writing. My research for this aspect of my exegesis relates principally to Annette Kuhn’s description in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* of the use of photographs as the initial prompts for remembering in “memory work” to create “memory texts.” Kuhn uses the term memory work to describe “an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re) construction through memory” (157). She describes memory as “an account, always discursive, always textual [which can] assume expression through a wide variety of media and contexts” (161). Methodology described by Kuhn inspired me to use photographs from the album for my own memory work. I wrote a series of poems in which the

present-day speaker purposefully reconstructs Ida's life as the photographs in the album prompt memories for the speaker and her mother. I illustrate this research further in the exegesis by referring to selected poems from Kerry Hines' collection *Young Country* and Lyn Hejinian's autobiographical prose poem *My Life*. *Young Country* demonstrates a means of collaboration between image and text and *My Life* resembles a form of memory text in which the speaker's life is presented as "a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, 'snapshots', flashes" (Kuhn 162).

The final section of this exegesis, "Album into Collection," discusses the process I followed as I sequenced the poems I had written into a collection. I describe my investigation into how I could make the visual experience of the poems on the page in a poetry collection resemble that of photographs in an album. Could a short lyric poem be the equivalent of a photograph for instance and what is the effect of placing it alone on a page? Social historian Martha Langford's book, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, provided me with a means of understanding my album as a tool for story-telling and oral history and this understanding in turn influenced the subject matter and sequencing of the poems in *Sea Glass*. While matters of chronology, narrative voice and illustration all influenced the final form of the collection, it was the poems as photographs that determined the final sequencing. Just as an album is made up of photographs that have meaning for its compiler, the poems in *Sea Glass* reflect the present-day speaker's understanding of the life of her grandmother.

The Album

A few years ago and shortly before he died, my uncle sent my mother an old photograph album that had originally belonged to their father Les. The small landscape format album is constructed from soft brown card and held together by plaited string tied into a bow. Some of the photographs have frames drawn around them and two of the pages have inked titles as if my grandfather had embarked upon a carefully conceived project. The photographs are of my grandfather, my grandmother Ida, her sisters and parents, and assorted views taken in and around Whanganui, the Manawatū Gorge and Napier. The album had originally been compiled so that the photographs were glued onto the right-hand side of each page opening and probably in a chronological sequence. The photographs have been trimmed and sometimes shaped before being ordered on the page and a few have been tinted.

Apart from the opening two pages captioned “Castlecliff from the Air” and “Aeroplaning Xmas 1921” my grandfather did not name the people or places in the photographs. It was clearly an album intended for viewers who did not need to have the subjects identified and who would understand the compiler’s sequencing of events. However, before gifting the album to my mother, my uncle added other photographs of Ida and her family and of my mother and himself as children to the blank pages of the album. These new photographs are a mixture of copies of original prints, some of which are poorly printed or trimmed and photographs which seem to have been lifted from another album. The result of the additions is that the original chronological sequencing of my grandparent’s life in the 1920s has been lost and the album has become a collection of historical family photographs in no particular

order.

Despite this confusion, I was fascinated by the album when I first encountered it because of a particularly striking photograph of my grandmother taken at some time in the early 1920s. Ida stands on a beach dressed in a heavy, calf length skirt and loose jacket over a white blouse which has a bright button or brooch closing the neck. Her hair is blown by the wind and in each hand she holds half an apple. She is smiling uncertainly as if she has been caught unawares or perhaps the photographer is talking to her and she is about to respond. She looks to be in her mid-twenties and although decades have passed since the photograph was taken, it could be contemporary.

The family resemblances revealed in this photograph and others in the album were particularly resonant for me because I have never met my mother's parents. Ida died in 1932 from pneumonia when my mother was 3 years old and my grandfather remarried in 1933 and died in 1951, the year before I was born. While my mother and her step-mother frequently mentioned my grandfather, and displayed his art and craft work prominently in their homes, neither of them referred to Ida and I did not know that she had existed until I was in my teens. This obfuscation is understandable I suppose. My step-grandmother behaved exactly as any other grandmother might and my mother was anxious that her own children did not devalue the person who had become the mother in her life.

My mother explained who Ida was when I was about thirteen and produced a few items of memorabilia which included letters, trinkets and jewellery. Some of the trinkets and jewellery had always been part of the paraphernalia on my mother's dressing table and as a child I was familiar with them but had never wondered about their provenance. My mother gave me Ida's art nouveau silver and blue-green

enamel pendant to wear when the style went through a resurgence of popularity in the 1960s and I was delighted to see that Ida was wearing it in the one photograph of her that my mother had at that time. Ida and I were probably the same age and, while I couldn't see myself in her face, I discerned a resemblance to my mother. I felt a connection with her every time I handled the necklace and I wore it on my wedding day and for special occasions until eventually I became concerned about the integrity of the chain and put it away.

When much later, I developed an interest in both ekphrasis and life writing and their expression in poetry, the album, its contents, and the memorabilia resurfaced as potential subjects for my own writing. I imagined a collection of poetry about my grandmother's life inspired by the letters which my mother had preserved. This biographical writing would be supplemented with ekphrasis derived from the photographs and memorabilia. There would be an additional speaker who could be identified as a modern-day viewer of the album and memorabilia and her implied autobiography would provide a commentary on Ida's life. In this way, the collection could be described as both life writing (biography and autobiography) and ekphrasis, all in the form of poetry.

At first, the letters seem to offer significant material for life writing: Ida writes to her sister Agnes about the aftermath of the Napier Earthquake, about motherhood and making jam; my schoolboy grandfather writes to Ida in 1914 begging for a photograph and as a young man in 1923 to tell her that he has bought her wedding ring; Ida's mother writes to Agnes in 1932 and describes Ida's death. But while I could research and dig deep into the letters for context and subtext and use them as the basis for reconstructing in poetry the events they described, it was the photographs that had the most impact on my early drafts.

Before the album appeared, I had only seen two small, formal studio portraits of Ida. This formality made her seem both distant and unknowable; in them she could be any young woman from the period 1910-1920. The Ida in the album who reads, smiles, scowls, pulls faces and glances uncertainly at the photographer seems somehow more personable and alive. The photographs make resonant subjects for ekphrasis and my connection with them encouraged me to investigate how I could use them for the biographical information that I had imagined would come principally from the letters. Ida makes a poignant subject for an investigation into photography and its relationship with memory as a component of life writing because she died before my mother was old enough to construct her own memories of her. In addition, as my research for this project progressed, I began to understand that the album could be viewed both as an historical artefact and as an example of visual storytelling: "... the album functions as a pictorial *aide-mémoire* to recitation, to the telling of stories" (Langford 5). Both interpretations inspired my poetry.

The questions I set out to answer as I wrote and attempted to sequence a collection of poems about Ida's life were firstly, in what ways could I represent individual photographs in poetry and secondly, could I reflect an album and its contents in the way I chose to sequence the final collection. I was interested in whether I could not only represent the subject matter of photographs in poetry but also find a way to reflect the images themselves through form or effect. In terms of the relationship of album to collection, my research was focused on how the forms of visual storytelling inherent in the album (the images, captions, layout) could provide me with the form for a collection (order, point of view expressed, form of poetry).

I

Ekphrasis as *Punctum* and *Studium*

Poems about photographs are a form of ekphrasis, a poetic mode often defined after James Heffernan as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan, *Museum of Words* 3). The term originates from the Greek and was originally applied to the practice of oratory in which a scene or object was brought vividly to life. Homer’s description in the *Iliad* of Achilles’ shield is commonly cited as the early classical example of literary ekphrasis and of *energeia*, or vividness.

By the time Keats published his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in the early nineteenth century, the practice of ekphrasis had evolved from vivid description to a mode in which the poet contemplates the meaning of an art work that is the subject of the poem. Critical debate on ekphrasis in Keats’ era was interested in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s, *Laokoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* which had been published in 1766.¹ Lessing argued that painting was a spatial art (a visual representation of a single moment in time) and poetry a temporal art (a verbal representation of a sequence) and that the distinct boundaries between the two forms of representation should be observed.

This distinction between poetry and art, expressed as a form of competition (paragonal conflict) between the two, continues as a component of literary analysis of ekphrasis into the present day. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” itself stands in much work as “paradigmatically ekphrastic” (Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation” 297) because the urn, as a still plastic object, decorated with (silent) scenes from classical

¹ In “Persona and Voice in the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’” James O’Rourke maintains that a reading of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ suggests that Keats was well acquainted with Lessing’s arguments in *Laokoön* (32).

life: “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time” (1-2) becomes animated in narrative in Keats’ ode. Scholars frequently refer to Lessing’s *Laokoön* and use Keats’ urn as an example of ekphrasis while proposing their own definitions and readings of the term.² Heffernan’s definition for ekphrasis allows for an exploration of visual/verbal relationships that encompasses classical ekphrastic situations such as a poet’s contemplation of an urn or a painting and for verbal responses to contemporary visual images like photographs, cinematic images and modern abstract art.

My principal research interest in ekphrasis is in poems written in response to photographs, and in particular to the kinds of images that typically make up the contents of domestic photograph albums. These images interest me as a poet because unlike formal studio portraits or carefully composed art photography, they are often spontaneous accidents of light and circumstance, a representation of what the photographer saw at just the moment the shutter was depressed and are presented out of context of any previous or future event. The snapshot photograph’s fixed viewpoint, its capture of a moment in time, and its sometimes-ambiguous contexts make it an ideal subject for representation in lyric poetry because lyric and photograph seem to have attributes in common.

In his book *Lyric*, Scott Brewster identifies a number of the lyric’s defining features: “it is characterised by brevity, deploys a first-person speaker or persona, involves performance, and is an outlet for personal emotion.” Further, it “is seen as a

² See also for example: Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (263-288); James A.W. Heffernan, *The Museum of Words* (1-8); Michael Davidson, “Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem” (69-72); and W. J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (151-181). Heffernan, Davidson and Mitchell all refer to each other’s work and to Krieger while proposing their own definitions of the meaning and significance of ekphrasis.

suspension or interlude, a unique intensification of literary language distinct from everyday experience” (1,6). Brewster’s description of the lyric as a suspension or interlude suggested connections between poem and photograph which were reinforced by my reading of art critic John Berger’s writing in *Another Way of Seeing*. He describes photography as a “strange invention [whose] primary raw materials are light and time” (87):

A photograph preserves a moment of time and prevents it being effaced by the supersession of further moments. In this respect photographs might be compared to images stored in the memory. Yet there is a fundamental difference: whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience, a photograph isolates the appearance of a disconnected instant. (91)

In this quotation Berger seems to place the photograph in the context of the arrested moment in time of classical ekphrasis. The relationship between photograph and poem then is characterised by the way visual and verbal represent that moment through light or words. Just as the moment in time that has been recorded by a camera is isolated from the moments before and after the photograph was taken, ekphrasis in the form of lyric poetry by focussing on the visual in “intensified literary language,” elevates that moment from the “residue of continuous experience” of implied narrative.

At its simplest level such ekphrasis is descriptive, however, my creative project is interested in representing more than just the subject and the presumed context of the photograph in poetry. I wanted to explore how I could write poems in response to photographs that are imbued with the attributes of the photographs they represent. In this exegesis, while I briefly consider how ekphrasis of photographs could include

attention to the appearance of the poem on the page in the section “Album into Collection,” this interest is represented principally by my critical research into Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* and his description of the ways in which photographs evoke an emotional response from a viewer.

Like Barthes, I began my research by investigating what a photograph actually represented. *Camera Lucida* is the source of Barthes’ terms *studium* and *punctum*, which he describes in the context of the desire to “learn at all costs what Photography is ‘in itself’” (3). This question is answered as Barthes considers a photograph of his mother as a young girl he calls the “Winter Garden Photograph.”

Barthes uses the term *studium* to refer to a general, universally available understanding of what any photograph represents: “It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” (26). A photograph’s *punctum* is a detail; a sensitive point, “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Barthes illustrates these concepts with examples including a description of a photograph of Andy Warhol with his face in his hands. For Barthes the portrait in itself represents the *studium*, “and the *punctum* is not the gesture but the slightly repellent substance of those nails, at once soft and hard-edged” (45).

Barthes develops these concepts further in the second part of *Camera Lucida* when he writes about the Winter Garden Photograph:

The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a

little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898). Her brother, seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing, along which he had extended one arm; she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera; you could tell the photographer had said, “Step forward a little so we can see you;” she was holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do, in an awkward gesture. (68-69)

For Barthes, understanding the Winter Garden Photograph is not a simple matter of identifying the subjects in a photograph. In this photograph, he recognised his mother’s “essential identity” (66) (the finger in her hand being one of the examples of *punctum* in the photograph) and “the certificate of [her] presence” (87). Barthes points out that photographs, unlike paintings and writing, “can never deny that *the thing has been there*” (76) (later described as the *that-has-been*):

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. (80-81)

Barthes’ discussion throughout the book of incidents of *that-has-been* revolves around the idea that while a photograph might be a certificate of presence it is also an intimation of death. Once a photograph has been taken, the instant has gone and will no longer exist: “Death is the *eidos* of that Photograph” (15); in other words: “what Photography is in itself” (3).

Later in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes returns to the notion of *punctum* and elaborates on it. He has seen a photograph of Lewis Payne, a young man who in 1865 attempted to assassinate the United States' Secretary of State. The photograph was taken while Payne was waiting to be hanged: "The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*" (96). Barthes has discovered "another *punctum* (another 'stigmatum') than the 'detail.' This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time" (96). Barthes is overwhelmed by his discovery that associated with this photograph and the one of his mother is a *punctum*, "vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die" (96). Barthes is referring to the way in which a photograph depicts the present and the future simultaneously. The act of taking the photograph has preserved the moment in the present of the photographer but as soon as it is developed and viewed, the photograph represents the past and in the future will, like the photograph of Lewis Payne show someone who is dead now and in the moment of being photographed will be going to die.

A slightly different perspective on this matter is provided by Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*. Sontag describes photography as "an elegiac art" and all photographs as "memento mori" (15). She describes the act of taking a photograph as participating in "another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (15). The difference is between Sontag's view of the photograph as frozen evidence of time past and Barthes' view of the photograph as showing simultaneously "[t]his will be and this has been" (Barthes 96).

I looked again at my album and the photograph of Ida on the beach. When I first encountered it, I experienced a moment of intense recognition – this is my grandmother! – that had not been present while I looked through the snapshots of her on the preceding pages. It was partly that she looked familiar because she resembled my mother and also one of my sons, partly that she would not look out of place on the same beach today, and partly that there was something about the photograph that suggested that the photographer had captured, in the split second that he pressed his finger on the shutter, a glimpse of what she was really like. She didn't care that her hair was being blown in the wind, she was happy to be on a windswept beach, there was no artifice in her expression or in her stance, she carried apples in her pockets, and there is a hint of laughter about her lips.

Even with the context of the album in which it appears and the family history it illustrates, the photograph of Ida on the beach is *studium* (a matter of general interest to anybody). The photograph is a snapshot of a young woman on an unidentified beach in the 1920s. The initial *punctum* (the poignant detail) for me is in both brooch or button and the halved apple. Ida wears jewellery in all the photographs I have seen of her, but this brooch seems to me to be a means of closing her blouse so that it doesn't open too low at the neck – it's a kind of protection. The apple is poignant to me because the shape of her mouth is imprinted in it. This *punctum* is overshadowed of course, by Barthes' other *punctum*: she is dead and she is going to die.

This photograph of Ida is a relatively straightforward subject for ekphrasis in that I could evoke or describe it as well as use it as the inspiration for imaginative biography. It is a reproducible image which could potentially become part of the collection as a whole, and as an image it inspired a variety of critical and creative responses. The ideas from Barthes which I applied to my reading of the photograph

not only inspired my creative writing but also provided me with a critical tool with which to view published ekphrasis of photographs and with a means of thinking about my own ekphrastic poems. This critical and creative practice is reflected in my examination of Ted Hughes' poem "Six Young Men" from his early collection *The Hawk in the Rain* and by my thoughts on my own poems "The Human Form in Art" and "Trace."

"Six Young Men" is an ekphrasis in which the speaker reflects on an old photograph and both poem and the photograph it describes illustrate aspects of *studium*, *punctum* and *that-has-been*. The title of the poem refers to a photograph, familiar to Hughes, of six men who were all friends of his father and who were all killed in the First World War. The photograph actually exists, the landscape of the place where the men were photographed is recognisable today and the poem itself is commemorated there with a plaque.³ The twenty-first century's commemoration of the First World War has made such photographs and the events they represent seem relatively commonplace but each photograph is nevertheless one in which the abiding sensation for the viewer is of *that-has-been*. Hughes' photograph is one in which the *studium* – six young men pose on a grassy bank dressed in their Sunday best – becomes an example of *that-has-been*, when it is viewed with the knowledge that all six will die within the next six months:

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well, –

Six young men, familiar to their friends.

Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged

This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands. (1-4)

³ See Ann Skea. "Ted Hughes at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, March 1976." www.ann.skea.com/THHome N.p. and Ann Skea. Ted Hughes: "Adelaide Festival 2. March 1976." N.p. www.ann.skea.com/THHome.

“Six Young Men” is structured like the act of remembering while looking at a photograph. The narration begins in the present tense as any discussion of a photograph in an album might as the speaker brings subjects and location into focus. It is almost as if the young Hughes is listening to his father as one after another the subjects of the photograph are highlighted and brought into close view: “this one was shot in an attack and lay / Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend, / Went out to bring him in and was shot too;” (19-21).

The six young men stare out of the photograph at the viewer like Lewis Payne does in *Camera Lucida*:

Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride – (6-8)

Unlike Lewis Payne (but like Ida), the young men in this photograph do not know that they will soon be dead, but the effect of this *punctum* in “Six Young Men” is the same for Hughes’ speaker as it was for Barthes when he saw the photograph of Lewis Payne:

I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (Barthes 96)

Barthes’ concepts seem to imbue “Six Young Men.” The first and second stanzas describe the photograph (as *studium*): “The celluloid of the photograph holds them well, – / Six young men, familiar to their friends” (1-2) and “All are trimmed

for a Sunday jaunt. I know / That bilberried bank..." (10-11). The third and fourth stanzas describe the death of each individual and the fifth is a meditation on the horrors of war. In these stanzas, there is *punctum*, "The locket of a smile, turned overnight / Into the hospital of his mangled last / Agony and hours..." (29-31); and *that-has-been*:

To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat. (42-45)

"Six Young Men," like any photograph of young men who are known casualties of the First World War, lends itself to analysis in terms of *punctum*, *studium* and *that-has-been* because of the poignancy of the subject matter. The subjects of the photographs are alive but are already dead; Hughes' poem and his photograph are *memento mori*. However, the poem provided me with more than just an illustration of the way in which Barthesian concepts could be found in an ekphrasis of a photograph.

In their essay "'Horrors Here Smile': the poem, the photograph and the *punctum*" authors Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer investigate three poems related to First World War photographs including "Six Young Men." They argue "that poems which take photographs as their starting point are able to re-present and sharpen the *punctum* that Barthes so elegantly analyses" (203). In their analysis of "Six Young Men" they demonstrate that in the last stanza, Hughes first uses the photograph to emphasise that we, the readers are just as mortal as the young men in the photograph: "That man's not more alive whom you confront / And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud, / Than any of these six celluloid smiles are" (lines 37-39). Then, by

emphasising “the single exposure” in line 44, Hughes is not only “rendering the six young men both alive and dead” but forcing the reader to “realise our own incipient deaths” (205).

“Six Young Men” showed me how a poet responding to a photograph and finding and elaborating on the *punctum* that has meaning for them, and representing that *punctum* in words, makes the photograph speak differently to their readers. This discovery led me to re-examine the way in which I was using Ida’s photographs as inspiration for my poems. Could I demonstrate a relationship between the photograph and the thought processes of the present-day speaker of the poems so that I could affect my readers in the way that Minogue and Palmer argue Hughes does in “Six Young Men?”

Part of my work in attempting to answer this question led me to experiment with deliberately evoking the idea of *that-has-been* and *punctum* in my poems rather than writing poems which might reveal these concepts in retrospect. There were two main reasons for this experiment; first I was struggling to write ekphrasis in the form of lyrics in response to any of the photographs despite my emotional attachment to them, and secondly, my reading of Barthes and Sontag in conjunction with “Six Young Men” illuminated for me exactly how the photographs were affecting me. My initial writing attempts were not getting further than *studium*: my analysis and scrutiny of them was mired in research about locations, identifying the subjects, and puzzling over the chronology of the album. Once I had been working with Barthes for a time, I came to understand that what was special for me about the album and its photographs was *punctum* and *that-has-been*. I turned to the photograph of Ida on the Beach and began to work critically and creatively with this image as an illustration of Barthes’ and Sontag’s concepts: I considered what the *punctum* was

for me and how I could represent it in poetry so that it became the *punctum* for a reader; I identified the *studium* and worked on ways in which I could represent that aspect of the photograph in a poem; I understood the *that-has-been* because I knew Ida's backstory, so I considered ways in which individual poems and the collection as a whole could reinforce this concept. This process is represented in *Sea Glass* by a sequence of five poems reflecting on the photograph of Ida on the Beach.

When I wrote "The Human Form in Art," my focus was on *punctum* and *that-has-been*. I had identified what was *punctum* for me, the tooth marks on the apple and the button on her blouse. The second stanza of the poem incorporates these incidents of *punctum*:

Later, the photographer will consider
limbs composed
in light diffused
through salt spray, distant waves,
tooth marks on a halved apple,
the soft cuffs of her blouse,
the bright button
gathering the fabric above her breasts, (13-20)

The last four lines relate to the photographer's action after Ida's death:

and taking out his pencil
try to capture only her mouth,
drawing from memory
the sound of her voice. (21-24)

In this case, it is the photographer for whom the impact of *that-has-been* has most resonance. His act in drawing her face is his attempt to preserve her in his memory.

The reader of the collection doesn't yet know that Ida is soon to die, but even without that context the intent of the poem is that it implies as Barthes suggests, that in this photograph Ida is alive but she is going to die.

In my poem "The Apple" the tooth marks highlight the *punctum*: "the shape of her mouth / preserved in its flesh, / a certainty" (4-6) in a poem that also incorporates the *studium* of the photograph (young woman stands on a windswept beach). In "Ida thinks about the Beach" I was thinking about how my idea of what was poignant or piercing about the photograph might not have matched the perception of the photographer or his subject. Here Ida is the first-person speaker of the poem, and my decision to write prose poetry rather than lyric here was to connect her in terms of poetic form to the present-day speaker of the collection, who is mostly represented in prose. In this poem, Ida describes the setting which is not in frame and the process of posing for the photograph: "I was thinking as I turned and held up the apple again and again, but as if it was natural..." (11-12). The apple has "coddling moth; webs and worms inside" (4) and is not memorable for her. She would have preferred a different photograph: "If I'd had charge of the camera, I would have taken this instead..." (16) and she imagines a different moment: "my tongue on the paper to close it, my fingers holding the match, his hand on my hand" (17-18).

My poem "Trace" from this sequence is an attempt to render the photograph into a poem which responded to an assertion by Susan Sontag in *On Photography* that "[a] photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (154). I wanted to present the image in writing in as much concrete detail as I could: "footprints in the sand around her feet, / sharp edged, crumbling a little as she pauses," (1-2) and then to refer to the photograph: "in black and white /

fixed by light and chemicals onto paper” (8-9) before making a final assertion that she is not only preserved in the photograph but also by the accidents of genetic inheritance that are present in her descendants:

How tempting it is now
to seek resemblances:
eyebrows, mouth, hair,
in the living. (11-14)

My experience in writing this sequence of poems illuminated the relationship of poem to photograph for me. I began to understand that ekphrasis of photographs need not be a matter of simply representing the visual image in writing, instead it could involve the evocation of what a photograph is “in itself.” Once I had discovered how “Six Young Men” reflected and then brought into focus the *punctum*, *studium* and *that-has-been* of its originating photograph, I was better able to imagine a series of poems which would be the equivalent of photographs. However, the act of writing these poems raised a further and related issue for me: who are the speakers of these poems and in what ways are they responding to the photographs?

In “Six Young Men” and in my poems “Trace” and “Damsons” the speaker meditates on the photograph from a point of view that is external to the image. Poem and photograph demonstrate the classically ekphrastic position where the speaker’s representation of the visual image reinforces their position as a viewer who is interpreting the image for the reader. My creative project however was interested in finding a means of writing from within the image as well as from without it. This desire was partly driven by my attempts to understand my grandmother’s character by looking at her photographs, partly by my perception that the photographs had

different meanings depending on who viewed them and in what era they were viewed, and partly by my interest in experimenting with different points of view.

Conceptual poet Cole Swensen's 2001 essay "To Writewithize" provided me with one means of reconsidering the ekphrastic point of view. In this essay, Swensen rejects the paragonal (oppositional) model of ekphrasis in favour of one in which poems "don't *look* at art so much as *live* with it," describing the relationship between poem and artwork in such poems as one of "fellow travelers sharing a context" (70). Swensen's interest is in the avant-garde, and she illustrates her thesis with examples drawn from poets such as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Laura Moriarty, however she also refers to the work of Carol Snow and her collection *Artist and Model*. Swensen identifies several attributes of Snow's writing in this collection as evidence of Snow's adoption of a new mode of ekphrasis. These attributes include Snow's references to art works as ordinary and normal parts of everyday life rather than exclusive objects, her evocation of artists who are participants in, rather than the subjects of, the poems, and her manipulation of the standpoint of the implied viewer of the artwork:

The implied viewer shifts constantly; at times it's the "I," which sometimes looks and is sometimes looked at, framed in a window or otherwise arranged as a composition. At other times, the viewer is the work of art or is dispersed throughout the world (70).

Two of the poems from *Artist and Model*, "From the Model" and "Artist and Model," provided me with examples of Snow's handling of point of view and demonstrated how a single photograph could be the subject of two quite different poems. Both poems refer to a photograph by Brassai of the artist Matisse at work in

his studio.⁴ The poems are not illustrated by the photograph so the reader's experience of the photograph is dependent on the poet. In "From the Model" Matisse speaks: "Matisse – 'one must always search for the desire of the line, / where it wishes / to enter or where to die away'" (2-4). In "Artist and Model" the speaker finds a resemblance between her father and Matisse, and herself and his model:

It is all here in the photograph
of Matisse and the dark-haired model I resemble: the artist –
portly, white-bearded, bespectacled (in 1939, almost seventy) –
presaging my father (1-4).

In these poems, the photograph is evoked either by the form of the poem as a visual object on the page or by the speaker's meditation on its meaning for her. In "From the Model," Snow's use of long and short lines, dashes, parentheses and the white space of the page contribute to a poem that is as much a visual object as the photograph is:

("I will condense the meaning of this body by
seeking
it's essential lines"),
to some extent he becomes her – the volume
and curves of her – as he has set her (standing, ankles crossed,
breasts lifted – (11-16)

In "Artist and Model" the speaker having identified the resemblance of Matisse and his model to her father and herself declares:

And I think that I cannot be

⁴ The publishers of the Kindle version have used it as a cover: www.amazon.com/Artist-Model-Carol-Snow-ebook/dp/B009F73WWC

or desire my father – being Matisse;

that is, having for this

complexity

of resemblance the passion Matisse had for line, for that curve

of thigh I see myself balancing book and paper against. (13-18)

Here, the implied viewer is both looking at the photograph, noting resemblances and “sharing the context” (Swensen70) as she aligns her role as poet with that of the artist.

In my own work, the concept of poem creating a poem as visual object on the page holds less appeal than the work of creating different personas to speak for the subjects of my photographs. In the same way that Snow presents the same photograph with different speakers or implied viewers, I wanted to find different speakers to interpret the photographs in my album and I intended that these speakers would use the first person “I” of lyric poetry. My main reasons for this are that my creative project is an attempt to find a voice for Ida and that because she is a real person for whom there is almost no documented information, I need to invent thoughts and actions to illustrate what little information there is.

In his treatment of the lyric “I,” Scott Brewster after acknowledging the “underlying uncertainty about the identity of the speaker or persona in a lyric poem, quotes Elizabeth A. Howe: “A characteristic feature of the lyric ‘I’ is precisely this vagueness that allows the reader to equate it with the poet, perhaps: to identify with it himself, or herself; or to see it as a universal ‘I’ belonging to no one and to everyone” (32). In my own writing, I wanted to take advantage of this uncertainty about the identity of the speaker and her relationship to the poet.

The poems in *Sea Glass* have a series of speakers who represent Ida and also a present-day viewer of the album who is sometimes a child, sometimes a young mother as Ida was, and at other times an older woman. The present-day speaker of the poems is driven by her knowledge that her mother, who is Ida's daughter, is losing her sight. I wanted to demonstrate through the ambiguity of who the speaker was, the way in which the present-day speaker came to understand Ida's life as a reflection of her own. The present-day speaker reads the artefacts of Ida's life through the lens of her own life and this not only colours the way she understands them but also represents the way in which Ida comes to inhabit her thinking. This process is illustrated in my poem "Back Steps" where it is unclear if Ida or someone else is the speaker:

"Nothing will happen today," she murmurs,
"if I do not will it to occur." She could stand here,
caught on the back steps, hair unbrushed, wearing her oldest skirt
pulled high above the five-month bump and the shirt
with the too long sleeves and no one would come
to set her back in motion. (12-17)

This poem is also an ekphrasis in which the act of taking the photograph, "preserving a moment of time" is mirrored by the speaker's experience on the back steps. She feels that she is "held in a glass sphere" (6), the pony in the paddock "suspended midstride like Muybridge's horse" (8). It was inspired by Berger's description of a photograph as "preserving a moment of time" and isolating "the appearances of a disconnected instant" (91). By employing the characteristics of the lyric, in particular by presenting the subject as a "suspension or interlude, a unique

intensification of literary language” (Brewster 6), I intended to heighten the poem’s relationship to both photograph and to the act of photography

II

Life writing, Memory and Photography.

Experimenting with point of view in ekphrasis was an important part of the process I followed as I began to construct a life story for both Ida and the present-day speaker of many of the poems. These life stories are an integral part of the collection because the experiences of both subjects inform the way they, as the speakers of the poems, interpret the photographs in the album. As forms of life writing they also demonstrate the way that the use of the lyric “I” of poetry enabled me to integrate the verifiable truth of historical research with imaginative conjecture.

I elected to use the term life writing for these poems because the term neither specifically implies biography or autobiography nor a particular form of writing. In their book, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe life writing as “a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (4). However, while this definition seems to allow for a collection of poems in which a speaker attempts to understand the life of a real woman through the visual artefacts associated with her as she meditates on her own life, it doesn’t explicitly allow for the kind of imaginative work I undertook while writing the poems in *Sea Glass*. My combination of verifiable biographical research and imagined persona in *Sea Glass* illustrates differences in the way matters to do with

auto/biographical truth and the “contract of identity” (Lejeune 19) are understood in auto/biographical writing or in lyric poetry. In his often-quoted essay “The Autobiographical Pact” Lejeune argues that when reading autobiography, the reader understands that author and narrator are the same: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text” (19). Smith and Watson explain that autobiographical truth “resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (16). There are two intersubjective exchanges implicit in *Sea Glass*; one between the speaker and Ida, and the other between the present-day speaker and implied author of the collection as a whole and the reader of the collection.

In my research prior to writing the poems I had compiled a certain amount of biographical information about Ida by using photographs and letters as evidence in the same way that an archaeologist might seize upon an unearthed fragment as evidence of past lives. This process of deduction then informed the way I elected to present the present-day speaker of the poems; the way she interprets the evidence implies her own life story. My initial research was entirely devoted to uncovering the historical truth of Ida’s life and provided me with basic genealogical and biographical information. However, my project is not so much concerned with the verifiable truth of Ida’s life; rather it is concerned with imagining her life through the eyes and thoughts of the primary lyric speaker of the poems. The reason for this focus is the imaginative freedom afforded me in writing poetry as distinct from biography or autobiography. Readers of poetry understand the speaker of a poem differently from the narrator of an autobiography. While the lyric “I” presents as

deeply personal and invites identification between reader and speaker, there is nevertheless an underlying understanding on the part of the reader that it is a construct and not bound by a “contract of identity” in the same way as autobiographical prose. This perception encouraged me to envisage *Sea Glass* as a creative life writing project in which Ida’s life is portrayed through the eyes of a present-day speaker who is using the photograph album as her primary source of biographical information. The photographs provide the link between the present-day speaker and Ida and the inspiration for the poems.

In “Ekphrasis as *Punctum* and *Studium*” I describe how I exploited the relationship I perceived between photographs and poetry in my own writing. In this section, I focus on the way memory and remembering link photographs and life writing. Smith and Watson describe memory as “the source, authenticator, and destabilizer of autobiographical acts” (22). As my project developed, this concept emerged first as the principal link between photography and life writing and then as an underlying component of many of my poems as I experimented with ways in which I could depict the events and characters depicted in the photographs. Finally, I researched the way that photograph albums prompt acts of remembering which encourage storytelling. This research is reflected in the sequencing of the poems in *Sea Glass*.

The photographs on which my project is based were taken in the early decades of the twentieth century when cameras were being advertised as aids to memory and as a means of preserving those memories forever. The fact that my album is not easy to decipher because there are few captions and the only surviving subject (my mother) has compromised sight meant that I investigated other means of retrieving the memories inherent in the photographs. This research led me to the work of

cultural theorist Annette Kuhn on the use of photographs as memory prompts for understanding events from personal and public pasts.

In her book, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Kuhn investigates visual culture (film and photography) as a means of prompting and enacting memory – “memory work” (4). The memory work then becomes the raw material for “memory texts” – “secondary revisions of the source materials of memory” (5). Kuhn compares memory work to detective work and archaeology: “forms of enquiry which...involve working backwards – searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence” (4).

The theory of memory work originated in a social research paradigm and is associated with socialist feminism and Freudian analysis. In constructing her own theses on the way in which memory work becomes memory text, Kuhn draws on the protocols developed by photographer Jo Spence and therapist Rosy Martin for their photo-therapy work illustrated in their 1987 book *Double Exposure: The Minefield of Memory*. According to Kuhn, in Spence and Martin’s work, the memory-work practitioner highlights and investigates the embedded contexts of personal photographs. The subjects of the therapy are encouraged to describe the human subject(s) of photographs of themselves in the third person, (“she” rather than “I”) and to visualise themselves as the subject in the photograph at the time the photograph was taken. Participants are encouraged to follow this procedure with all the human subjects of the photograph if there is more than one as well as animals and inanimate objects. The subjects of the therapy are also asked to consider the contexts of the photograph’s production (where, who, when, how, why); its

aesthetics, technical production and its reception; and who it was made for and who sees it now (Kuhn 8).

These techniques eventually became a principal means of approaching the photographs in my album as I used them as inspiration for my poems. It is important to clarify at this point that I am using Kuhn's terms "memory work" and "memory text" as the general description for a technique for uncovering the underlying meaning of a photograph and for the text (poem) that the work inspired. I adapted this technique which was intended for forms of autobiography because it demonstrated how I could go about deducing information about Ida's life from photographs.

At the outset, I knew that I wanted to bring Ida to life in my writing. One way to do this was to work very closely with the photographs and imagine myself as Ida and that I was seeing the photographs through her eyes. This imaginative process could then become her memory work and the poems could become her memory texts. The *Ida on the Beach* photograph seemed to lend itself particularly to this kind of experimentation because it was a clear and uncluttered image which nevertheless contained interesting detail.

The memory work techniques Kuhn describes enabled me to write a number of poems from different points of view, incorporating details of place, of dress, and of social and historical context that I might otherwise have never imagined. This experience matched Kuhn's assertion that:

...memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the

image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary, but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning making; always pointing somewhere else. (14)

My experience with the photograph of Ida on the Beach encouraged me to look again at the album for the creative possibilities that it contained and led me to experiment with the letters that were part of the Ida memorabilia. I had placed the letters in the album for safe keeping and while they are documents rather than photographs, I could see and touch them in the same way that I could see and touch the photographs. I noted their dimensions, the colour of the paper, the watermarks and embossing, the way they were folded, the style of handwriting and in two cases, the stamps and postmarks on the envelopes. I decided to apply my version of memory work techniques to Ida's letter to her sister Agnes about their family's experiences during the Napier Earthquake. I wanted to see if it could become central "to a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations" (Kuhn 5).

As I began writing, I carried out a great deal of investigation of archival photographic material relating to the earthquake, added to Ida's backstory by trawling the letter for clues about her life and thoughts, and searched for possible synergies between her life and that of the present-day speaker of many of the poems. This activity resulted in drafts for several poems including "Ida's Version," where lines from Ida's letter are interwoven with commentary resulting from memory work, and "Amongst Ida's Things," which was prompted by a line from the original letter, "of course all Edith's things were broken." In the course of writing these drafts, I investigated the Napier earthquake and its impact in Hastings and the central North Island, and spent some time experimenting with point of view – who might best narrate the events of these poems and in what time period? As I completed

successive drafts of these poems and “Ida’s version” in particular, I kept in mind Kuhn’s description of memory work as being like archaeology. I read and re-read Ida’s letter searching for clues, making deductions and deciphering signs (Kuhn 4). I came to the conclusion that Ida was both frightened by the quake, despite not being directly affected, and afraid of being by herself at night:

Ida reports:

that she has been alone at night three times since the quake,
that their mother has come to stay,
that their father has returned to Hastings,
that she wakes up in the night afraid.

But all the same, we who were not in it, can have no conception of what it was actually like. (40-46)

My interest in adapting memory work techniques for poetry writing was given added impetus when I encountered Kerry Hines’ work *Young Country*. This collection of poetry along with her unpublished doctoral dissertation *After the Fact: Poems, Photographs and Regenerating Histories* provided me with an example of a form of life writing based on historical photographs and demonstrated a means of combining image and text which went beyond mere illustration. *Young Country* is a work in which poems are presented alongside a collection of 19th century New Zealand photographs taken by William Williams, himself the subject of many of the poems. In this collection, photographs and poems share status; neither directly illustrates the other. In the introduction to her dissertation, Hines describes this relationship as “co-medial”: the resulting work (poems and photographs) “offers significantly more than the constituent parts on their own” (6).

Young Country offered me an example of how a poet could use historical photographs to imagine a life for the subjects preserved in the images, rather than simply describe the subjects and contexts. In the notes to the poems at the end of the book, Hines writes:

Most of the voices, characters and happenings in these poems are imagined. Some poems draw on material in the public domain about specific individuals and events, as well as about New Zealand and the period; however, they also include invented elements (including invented happenings and utterances, and some entirely fictional characters) and should also be considered works of the imagination.

(180)

In some respects, Hines' remarks validated what I had been doing while writing my own poems as I too had been combining imagined scenes and conversations with real historical events and people. Her final statement that her poems "should also be considered works of the imagination" (180) gave me a way to explain to family members who might have a stake in the historical accuracy of my writing that I had invented many of the scenarios in my collection because there were no records, oral or otherwise, of my grandparents' domestic lives apart from what could be deduced from letters or photographs.

The first section or suite of poems and images in *Young Country*, "The Old Shebang," is an example of how Hines uses photographs as the departure point for her poetry. The fourteen poems in this suite introduce the photographer William Williams and his friends, T.H. (Tom) Wyatt, Elsdon Best and Alexander Barrington Keyworth, who all appear in many of the photographs. Williams, Keyworth and Wyatt lived for a time in the early 1880s in "The Old Shebang," a run-down wooden

house in Cuba Street, Wellington. The eighteen photographs presented alongside the poems show Williams, Wyatt, Keyworth, and others in the domestic and broader environment in which they lived. In her dissertation, Hines describes how she worked with a particular photograph of the attic bedroom in “The Old Shebang.” She meticulously describes the appearance of the room and its contents, including the mismatched wallpaper, the clothing distributed about the beds and the sets of framed photographs on the end wall:

It’s a worker’s hut, a temporary lodging, a student flat, three guys roughing it. It’s a frontier space. A wooden tent. And yet it might have had other aspirations, this room: the wallpaper could have been properly domestic.

This conclusion is called into question, though, by the elegance of the clock and the multiple photographs presiding over the back wall. Was such a timepiece usual in the bedroom of a working man? Who took the photographs, and who took the care to have them framed? (103).

These observations and questions mirror my own when I was attempting to make meaning from the photographs in my album. For instance, I spent a lot of time scrutinizing a page in the album which contained photographs of Ida and her sisters taken on the porch of their family home. I noted the architecture (possibly early Californian Bungalow), the style of the wooden chairs that the girls were sitting on (a mixture of wicker and bentwood), and observed that they must have been bought from inside for that shot, as two photographs showed the porch empty of furniture and the girls in different clothing. I noted the tabby cat in two photographs and the shadow of a figure on the wall beside it. Whose cat was it? Were the girls, who are

dressed in skirts and blouses, black stockings and laced or buckled shoes wearing their normal at home clothing? Are they posing formally with books in their laps, or is this a candid shot? Was Agnes, the older sister by ten years, making a special visit to her parents and sisters? Why is Agnes smiling openly while the two younger girls, Ida and her sister Nerissa, are poker faced? Who took these photographs and who pasted them into the album? These observations and questions prompted my poem “Engagement:”

The Mummery girls are on the front porch. Agnes has fetched a chair from the front bedroom, Rissa has a bentwood kitchen chair. Ida sits cross legged on a cushion.

The sun beats onto their faces. Les stands in the driveway with his new camera, composing the shot.

“Look at the camera!” Ida holds her novel open like a hymn book, Rissa lays hers down on her lap. *He’s mine*, thinks Ida.

Agnes taps her back with the toe of her shoe. “Has he?”

“He’s here for lunch,” says Rissa, *sotto voce*,

(an expression she has found in a book). “We made trifle and Dad has been primed to stay.”

“You’re embarrassing me,” whispers Ida.

She has a glory box at the foot of her bed:

.....

The photograph shows Agnes laughing, Ida looking thoughtful while Rissa purses her lips as she whistles at the cat.

(1-13, 20-21)

In this poem, the results of my initial looking at and thinking about the photograph are combined with an imagined reason for the photographer having been present. My initial questions about what is happening and why the sisters present as they do is answered with the thought that perhaps it is a special occasion (a confirmation that Ida and Les are to marry) and that Rissa and Agnes are teasing Ida as they pose on the verandah. My choice of occasion also reflects my perception that this poem could fill gap in the chronology of Ida's life.

Hines' treatment of her photograph in the published collection also provided me with an example of how I could write poems inspired by analysis of my photographs but not directly about them. There are two poems in *Young Country* that respond to the photograph of the bedroom in The Old Shebang: "Three Beds, Candle Extinguished" and "Tom Awake." The poems are separated from each other by two photographs and the conjunction of image and text provide an example of how Hines manages the relationship between text and image in her book. The first poem, "Three Beds, Candle Extinguished," is printed on the second page (the left-hand opening) and faces a photograph on page three of Williams, Wyatt and Keyworth busy at domestic tasks in the backyard of The Old Shebang. Overleaf, on page four, the photograph of the men's bedroom faces the second poem, "Tom Awake." By alternating the use of the right-hand opening between text and image, Hines is ensuring that neither is perceived as being more important than the other.⁵

"Three Beds, Candle Extinguished" is the imagined, disjointed conversation of the three men as they lie in their beds before going to sleep. It begins with a voice asking Tom about a newspaper advertisement in which a Wellington chemist had

⁵ In the conclusion to her dissertation, Hines notes that this is a deliberate arrangement for her collection, as is ensuring roughly equal numbers of poems and photographs (204).

promoted his cough elixir by quoting an endorsement from “T. H. Wyatt, Taranaki”

(4):

...that I was saved from death
by Fitzgerald’s eucalyptus balsam. Three days.
and I rose to work anew...

He’s got a long memory.

Fitzgerald has re-posted it. (5- 9)

The conversation meanders on with railway jokes and puns until one says:

And no talking in your sleep tonight.

Eh?

Hood, lens

my mind’s eye... (16-19)

In “Tom Awake,” Tom is portrayed as lying in his bed and thinking about his friends:

Sleep is a tonic for Alex,
he wakes up sweet. Will
goes deep and must be
dragged awake, his eyelids
reluctant, his hair
bemused. (1-6)

In this poem, Hines creates a persona for Tom Wyatt that hints at a man with a secret past: “Darkness / is my keeper; I don’t escape / all night” (6-8) is followed later by,

“I don’t like hands touching / my face. I don’t like questions / about the scar” (30-32). The poem finishes:

I will not throw myself
on the mercy of the floor.

I will hang
in this sling of a bed,

a bone badly set. (47-51)

The poem “Three Beds, Candle Extinguished” interested me initially because Hines has discretely incorporated a large body of historical research into a few short lines. For instance, she discovered that Tom Wyatt featured in Evening Post advertisements and makes it part of a conversation: “Fitzgerald has re-posted it” (9). Williams’ work as a photographer is referred to in an oblique manner: “*Hood, lens, / my mind’s eye...*” (18-19). Many of his photographs were of subjects related to railway building and associated machinery. This is represented by a ‘throwaway’ comment: “With us, it’s / contractors with Railways jokes –” (11-12)

My observations encouraged me to consider how I could incorporate historical or factual detail in my own writing without overwhelming the poem with facts. I was dealing with genealogical information about my family, historical information about such matters as the Napier Earthquake and early aviation, and scientific information about surveying, x-rays and pneumonia and it seemed to me that it was important that this verifiable information was accurate if it was to be part of the poems. In my poem “Mishaps” I incorporated lines taken from old newspapers about early aviation accidents: “Machine falls at racecourse, three killed, / engines disabled – airman

drowned, / fell and was killed” (6-8). In other poems, like “Macular Degeneration” and “Sunstrike” which are set in the present day, I tried to write accurately about the condition macular degeneration without seeming to have lifted entire lines from a scientific article on the subject. I needed the information about the condition and its effect on the speaker’s mother in the collection because the mother’s failing eyesight is one imperative behind the biographical project in *Sea Glass*: “I ask my mother to name the people in the albums while she can still see” (“Macular Degeneration” 13).

As I continued to write poems for my collection, my concerns about information giving began to decrease and it became easier to work with what I had learned. This enabled me to work with the information in the found poem, “*from* The Press, December 16, 1909” and transform it by including allusions to the details in the poem “Girls in White blouses.” These are details from the newspaper article that inspired the found poem:

Wanted, by Young Lady, a position as Shorthand
Typiste, knowledge bookkeeping, experienced. Apply
“Urgent.” “Press” Office. (31-33)

In the later poem these became part of the conversation of the sisters preparing to have their photograph taken:

Ruby would like to pinch
the others sometimes: their eyes,
the way they glance at each other when she spills
tea on her skirt. “I have seen an advertisement,”
she announces. “For a Young Lady.”
Her hair will not stay on top of her head, Lillian
has ratted it for her, and now it is a nest

of brambles: a gorse bush. "Office work," she says.
Nora laughs, gathering hairpins scattered
on the floor, "You can't type."
"But my bookkeeping is..." Ruby takes
up her necklace and the clasp breaks
in her fingers. "The brooch then." Agnes
pins it for her, whispers: "Not *wanted*. The young lady
needs a position." Then louder, "You're so lucky,
Ruby. The way your cheeks colour." (1-16)

*

The memory work I undertook with my photographs and related archival research provided me with a great deal of information which I used for the life writing aspects of my creative project. However, I also wanted to investigate how I could evoke the act of remembering in my poems and to do that I made use of my mother's memories of Ida. Her memories are fleeting, like split second flashbacks in a movie. She remembers a picnic, long grass and someone taking her hand. She is very clear that these are her only memories of Ida, and unlike other memories of her early childhood, they are not backed up by photographs which might have ensured that the memories were recounted and details of the occasions reinforced and embellished each time she viewed them. Faced with such tantalisingly brief flashes of memory, I turned to poet Lyn Hejinian for examples of how she had depicted memory in her autobiographical prose poem *My Life*.

My Life is notable for Hejinian's use of the devices of Language poetry such as parataxis (the juxtaposition of thoughts and ideas which are not subordinated to each other), permutation and repetition to represent the way the narrator makes sense of and reconstitutes experiences and memories over the course of her life. My mother's flashbacks reminded me of the way Hejinian represented the processes of memory as a series of vignettes and fragments in *My Life*:

Somewhere in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses.
Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity
is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity. The better things were
gathered in a pen. The windows were narrowed by white gauze
curtains which were never loosened. Here, I refer to irrelevance, that
rigidity that never intrude. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition.
The shadow of the redwood trees, she said, was oppressive. The plush
must be worn away. ("A pause, a rose, something on paper." 7-15).

This short excerpt from the first poem in *My Life* demonstrates the parataxis of meandering thought. The recollection of a rose patterned wall paper is accompanied by a memory of a family expression: "Pretty is as pretty does." Two sentences later there is a memory of windows and white gauze curtains and later again a relative's comments about the redwood trees.

In her essay "Comments for Manuel Brito" Hejinian describes her process in structuring the writing in *My Life* as one in which repetition is used to represent "the recurrence that constitutes memory but also providing the recontextualization that it involves – memory recontextualizes what one thinks and one knows" (186-187). In *My Life*, this repetition not only mimics the process of memory, but also contributes to a sense for the reader of being witness to the speaker's thought patterns. *My Life*

is a series of prose poems, but I wondered how I could use my mother's fragments: "a picnic," "long grass," and "someone took my hand" in my collection which consists mostly of lyric poetry. I experimented with one of these expressions in my poem "Sunstroke":

In the house, her mother's hat
on the peg by the door, her blue dress in the cupboard.
Someone takes her hand. The curtains are drawn,
a flight of dust motes hangs above the carpet,
her mother's workbox is under her chair. Someone
takes her hand. Out in the street children are skipping,
their rope thudding against the path. It is her turn. Someone
takes her hand. (23-31)

While writing this poem, I tried to understand why the memory of someone taking her hand had stayed with my mother and decided that it must represent her childhood realisation that something bad had happened. My intention was that by repeating the phrase I could represent that moment of understanding and panic.

My interest in how I could evoke memory was not limited to individual poems. I was equally interested in how a collection of poems could evoke remembering for a reader in the same way that photographs in an album prompt remembering for a viewer. Once again, it seems that one of the ways this remembering occurs is through repetition. If the same faces and locations recur in an album sufficiently a viewer begins to construct a history for them, so I determined that I would endeavour to repeat motifs, characters and expressions in my poems to evoke the same effect. With this in mind, I duplicated aspects of titles, "Sunstroke" and "Sunstrike," "Her White Blouse," and "Girls in White Blouses"; I referred to the same events in

successive poems; I set many poems on a beach and made frequent references to problems with eyesight. During this process, I discovered that repetition need not necessarily be a deliberate act; often a motif or an idea recurred spontaneously in much the same way as the subjects of photographs in an album are recognisable over time because they appear to adopt the same postures or expressions while being photographed.

My poem “Ida Reading” is an illustration of this process of repetition. I had noticed that Ida was often photographed with a book in her hand. I write about both Ida and the present-day speaker reading or holding books in several poems interspersed through the collection including this one:

Today, I picture Ida
outside in the sun at the table
on our deck. She is reading a novel
from the clearance sale at the library; (Ida Reading, 1-4)

Just as the album had more than one photograph of Ida on a beach, several of my poems, including this one mention the sea:

There is
a breeze from the beach carrying the smell of the sea
and laughter from a neighbour’s garden. Somewhere
there is a barbecue. (9-12)

In this poem, the speaker is imagining and narrating the scene in the present day because she has seen a photograph of Ida reading:

In the album on my lap
Ida sits outside on a kitchen chair
in black and white, hair loose

over her shoulders, hairbrush in one hand
a book on her knee. (15-19)

In his essay “Stories” from *Another Way of Telling*, John Berger writes about the narrative form implicit in sequences of still photographs which he compares to memories or reflections:

Memory itself is not made up of flashbacks, each one forever moving inexorably forward. Memory is a field where different times coexist. The field is continuous in terms of the subjectivity which creates and extends it, but temporarily it is discontinuous. (282)

In “Ida Reading” the present-day speaker, in searching for what is happening in this photograph which is one of a series, treats the image as if it was part of an ongoing narrative. But as Berger suggests, this narrative like the workings of memory is not a flashback as you would find in a movie, but an amalgam of present and past. The speaker transports Ida into the present day while acknowledging that the photograph is from the past and that she wishes that she could show Ida photographs of herself:

“Look,” I want to say, “here’s some of me –
in the back garden – a swing and a book,
and there, on the beach; sunburnt. And here,
cradling a baby – reading.” (21-24)

Berger asserts that “The Muse of photography is not one of Memory’s daughters, but Memory herself. Both the photograph and the remembered depend upon and equally oppose the passing of time” (282). “Ida Reading,” a poem placed towards the end of *Sea Glass*, is intended to stand as an illustration of both the narrative temporality of ekphrasis and the temporal discontinuity of memory.

III

Album into Collection

The final act of my critical and creative research was deciding the finished form of my poetry collection. On the one hand, I needed to decide what system of narrative ordering I should use and whether any of the images should be included, and on the other, I needed to consider whether I had achieved my goal of producing a collection that resembled the album. How did my poems represent individual images and did they work together to represent the narrative inherent in the album?

Many of the poems I wrote were a way for me to meditate on or “talk to” the photographs that “pricked” me as I searched my album for details of my grandmother’s life and evidence of her personality. My experience with these photographs was like that described by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*: I leafed slowly through the album noting unidentifiable scenery, a house and then a large building – but whose house, and is it a hospital? However, these photographs were *studium*; it wasn’t until I found the photograph of Ida on the beach that I understood *punctum*. Barthes writes that “the reading of the *punctum* (of the pricked photograph, so to speak) is at once brief and active” (49). He compares the process of developing a photograph in which a viewer discerns *punctum* to that of reading Haiku: “In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility*: linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph: neither the Haiku nor the Photograph makes us ‘dream’” (49).

Earlier, Barthes writes about *punctum* somewhat differently when he describes his experience with a photograph of a black family taken in 1926 by James Van der Zee. At first he had decided that the *punctum* in this photograph was the “*strapped*

pumps” (43) worn by one of the women. A few pages later however, he returns to the photograph (in his memory) and instead identifies not the shoes but a necklace worn by the same woman. This necklace has associations for him with a maiden aunt whose life he characterizes as “dreary” (53). The associations are an example of the way in which the *punctum* of a photograph is capable of triggering new layers of meaning: “on account of her necklace, the black woman in her Sunday best has had, for me, a whole life external to her portrait” (57).

While writing the poems in my collection I experienced both incidents of *punctum*: an initial “detonation” which then triggered new layers of meaning after I had researched and thought about particular photographs over a period of days or weeks. My initial experiments with ekphrasis were focussed on *punctum*: I wanted to register my initial responses to the images and short lyric poems seemed to me to be the most appropriate form for this. I could focus on the visual component of the photograph and experiment with the means of representing it; verbal images replacing visual ones. My use of the lyric would mean that photograph’s moment in time would be represented in poetic form and my personal emotional responses to the photographs could also be represented and filtered through the thoughts of the present-day speaker. Once I had completed initial drafts, I put the photograph away and relied on memory to trigger an additional layer of responses. This sometimes resulted in prose poetry rather than lyric as I moved from representing the image to writing in the persona of either the subject of the photograph or the present-day speaker. My poems “Trace,” “The Human Form in Art” and “Ida thinks about the Beach” embody this process. As I completed more and more pieces of writing, I began to think about where they might fit in the collection in much the same way as

someone with a box of loose photographs might consider how they should be collated into an album.

Part of the work of sequencing involved considering how the narrative of Ida's life should be revealed. While my present-day speaker and her mother know what happened to Ida, the reader doesn't know until they read "Patea Wednesday." While experimenting, I found that individual poems took on different meanings depending on their placement in the collection. For instance, "The Human Form in Art," would have more or less meaning depending on whether it was placed before or after the poems about Ida's death. If I placed the poem before "Patea Wednesday" and "Sunstroke" then the lines, "drawing from memory / the sound of her voice" (23-24) seem to refer to the photographer being temporarily separated from Ida. If I placed it after these poems about her death, then the inference must be that he is in mourning. In some respects, this mirrors the way an album works – there is an expectation of a "before" and an "after" for the recording of sentinel events like birth and death and the contents of an album are understood in the light of what can be deduced by the sequencing.

My uncle's displacement of the chronological order of the photographs in the album raised some related questions for me. Because the blank left-hand pages of the album were used for assorted family photographs in no particular order, the "Ida on the Beach" photograph follows pages that have images of Ida with my uncle as a baby, a studio portrait of Ida's older sisters, and portraits of her parents taken on their wedding day in 1883. It isn't until you turn through to the last page, past photographs of my mother and her brother as children and my grandfather as a middle-aged man, that you see that Ida does not appear in the album again.

In her book, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, social historian Martha Langford acknowledges these gaps and discontinuities as typical of photograph albums:

But gaps, as unexplained links, have their own lucidity. While they can never be resolved with unquestionable finality, they are no different from any other ambiguous element in a work of art, neither mistakes nor secrets. At the same time, there is no guarantee that the compiler was aware of, or could have explained, his or her leaps and digressions... We are accustomed in conversation to weighing both words and silences. (18-19)

Someone viewing my album without family knowledge to explain the significance of the photographs must make sense of the chronology and Ida's disappearance as best they can. Has Ida herself become the photographer? Have there been no good likenesses of her that she wished to retain? The possibility that she has died is no more likely to an outsider than that she just didn't like having her photograph taken.

However, like my uncle, I know that Ida was dead within ten years of the beach photograph being taken and part of the photograph's overwhelming appeal for me is this knowledge. Here she is on the beach at the beginning of her adult life, and this photograph (and others in the album) is evidence of her existence. Her tooth marks are preserved (like a death mask) for as long as the photograph exists. The act of her teeth biting into the apple is preserved unchanged and as Berger says in *Uses of Photography*: "before the invention of the camera, nothing could do this, except, in the mind's eye, the faculty of memory" (52).

It seemed logical to begin with that I should attempt to use my album's present day sequencing as a template for my poetry collection. I could begin with poems

relating to the annotated aviation photographs at the front of the album and then move from there through my grandparent's courtship and their early married lives. I had other materials like letters and trinkets to provide additional background material and once I had understood how my uncle's additions fitted in, I could either ignore the chronological problems they presented or use the inserted images as "flashbacks." This solution would have provided me with a historical biography resembling a conventional family history and the photographs from the album would illustrate selected poems.

However, my intention was that the collection should be more than just a family history, and to achieve that result I decided to consider the role of the present-day speaker of the poems that weren't written in the voice of Ida or my grandfather. Martha Langford's work in *Suspended Conversations* alerted me to the way in which a photograph album, as an instrument of oral history, could be viewed as a "pictorial *aide-mémoire* to recitation, to the telling of stories" (5). In this book, Langford uses an album depicting the activities of two anonymous sisters to demonstrate how albums "preserve the structures of oral tradition for new uses in the present" (21). If I was to use my album in this way, I needed to decide who my story teller was going to be.

At various points during the writing of the poems in the collection, I considered whether a version of my own or a different voice would make a better narrator of Ida's story. In her dissertation Kerry Hines describes her decision not to write from the point of view of William Williams:

...a biographical focus would have required me to adopt a more thoroughly factual approach than I wanted in writing the poems, as well as taking me into areas of Williams's life that I did not

necessarily want to write about. To underline the distinction between the work and the life, I decided not to write any poems in the persona of Williams (in the few poems in which he appears, he is observed rather than the observer). (201)

Hines also notes that she is “drawing on someone’s [Williams] entire body of work, and that the person is not in a position to defend that work against my use of it” (201). In my writing, I found myself in a similar situation as neither Ida nor my grandfather can defend themselves against my reading of the images and their letters. Rather than choose not to write in their personas, I decided instead to invest the present-day speaker with life experiences that resembled Ida’s so that she had a stake in the retelling of the album that might overcome objections from family members. My experience at this point with showing some of the poems to my sisters has been interesting; each poem about Ida has prompted further conjectures about her as each of us had focussed on a different aspect of her life. When I spoke with my mother about Ida’s sisters she suddenly offered her memories of their characters and was amused at how close my conclusions about them were after months of scrutinizing photographs. It seems that the present-day speaker is the right storyteller from my family’s point of view. From my own perspective, she is the right storyteller because she is the persona who is making sense of the story implied by the photographs in the album.

The second part of the sequencing process was concerned with the relationship between image and text. I first needed to decide whether to include any of the images in the finished collection and to investigate how their inclusion might impact on the finished work. Hines’ work has photographs, but they are not illustrations as such; their presence adds an almost undefinable extra dimension to the work. The

photograph of the six young men that Ted Hughes writes about is available on the net but not associated with the collection in which the poem is printed. I decided that my enjoyment of “Six Young Men” was not actually dependent on an illustration provided by the photograph and that the image would be a distraction rather than an enhancement to the poem. For this reason, I made the decision that the only illustration in my collection would be the Ida on the Beach photograph which I would use as a coda signifying *that-has-been*.

My decision not to illustrate a collection that was intended to resemble an album, allowed me to focus on how the text itself might resemble the contents. In managing this aspect of my project, I considered matters to do with layout, with the form of the poems and with narrative voice. One way to make a poem resemble a photograph is by using techniques aligned with concrete poetry. I could make the lines look like a tree, or an apple, or I could spread the lines across the page to resemble a disjointed conversation and the adjacent photograph as Hines did in “Three Beds, Candle Extinguished.” However, I chose not to attempt these techniques. Instead I decided that I would place short lyric poems alone on a page surrounded by white space to imitate a single photograph on an album page. These “text-images” would be accompanied by other forms, including prose poetry and found poetry which would represent the meditations on the photographs and the oral history telling of the present-day speaker.

One advantage of writing a life story in poetry rather than prose did not occur to me until I was some way into the process of compiling finished poems. I had begun to be concerned about linear chronology in terms of filling in gaps in the life stories of Ida and my grandfather. How was I going to get Ida from her life as a school girl in Christchurch to adulthood as a clerk in a lawyer’s office in Hastings? How was I

going to get her to Patea and my grandfather to Whanganui after her death? The answer came as I returned to the album. Here is Ida on the beach on one page and here she is in Patea with a baby on the next. An album viewer makes sense of the chronology of the album by telling themselves what is happening in which case I could assume that the reader of *Sea Glass* should be able to understand the life story depicted in the poems in a similar way. Poetry collections, even those with a discernible narrative linking the poems like Hejinian's *My Life* and Hines' *Young Country* have similar gaps in chronology. *Sea Glass* as a poetry collection is able to accept the gaps in the album instead of attempting to fill them.

I hoped that the collection would not only resemble the contents of my photograph album, but also the *idea* of an album that is being “performed” as memoir by a narrator to an audience. Langford, quoting Anne-Marie Garat writes:

... Garat sees the family album as a hybrid novel – a saga, a chronicle, a life story, an autobiography, a legend, a photo romance – all these things at once. ‘A draft always started over in a recitation for several voices. Family photography makes people loquacious. It engenders a text from oral tradition – collective and sustained by successive contribution.’ (20)

Once I had made these decisions, the final step in sequencing my collection was to do with the order of the performance, or as Langford describes it, the “collective show and tell” (20). I could begin with the present-day speaker opening the album, or in 1883 with the oldest photographs of my great-grandparent's marriage and the newspaper clipping about Ida's school days in Christchurch. Alternatively, I could begin with Ida on the Beach; the photograph that illustrated *studium, punctum* and *that-has-been*.

I chose the present-day speaker opening the album. The reason for this is as much to do with photography as it is to do with poetry. If it were possible for a poetry collection about photographs to have a *punctum* in the same way as individual photographs might have a *punctum*, it is represented in the collection by the failing sight of Ida's daughter, the speaker's mother. The speaker's urgency in completing her telling of the album is related to the knowledge that the last person alive to have touched or spoken to any of the people pictured in the album is increasingly unable to see the images or to use them to tell their story.

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Sea Glass

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Voices

I grew up in a small house; boxes in wardrobes,
envelopes in old text books. I picked my way
through them when I was a child, finding secrets
I was too young to understand. *Ida Mummery*
addressed on tiny envelopes by my grandfather,
(*Your pal, Les. All my love, Les.*)

Now the secrets are an ongoing story, but disjointed –
a radio serial missing an episode, as voices
from the distaff side chime from the leaves
of my grandfather's album. He'd laid out
the right-hand pages; drawn frames in coloured ink,
made scrolled captions, coloured *Ida's* hat band,
striped her jersey, then stopped –

Too much else to do, or perhaps
he no longer wished to see these images.

The gaps were filled by someone else and now
there is no order: here's my uncle as a baby before
he is conceived; *Ida's* parents pose on their wedding day
between their adult daughters; *Les* lines up with the scouts,
their dogs and semaphore flags, but after the war.

Each time we open the album, more details emerge:
my mother recalls the cousin who fell from the verandah,
the pony in the back paddock. She names her aunts:
Lillian and *Nora*, *Agnes* and *Nerissa*, *Ruby* who died.
They were very close. *Excitable* writes *Les*
in a letter to *Ida* before their wedding.
“*Lillian* and *Nora* were quite serious,” my mother says,
“*Agnes* and *Rissa*, bubbly and charming.
But *Nora* was very kind to me.”

We pause at *Ida's* photograph

Ida is a school girl in a white blouse,
a young mother with a baby on her knee.
This is the missing episode.

We turn the page.

Here's Agnes with a rose.
"She worked at Ballantyne's
in the underwear department."
We imagine
flesh coloured corsets, straps and buckles.
"She had a special friend who was a travelling salesman."
We laugh.

*I suppose you will be having rather a thrilling time
writes Ida. And why not.*

Ida stands on the path to the elevator tower on Durie Hill.
She is wearing a hat and gloves, white stockings.
"Was this their honeymoon?"
Below her on the page
a paddle steamer churns up the river.

There are no wedding photographs,
although Les had agreed on a photographer.

I got the ring yesterday dear, I think you'll like it.

We pore over Ida's letters as if they might reveal
a sense of her hand as it held the pen; scrutinize
her face – for the shape of her mouth, the way her eyes
meet the camera; we want her
to speak to us here in this kitchen,
before she disappears.

Macular Degeneration.

On waking, and after turning on her light, my mother saw bright chrysanthemums of colour which persisted long after she had pulled the curtains. This was a sign; although she did not know that then. At the time, her paintings were bright swirls of translucent wash over detailed pen and ink. After an incident she thought was sunstroke, she was diagnosed with macular degeneration. It can be genetic; although her grandparents read the Bible into their eighties. The macula is behind the lens near the centre of the retina and is required for sharp central vision. It became hard to gauge how far her brush was from the paper and then more difficulties arose. The retina contains rods and cones which are sensitive to light and colour. Green began to fade to brown. This might be overcome with a limited palette; memory distinguishing between viridian and ochre. Perhaps the grandparents had memorised their Bible passages. I ask my mother to name the people in the albums while she can still see. Nothing can be done for some kinds of macular degeneration, just as nothing could be done for her mother, Ida, in 1932 when she was a young woman with two small children and ill with pneumonia. Whanganui Hospital: a fountain, a statue, a garden seat. There were no antibiotics. I ask my mother who the children are. A boy and a girl among autumn leaves and long shadows. Green grass, brown leaves, blue sky all fading in black and white. It seems that the photographs can be dated by death; first mother and child, then children alone.

from The Press: December 16, 1909.

Sir, – I am firmly convinced that if the Court of Arbitration were resorted to for the purposes of fixing a hard and fast rate of remuneration, the last state of the clerks of this city would be worse than the first. I fear that it would lead to the dismissal of a considerable number of clerks who are now earning at least, a living, and who are incapable of earning more. The places of these clerks would either remain vacant, or be filled by lady clerks at a still lower rate of pay. An attempt might be made to raise the salaries of the female clerks to those paid by men, but no Court I feel sure, would grant such a thing.

The prizes won by the successful students of the Christchurch Technical Day School were presented last night. Commercial Course, 1st Class: Special prize for general excellence in all her subjects: Ida Mummery *aged fourteen*. English, typewriting, shorthand, needlework, arithmetic, bookkeeping, business methods, cookery, commercial correspondence, commercial geography, history. (*All or some of these*).

Behind Ida in the audience, her sister Agnes with her mother and father. The others are at home; Ruby not well, Lill and Nora will put Victor and Rissa to bed. Agnes waves, a little flutter of her fingers as Ida walks back with her prize. Ida tries to look serious. Her ribbon is so tight on her hair that her ears hurt.

Wanted by Young Lady, a position as Shorthand Typiste, knowledge bookkeeping, experienced. Apply “Urgent.” “Press Office.”

Wanted, Youths for farms and stations, able to milk; Station Cook 25s; Cowboys 20s; Nurse for one child, 15s country; Housemaid, 17s 6d.

Mr H. J. Evans located Halley’s Comet at 11 o’clock on Tuesday night by means of a telescope with a 3-inch object glass.

Girls in White Blouses

Ruby would like to pinch
the others sometimes: their eyes,
the way they glance at each other when she spills
tea on her skirt. "I have seen an advertisement,"
she announces. "For a Young Lady."
Her hair will not stay on top of her head, Lillian
has ratted it for her, and now it is a nest
of brambles: a gorse bush. "Office work," she says.
Nora laughs, gathering hairpins scattered
on the floor, "You can't type."
"But my bookkeeping is...." Ruby takes
up her necklace and the clasp breaks
in her fingers. "The brooch then." Agnes
pins it for her, whispers: "Not *wanted*. The young lady
needs a position." Then louder, "You're so lucky,
Ruby. The way your cheeks colour."

They framed the picture for their mother. All in white blouses
vignetted, their four heads pompadoured like peonies,
necks wired inside high lace frills and only Ruby,
the one who died young, without a locket on a chain. They
seem to lean against each other, shoulders touching.
The fabric of their blouses, lace and pin tucks, fading into nothing
like the scent of roses pressed inside a book.

School Photograph

All the girls in the front row have their hair up; teased or tied. White ankle socks, wrist watches, brown leather shoes, hands folded in laps. The girl in the middle is eight weeks pregnant. Next to her, a girl with shoulder blades like wings under her cardigan, thighs no wider than her knees. Their friends sit with them at lunch time, whispering. No one eats. I'm in the back row; French not Chemistry, History not Calculus, German not Physics. If my great-grandmother, Amelia, had been in this class, hair parted in the middle and pulled back, no more secretive than any other sixteen-year-old, she would have been in the front row. Her husband could be any of the boys beside me at the back; his hair a little long, the trace of a smile. For her wedding photograph she stood in a photographer's studio in her best dress, one hand resting on an ornate chair, the other carrying a sheaf of papers. Her father was required to give permission for her to marry. There is a sprig of little flowers pinned to her bodice. The papers might be piano music. Her daughter Ida, my grandmother, did not marry until she was twenty-seven. The girl who was pregnant left, and found her way to University the following year. Baby in the crèche, text books and nappies in her shoulder bag. I would be up all night writing essays and in the mornings, too tired to make sense, would force myself to walk up the hill to lectures, my books a weight in my arms that I relished. I can't be sure that Amelia wanted more from life than her own kitchen. Her children won prizes at school for attendance and general excellence. There is a photograph of her in her sixties holding music in her lap, but none with children or grandchildren. In my albums, the boys build tree forts and run wild in paddocks while I sit in the background with a book. The weight of their heads against my shoulder, the smell of their hair. Their voices. All invisible. We are remembered now in photographs, a coincidence of time burning truths into paper.

Correspondence

LF Row,
Grey House,
Collegiate School,
Wanganui, NZ.

February 8, 1914

My Dear Little Ida,

Have you forgotten all about me yet? I wonder. I was just thinking of you working (?) away in the lonely, hot office. Poor thing! I think it's a shame for such a nice girl to have to waste her time at work when she might be enjoying the pleasures of some more independent and leisurely occupation. Even Shakespeare admitted that: "Frailty thy name is woman." I hope someday to have the great pleasure of placing one of these frail creatures in her proper & natural position in life; that of helper, cheerer and companion to one of our sex. Don't you think that's the proper way for a girl to spend her time? Keep her out of mischief.

By the way little girl — somehow I can't seem to completely recall your pretty face and it's very distracting. Can't you send me a photograph of yourself please? Doesn't matter whether it is only very small or not a particularly good job on the part of the photographer. As long as it is a photograph of Ida.

I know that we have not known each other very long but all the same, please don't disappoint me. You'll send me one, won't you? I shall promise to take it as a token of friendship only (no more),

I remain
your sincere pal,
Les

P.S. Don't forget the photo, will you Ida? Please!

What we Kept

I kept a ring — silver hearts
and red stones,
in a jar containing
single earrings, safety pins
and buttons. It appeared
to decompose over time —
tarnishing like tinfoil blackening
on a barbecue until only a glimmer
of red remained and the romance became
a distant memory of aftershave
and hot nights in a small car.
Years later, a visiting child found it:
“Rubies?” she wondered, slipping
the ring onto her finger.
“Glass,” I said. “I didn’t want it.”
I didn’t add, “Or anything else then
that the gift implied —
marriage, a mortgage, nappies.”

My grandmother kept the letter —
pale blue paper, folded in four.
She opened it at work —
My schoolboy grandfather quotes Shakespeare
in carefully formed cursive, selecting
Hamlet to impress. Perhaps “frailty”
appealed as an attribute: the little woman
as helpmeet. Unlikely that he took the word
as Hamlet did, to use in scorn.
It seems rarely read
in a hundred years — creases
still sharp, envelope carefully cut.

Perhaps she ignored
the schoolboy posturing, and posting
the photograph he’d begged for,
decided to flirt; finding
“My dear little Ida”
charming, not demeaning. Or perhaps
she kept him waiting until he wore
her down. The letter, a pale blue reminder
in her handkerchief drawer of a woman’s
“proper and natural position in life.”

Engagement

The Mummery girls are on the front porch. Agnes has fetched a chair from the front bedroom, Rissa has a bentwood kitchen chair. Ida sits cross legged on a cushion. The sun beats onto their faces. Les stands in the driveway with his new camera, composing the shot. "Look at the camera!" Ida holds her novel open like a hymn book, Rissa lays hers down on her lap. *He's mine*, thinks Ida. Agnes taps her back with the toe of her shoe. "Has he?" "He's here for lunch," says Rissa, *sotto voce*, (an expression she has found in a book). "We made trifle and Dad has been primed to stay." "You're embarrassing me," whispers Ida. She has a glory box at the foot of her bed: Agnes has bought her four tea towels, two pillowcases and a night gown from Ballantynes. *The Ladies Mirror* says that engagements are short these days; a bride need not acquire a large wardrobe. Nevertheless, she likes to take the things out one by one and lay them on her bed, imagining marriage. "Smile!" Les stubs his cigarette into the gravel with his boot. The photograph shows Agnes laughing, Ida looking thoughtful while Rissa purses her lips as she whistles at the cat.

Foresight

A reading taken on a position of unknown co-ordinates

My grandfather, the surveyor's assistant holds the rod while bees hover above foxgloves and blue borage. Heat rises from shingle mounds beside the river and seems, in rising, to tickle a fine plume of gravel from the cutting above the road; each stone, a delicate, metallic note.

He would like to operate the theodolite himself — or make sketches; taking them home later to copy onto watercolour paper. If he had time, he'd draw the opposite bank where low scrub and blackberry surround a tin shed beside a tilting telegraph pole. In the foreground, Queen Anne's lace, more borage and woolly mullein in clumps.

He considers the sightlines; the shed and pole the focus for a painting, blue in the flowers leading the eye toward the rusted tin. He wishes he had his camera, but even if he'd carried it here, it can only take shapes; his memory would reproduce the scene and his brush will render colours as he recalls them — alizarin, ultramarine deep, sap green. He fingers the fleshy buds of the foxgloves and the soft grey leaves of the mullein:

“My dear little Ida,” he will write tonight, “I just know we are going to be happy.”

Ida thinks about the Beach.

Mounds of dry seaweed, a fish carcass with mother of pearl eyes and, further away, seagulls. The damp sand of a winter afternoon, waves hurling spray and salt and then dragging it all back. None of this is visible. The apples from the home trees had codling moth; webs and worms inside. My blouse was too big; I had gathered the neckline with a brooch. I will remake it later into a baby gown; embroidering in herringbone along the tucks, sewing yellow ribbons at the neck, each stitch a step forward and a step back. We had been walking out along the beach for an hour that day talking back and forth against the waves before we turned for home.

The taste of the apple, the tug of the breeze, the weight of the knife in my pocket which had an ivory handle and was one of a pair; the other for grapefruit. I was thinking as I turned and held up the apple again and again, but as if was natural, that I must wash my hair but then it wouldn't dry before bed. We made tea in a billy and I fed the fire with driftwood while he sketched the waves for a watercolour.

If I'd had charge of the camera I would have taken this instead: I roll a cigarette to place between his lips; my tongue on the paper to close it, my fingers holding the match, his hand on my hand.

That night, my hair smelled of smoke and my fingernails were full of sand. Undressing to wash, I saw myself in the mirror; a human form in art like the models in his book, all flesh and angled light except where the silver had tarnished and a web of rusty lace threw filigree patterns across my breasts and neck.

The Apple

In her hands, an apple halved,
the core, two scrolls
of black and white,
the shape of her mouth
preserved in its flesh,
a certainty
like the sea breeze visible
in her hair
or the damp sand
under her shoes.

Ida waits for the photographer
to finish his work,
while in the background, spray
lights the shingle bank
and distant hills
with a soft focus
that he imagines reproducing on her skin

if she would stand near a lamp later,
peel off her white blouse,
the heavy skirt hemmed
with salt stains,
the damp stockings
and allow the light
to model her body
for his camera.

The Human Form in Art

She slices the apple
offers it to the light
and, eyes half closed against sun,
watches
his finger on the shutter, waiting
for release, again, and then
once more; fixed
in that moment when
the apple –
its white flesh
in her hands, is the heart
of the image.

Later, the photographer will consider
limbs composed
in light diffused
through salt spray, distant waves,
tooth marks on a halved apple,
the soft cuffs of her blouse,
the bright button
gathering the fabric above her breasts,
and taking out his pencil
try to capture only her mouth,
drawing from memory
the sound of her voice.

Trace

Footprints in the sand around her feet,
sharp edged, crumbling a little as she pauses,
turns, waits for the shutter to capture
an instant: a flickering expression
the curve of her cheek.

An exposure: oxidised residue
of her eyes gaze
across years in black and white
fixed by light and chemicals onto paper
and forgotten in an album.
How tempting it is now
to seek resemblances:
eyebrows, mouth, hair
in the living.

Her White Blouse

Her white blouse, buttoned
or closed with a brooch
as if to make modest
a garment, which
might reveal breasts.
— she seems overdressed
for the beach;
heavy skirt,
sashed jacket, laced shoes.

I've been thinking about the button;
how it resembles the pin
I bought at a gallery — a souvenir
of the artist, whose eyes
glance sideways at viewers;
blue shirt, orange beret,
her image as art reflected
in the pin, which I wear
as a brooch,
anxious about necklines
revealing too much,
reluctant to bare all
in black and white.

Aeroplaning

My grandfather once learned to fly —
leather jacket and flying helmet hidden
behind his office door long after
he had agreed to give it up.

His album has blurred views of Castlecliff framed
by a bi-plane's wire struts. Houses marooned
in sand hills, the Freezing Works, surf club,
river mouth, a line of breakers — all captioned,
“Aeroplaning Christmas 1921.”

He was a joy rider —
on another page “Castlecliff from the Air,”
the biplane in a long gone paddock, centred,
sepia toned. Arranged around it, faded
views of children playing in pools
left by the departing tide, or adults gazing skyward
in Sunday clothes and hats, as a pilot
takes the plane out over the sea.

Easy to imagine his delight that day,
while Ida, waiting on the sand below,
skirts buffeted by the breeze,
hat and hair damp, scans
the horizon, anxieties
burning like the black sand
under her shoes.

Summer Wedding.

*What the devil does it matter, wrote my grandfather in December 1923,
if something does go wrong; if we missed the train or the photographer
was not ready or the taxi got a puncture. Isn't it going to be glorious sweetheart.
Won't it be funny calling you Mrs Row?*

It's late summer, 2016: their great-grand-daughter's wedding.
The garden as beautiful as a park; trees, flax,
soft, cool grass. There are girls in floral frocks
and high heels; silver salvers; champagne
and cordials, and lines of wooden chairs
on the lawn for all the friends and cousins called
in from overseas and down country, aunts
and uncles, grandparents. We wait for the bride
while overhead, the sky grows darker and darker.
The groomsmen fidget in their white shirts,
there's a distant rumble, bunting flutters,
a little tremor in the trees.

We all watch the clouds as the bridesmaids,
in long pastel dresses, walk one by one through
ornamental grasses, before the bride, on the arms of her
parents, joins the party on the lawn. The sky glowers
mauve to midnight, the trees shimmer, and the air is so heavy
that when the first raindrops become a deluge
as the bride signs the register, everyone laughs
as they run, four to an umbrella.

When the rain clears, the cousins line up for photographs.
They've taken off their shoes, their clothes steam gently
in the heat, there's a rainbow above the house.
It is glorious.

Back steps

Sometimes she thinks of time as a slowing;
early morning when the air is so light
that distant sounds seem to hang in stillness;
the school bell, a truck on the main street,
the neighbour flicking her sheets with a crack
of the hand before pegging them. She is held in a glass sphere,
and even the pony trotting to the fence in the paddock behind the house
is suspended midstride like Muybridge's horse.
She has seen his photographs in a book.

She purses her lips and breathes into the morning,
the vapour disappearing between exhalations.
“Nothing will happen today,” she murmurs,
“if I do not will it to occur.” She could stand here,
caught on the back steps, hair unbrushed, wearing her oldest skirt
pulled high above the five-month bump and the shirt
with the too long sleeves and no one would come
to set her back in motion. This is what she remembers
whenever she sees her image, printed and pasted into the album.

Cigarette Box

The box is shallow – barely deep enough
for single earrings or the new-born's necklace, name
spelled out in coloured beads that lie inside it
above a yellowed paper, worn and folded
like tattered fabric. It still smells faintly of cigarettes
although sixty years have passed since they
filled this box.

*The paper from the box has a diagram
in my grandfather's hand:*

Sides: Tawhai, Kowhai,
Puriri, Manuka,
Ngaio, Rata.

Trees of the central North Island.

My grandfather holds a cigarette in every photograph – concealed
in his palm, at his side, between his fingers. Posed in the garden,
boot on the blade of a shovel, the hand on his hip
holds a roll-up. The backs of the prints are foxed, flecked
like tobacco.

Lid: Totara, Kauri
Ramarama,
Kohukohu,
Taupata,
Karaka
Miro.

Some names crossed out and over written.

He packed Cockayne's *Trees of New Zealand* in the satchel
with his lunch, found samples for this box while inspecting
bridges and cuttings, sketched gates and sheds alongside notes about drains,
cigarette in his mouth, pencil in his fingers.

Tawa (hardwood); Pohutukawa (used for ship building);
Mangao (*Litsea calicaris*);
Kaikawaka (glues well).

Weekends were for shaping and gluing – the air burning
like his smokes, sawdust on the kitchen table and Ida
opening windows, emptying ash trays, sweeping.
I've never liked that smell, the stink in my clothes,
the scratch in my throat.
But the box is hard to fault, carefully crafted,
smooth to touch, the timber lovely.

Damsons

White blossoms anticipate
clusters of indigo plums
powdered with bloom.

Folds of white cloth
in sunlight: a woman
holds a glass and on the table
the jar of red jam;
a pink glow.

Her face is blurred.
It's just the necklace
that identifies her — the one I wear,
and the dress I've seen before in other shots.
I imagine it grey or blue, dark stitching
around the neck just as I imagine
indigo reflected on white damask
pulsing through the veins
inside her wrists.

Earthquake weather

On the day of the Napier earthquake,
Ida stands at her table
in Patea, weighing sugar for jam,
all windows thrown wide
in search of a breeze.

The scales dip
and hover, she
feels dizzy.
Dishes clatter
in the sink,
the kitchen light swings,
clouds of soot breathe
into the fireplace,
two plums fall
from the bowl on the sideboard
and roll across the floor
to Ann, playing dolls
with pegs by the door.
Not dizzy — shaken.

Safer outside.
They sit in dry grass under damson trees,
watch starlings wheel about the sky,
insects busy among the windfalls.
Ida folds a ribbon into a dress for
the peg doll, makes a baby with a
plum stone and a hanky,
hears a tui in the puriri,
the school bell, children shouting.

Their voices rise then fall, and rise again
as if they were being tuned on a radio.
Listening in, she imagines static
overwhelming the signal or too much
being transmitted, glass valves glowing
behind a polished cabinet and her fingers
turning the dial in search of adult voices. The world
has slipped somehow, a shuddering in the air
has settled in her chest.

Ida's version

Patea: February 12, 1931.

*My Dear Ag, — the table under Ida's hand rocks,
her nib makes the comma a blot. In the pantry,
jars of jam chime softly together on the shelves,
the ceiling light swings moth like shadows across the page.
She pushes on: I will try and give you my version
of the terrible happenings of last week. The paper
she is using is lined foolscap and the handwriting
unremarkable, although Agnes, folding it away later to keep,
notes the wavering slope of the letters formed below the line,
the indentation of the stops and dashes, the scratching out.*

*There must have been queer things going on in the sea all round ...at Castlecliff
there was something wrong for six waders had to be rescued from a sandbank.*

She will write later, that a week after the quake
she has become quite used to tremors.
Her reflection, captured by the dark
in the un-curtained window, stares at her.
Perspiration trickles down her forehead and into her eyes.

*Les was away in the country that day and when he came home at about half past four
he told me it was a severe quake at Napier with great loss of life. We went to
someone's house and listened in at 7 o'clock. We heard that Hastings was as bad as
Napier...*

Ida places her pen on the table, and lifting
her hair from the back of her neck, stares through
her reflection and into the garden beyond.
The branches of the damson tree seem to form
a silver fingered wreath around her head.

*Les made up his mind that he must go through to see how the family were getting on.
The most trying part of the trip was going through the Gorge because of course he
had no idea what was ahead of him. When he reached Hastings the next morning,
Mum and all of them were cooking breakfast in the back yard. Les says the tears
streamed down his face pretty well all the time he was in Hastings — it was such an
awful sight.*

Her children are asleep — the kiddies. She calls them
kiddies like Les calls her kiddie and “My Little Ida.” Sometimes
she wishes she was more confident — could learn to drive,
could take herself to Hastings or to Agnes in Christchurch.

*I don't suppose there will be much of their crockery or ornaments left and of course
all Edith's things were broken. It seems a shame but those things are nothing so long
as they escaped with their lives.*

Ida reports:
that she has been alone at night three times since the quake,
that their mother has come to stay,
that their father has returned to Hastings,
that she wakes up in the night afraid.

*But all the same, we who were not in it, can have no conception of what it was
actually like.*

Amongst Ida's things:

monogrammed serviette rings in a leatherette case;
a tarnished silver evening purse;
three strings of coloured beads;
and her collection of delicate
demitasse cups and saucers,
preserved in tissue in an apple box
for her daughter.

My mother is gifting these keepsakes
to Ida's great-granddaughters — the purse
for this one, the serviette rings and beads
for the others. She polishes the purse,
runs her thumb across the monograms,
lets the beads drip through her fingers,
imprinting their shapes on her mind.

One cup and saucer survive: flowered, fragile,
a doll's tea-service for gloved fingers.
I touch its eggshell rim, and in my mother's eyes
I'm four years old again —
wresting the box from
my toddler sister's hands,
the lid flying open,
and each cup and saucer
held fast by the air
on tissue paper wings, then falling,
falling, the shards of china,
like crushed sea shells
upon the kitchen floor.

Visiting

Ida and her mother visit Matron Kelly,
a social call to the Nurses' Home.
They speak of the quake,
student nurses bring tea.

Matron Kelly enlisted in 1916,
45 years and 4 months old, 5 feet 4, 126 pounds.
The Hospital Ship, Maheno, arrived in Southampton
in time for the Battle of the Somme.

Here in Patea, she likes to follow the horses,
hosts bridge parties in her lounge,
dyes her hair chestnut and smokes.

Ida and her mother
return home, plan further calls —

Ida is keeping her mother busy while
Napier and Hastings bury their dead.

Preserving

February's heat
ripens peaches on the neglected trees
shading the parched grass
on our garden's clay slopes, which each day
seem more crevassed. I imagine
the ground opening,
peaches disappearing
into cracks that trap my feet.

The weather continues hot and humid:
birds excavate the unripe fruit out of reach of my fingers,
slaters burrow into windfalls.

I watch spores of brown rot bloom;
consult handwritten recipes
for chutney and jam; recall
quart jars and metal rings, water baths,
a kitchen full of steam and wasps.

I think of Ida at her table,
weighing sugar for jam
and I eat the peaches raw, peeling
away the skin with my teeth, golden
halves in sugar syrup
never as sweet as this warm
flesh dripping juice
down my idle arms.

My Grandfather's Watercolours

The Farm Gate beside the eucalypts is growing spores of rust, its backing board freckled with mould, and the evening sky above the *Wanganui River Mouth* has a sunburst low on the horizon; an orange blur as if the artist, unable to clear his eyes of afterglow, has left it in. Only *The Cascade* is clear of foxing — a stream courses over rocks and under tree ferns. Here and there, brush flicks of green feathered into grey depict ferns above water, and under the colour, hair-like tracteries of pencil record his first drafts. This painting has no sky — the cascade's filtered light and foliage preserved the scene from acids like those that stain the clouds above the farm gate and the sea.

I could replace their mattes and boards, treat emerging blotches; but new frames would mean the pencilled scrawl across their backs with which he named them would be lost, along with residues from rooms in which they've hung — fingerprints and dents, and in their twisted wire hangers, sounds — a man laughs, a child sings, a woman reads aloud, each voice preserved in dust.

Fading

I can still return to my childhood home by walking from the bus stop on the Main Road. In the wardrobe where I once hung mini-skirts and school uniforms there is a rabbit fur coat in a cloth bag, a fox stole with glittering eyes and tiny paws, two Kodak folding cameras and a box of 78s. I wait until my mother has gone to bed and open the box of old letters she keeps in a chest of drawers. A faint smell of dark chocolate and rusty tinfoil. Ida's handwriting, January 20th 1932, a Wednesday: *The council have got Les a new car – a five seater Sedan Vauxhall. Such a shiner. It looks real swanky too. I would like to be able to drive this car. It seems very simple – only a matter of confidence – which I'm afraid I haven't got.* I fold the letter away. My mother taught me to drive in the Valiant. It had a column change and the seat on the driver's side had worn through almost to the springs. I used to drive to work along the Hutt Road, praying that I would not need to do a hill start at Korokoro. I must not ride the clutch. It is hard to throw things away once they have been kept for years. Here is a photograph of my mother in the car aged three. Her hand is blurry as if she is waving. Her father has told her to smile for the birdie. It is an old story; she has caught her finger in the door, she is not waving. She remembers this, but her mother has faded away like a photograph left too long in the light.

He Loves Her

It is January, 1932. Ida writes to Agnes about her holiday in Hastings. How desolate Napier looks and their mother has an electric range. The children loved their Christmas presents. Ida doesn't seem happy. It is possible that she has depression, just as it is possible that I am reading too much into her letters. She mentions tiredness and self-doubt. She has been gardening all day and now she is tired and their cousin has had another baby. How does she manage? It takes her all her time to look after just two. She is too tired to write much. She would like to get Ann a nice pram for her doll. When my children were babies we all tried to nap in the early afternoon as the sun shone through the jacaranda and cast a purple glow across the bedroom wall. Later, the same tree filtered the moon between its feathery leaves, as I stood at the window with a child against my shoulder. My grandfather writes that he is sorry that he is not at home. He loves her. He has filled four pages with pencil. Sometimes I thought that I would never sleep properly again. The baby would cry if I put him down. I swayed slowly from side to side while looking out at the night. There was always a light on in the house across the road. If I put my hand against the dark glass, I imagined frost, misty breath. You descend into fog slowly; day by day you go deeper until you are entirely enveloped and you forget how clear the moon is behind the jacaranda, how big the sky is and the stars, their cold light. All voices become distant. "Looking after" is not how I felt about mothering. I couldn't imagine my body separate from theirs. Tears come easily when you are tired. He will make it up to her; he loves her.

Plunket Book

The plunket nurse strips the baby to his singlet, weighs him. His feet flex, toes curling inwards as she suspends him in a nappy from the scale. She holds one hand out underneath. I do not believe she could catch him if the pin broke. We plot his weight on the graph in the plunket book. The nurse prescribes orange juice in cooled boiled water, writes it down. Everything is normal. While I dress the baby she suggests that I peel the potatoes while baby sleeps, set the table after lunch so dinner will be ready when my husband returns from work. I smile and nod and the baby cries. I wait while the nurse walks up the path to the gate before sitting down with a novel, baby latched on. This is my new routine; one hand on my breast, the other smoothing down the pages of a book. Or, soaking nappies, washing, drying. Talking to the announcer on the national programme. Some days, it feels like washing nappies is more urgent than potatoes, drying them more pleasing than table setting. This is normal. The baby sleeps, the baby wakes up. I feed the baby while out in the garden, washing flaps on the line. In the street below the house a woman in a dressing gown throws crusts every morning to birds waiting on her lawn. In the evenings, I sometimes hear the next door neighbour singing "Nessun Dorma" while we watch T.V. The houses here are very close together, we hear them slamming doors. This is all normal.

Ready, Go!

“Ready, Go!” The swim coach is Russian,
his accent conjures up a large grey town
in the middle of a steppe; the pool might be
an iced-up pond. The children kick underwater
and rise, already stroking, for the end of the pool,
tumble turning back. “Ready. Go!” the next group splashes away.
In the toddler’s pool, the little brother, slick as butter
hurls himself over and over into the deep end,
arms flailing; he will not stop until he too can swim. He watches
me at the side where I’m talking with the mothers, waits
until I raise my eyes and dives again. On the way home,
they all recite “Ready, Go!” with a Russian accent: “Ready. Go!”
Yes, I saw them dive, saw them backstroke, saw them try butterfly.
Their hair has a greenish tinge; goggles have left red marks around their eyes.
We wind down the windows and let in the scent of mown grass. I’m already
somewhere else: wet towels, washing lines, homework, carrots.

Have you been doing much bathing? Ida is writing to Agnes:
It’s years since I had a bathe. I think I would be frightened to tackle it now.
And yet, she is in the album in front of the surf club,
wet woollen togs and bathing cap,
black sand all over her legs. Laughing.

At the beach, the little brother stays above the tide mark: “Sharks,
and tidal waves.” He has a spade for digging, his hair bleached white,
his skin caramel and tasting of salt. His brothers too are wary of such wild water:
there is no one to shout “Ready. Go!” I hide my novel under the towels
and walk down to the waves. We take each other’s hands
and throw ourselves into the world.

March, 1932

The hospital has a maternity ward,
a fever annex. Matron and the Doctor
are well acquainted with *The Captain of the Men of Death*.

Pneumonia — a shaking chill, stabbing pains in the side,
prostration, fever, laboured breathing,
and for one in four cases, periods of apnoea
increasing in length until breathing ceases.

Amelia holds her daughter's hand,
Ida will be her third death — baby George
and Ruby left behind in Christchurch, "Safe in Glory."

Grief returns at unexpected moments —
birthdays, a girl in a white dress seen in the distance, violets,
a hymn played *sostenuto* to an empty room.

Mishaps

A boxthorn hedge,
an air pocket,
controls jammed,
the hand of Fate,
dead air.

Machine falls at racecourse, three killed,
engines disabled — airman drowned,
fell and was killed,
wing broke, machine fell, killed.

London, March 1917: while aeroplaning,
Flight-Captain Brandon,
the New Zealander who helped to bring down a Zeppelin,
struck a tree in heavy fog,
fell and suffered a severe fracture of the leg.

The papers report
every mishap, and yet,
each dispatch is seductive,
one more inducement
to take to the air.

As my grandfather clipped each article for an album,
drawing propellers and roundels in the margins,
he dreamed of climbing
nonchalantly into the seat,
tuning up the engine, rushing
past spectators
rising into the air, banking,
standing her on her wing-tip,
doing the loop.

It was much later, flying jacket heavy
across his shoulders and the controls
in his hands, that he understood
that he must not fall. Like Ida
as she struggled to breathe, he feared
leaving their children behind.

X-Ray

An x-ray might have captured
a soft grey cloud low
in the vault of Ida's chest. Visible
in the lightbox like cobwebs
against a window pane, a diffusing plume
of autumn smoke, early mist
pooling in a sloping field.

The film all shadows — tempting
to call it a negative like those
stored in the album which depict her hair
as white, her blouse grey and that halved apple
in her hand rotting, but bought to life by printing
unlike this image in the lightbox,
where her ribs, bright because they block the rays,
seem transparent and the tissues of her body,
her lungs, all greys like pencil shading, smeared
and smudged, or thumbprints on glass, expose
the reason for the cough that will not clear, the laboured
breaths, the fever out of place in high summer
while fruit ripens for preserving, and a blue dress
hangs in the cupboard still creased and grass stained
from a picnic by a river.

Patea Wednesday

Dear Agnes,

I was sorry when we knew you were not coming,
but perhaps it was just as well.

(And I will never be able to praise the nurses enough)

The last night I was called in a big hurry at 12;

I went in my coat and slippers, dressed of course.

She was quieter whenever I was there,

would just keep squeezing my hand.

But Agnes it is a cruel thing,

the suffering was awful.

I don't think I would like to live here.

Once when Ida was sensible she said,

"Mum, you and Grandma Row will have to look after the children."

All the same the weather has been lovely since I came.

Now Agnes I will not write any more;

there is not a pen I can use.

I asked Dad to send mine and something else

but if he did, we did not get it.

Sunstroke

There is a picnic with cousins
in a field by a river — tartan rugs floating
on mounds of dry grass, cicadas, water trickling
over stones, dry mud at the river's edge, a camp fire under willows
where her aunts make tea and in the bright sun,
her mother in a blue dress with no hat.

The children hide in long grass, which parts softly
against their legs and outstretched palms, like waves
and in the distance, her mother,
hair coiled loosely at the back of her head,
sun burned arms and cheeks, all the others under the trees.
Cutty grass beside the track traces thin ribbons
of blood across her legs, the whip wire sting of it
as she runs through the field toward the blue dress.
Someone must have kissed it better
lips against her knees.

The next day, her mother stays in bed with sunstroke:
Her mother's face is hot, she has a headache, she needs to rest.
Her grandmother comes, the doctor visits and then her mother
is taken to the hospital. Not sunstroke but pneumonia,
and everyone speaks in low voices.

The scars on her legs fade to silver before she is called from a game.
Someone takes her hand. In the house, her mother's hat
on the peg by the door, her blue dress in the cupboard.
Someone takes her hand. The curtains are drawn,
a flight of dust motes hangs above the carpet,
her mother's workbox is under the chair. Someone
takes her hand. Out in the street children are skipping,
their rope thudding against the
path. It is her turn.
Someone takes her hand.

The Press 18 March, 1932

WOMEN'S CORNER

The Lady Editor will be pleased to receive for publication in the "Women's Corner" items of social or personal news. Such items should be fully authenticated, and engagement notices must bear the signatures of both parties. Correspondence is invited in any matters affecting, or of interest to, women.

Mrs W. G. Rutherford (Palmerston North) is visiting her mother, Mrs W.J. Mitchell, Rugby street for her sister's wedding, which takes place next week.

Miss Lillian Harper, who has been on a short visit to Timaru, has returned to Christchurch.

An exhibition of art craft, including metal work, needlework, marquetry, etc., will be held by Miss Buckhurst and her students at Miss Buckhurst's home, 38 Cashel street west, on Tuesday afternoon and evening. No admission fee will be charged, but a small collection will be taken up, and proceeds will be devoted to the All Nations Fair. The exhibition will be opened at 2 p.m.

The death took place at the Patea Hospital this week of Mrs Ida Evelyn Row, wife of Mr L. F. Row, of Patea, County Engineer. During the two years she had been in Patea Mrs Row made many friends. She was a keen worker for her church and for the Plunket Society, of which she was an executive member. She married Mr Row only a few years ago, being Miss Mummery of Christchurch. There were two children of the marriage.

The engagement is announced of Jean, only daughter of Mr and Mrs W. Ellen "Willowdene," Templeton to Frederick George, only son of Mr and Mrs F Kolkman, Willow Bank, Halswell.

Obituary

I show my mother Ida's obituary from *The Press*. She reads it slowly, word by magnified word. She pauses on *Patea Hospital* and then on *keen worker for her church*. "Go on," I say, "there were two children of the marriage. Perhaps her sisters put the notice in the paper – for friends of the family." My mother has never seen it before. She puts down the magnifying glass and folds the paper. In this kitchen, the one I grew up in, the windows look out onto the house next door. I no longer know the neighbours, whose curtains are pulled. I fill the kettle at the sink and find the tea bags. My mother wants to talk about her computer, her telephone, the phone call from a friend who wants to know if another friend is still alive. She isn't in the phone book any more. "You should have an afternoon tea party for everyone who is still alive, and then these questions would be answered." We drink tea. How will I be in twenty-five years' time – Will one of my sons be visiting, or a daughter-in-law? Will I want someone to fix spouting or take the car for a warrant? Will I too, be alone? We sit down later with a box of photographs to look for pictures she could paint. If we enlarge the print she can see details. She magnifies a shot where a figure in a red jacket stands on a river bank. "I could put a figure in," she says. "I hope I can. I have to train my brain to see around the hole." Sometimes I forget that she can't see or hear well. I forget to speak loudly. I'm impatient. "You know," she says. "My father died when I was 24. He never spoke about my mother and I didn't know how to ask."

Ida Reading

Today I picture Ida
outside in the sun at the table
on our deck. She is reading a novel
from the clearance sale at the library;
pages softened from turning and the plastic
cover on the dust jacket brittle, peeling away
in jagged strips from the corners. She rests
her head on one hand and with the other
fingers a long loop of white beads. There is
a breeze from the beach carrying the smell of the sea
and laughter from a neighbour's garden. Somewhere
there is a barbecue. Ida lets the beads fall and turns the page,
they clatter against the table like droplets from a garden hose.
This bright summer light bleaches everything to sepia.

In the album on my lap
Ida sits outside on a kitchen chair
in black and white, hair loose
over her shoulders, hairbrush in one hand,
a book on her knee. A tabby cat crouches
in the shade, rows of cabbages and potatoes behind.
“Look,” I want to say, “here's some of me —
in the back garden — a swing and a book,
and there, on the beach; sunburnt. And here,
cradling a baby — reading.”

I wish I could hear her voice in reply;
its timbre — I imagine it light and brittle,
and rising into the afternoon air with
these doves, whose grey wings
beat upward like pages
blown by the breeze.

Album

The summer I turned twelve: I'm wearing shorts, a cotton blouse, school sandals on my feet. I remember the blouse – hours at the sewing machine stitching and unpicking; and the sandals – the way the buckle scraped and the stiff leather blistered my toes. This album is for photographs like these. Each summer recorded in faded colour film; sisters in identical dresses, the Christmas bike, a doll. Tiled roofs in the distance, high cloud and the same swing set in each; verticals frame us against a hedge – *photinia red robin*.

I'm sitting on the swing looking down at a book placed across my lap. My hair recently cut; jagged scissor lines from kitchen shears still visible at the ends – I don't care yet, how I look. Yes, I was always reading, but never on the swing; the swaying made me sick. We were all photographed that day, placed in the garden, told to smile. They're good shots; posed and focussed, mounted with care, unlike those which have slipped from their hinges leaving gaps, as if each of us had left home then returned, and left again.

Here's the summer I got glasses. How surprised I was by clarity; to find that only the outside leaves of the hedge were red, that the line of distant hills could sharpen out of blue-grey haze, and the rocks on the riverbank become shapes not shadows. And now, the summer of my first pregnancy: barefoot and in a voluminous dress. There is a half-painted cot in the basement and we sit inside this first house on garden chairs. I am counting down the days until I can leave work, obsessed with the thought of staying at home; imagining freedom.

We tell stories about summer with this album; long, light evenings; heat and sunburn; sandals, cotton blouses; Christmas – the gaps and empty hinges hint at winter, something hidden, unexpected. Later it will seem like sorrow.

Pneumonia

In the photograph, black and white,
taken in the sitting room, I am
all hollow eye and pale forehead,
awkward in knitted jersey and pleated skirt,
hair pulled back with ribbon.
Memory colours the jersey fawn, the skirt blue,
I am smiling as if I wish I were somewhere else.

I had been sick; days in bed, feverish
sleep in lukewarm sun filtered through
flowered curtains, disturbed by murmured conversations
outside the door about x-rays and hospital; the low rumble
of the doctor's voice populated my dreams with giants
and ogres from my fairy-tale book; in my mother's voice
a whisper of anxiety that I mistook for impatience.

The x-ray plate is cold against my chest. I want to see
this image: my bones, my lungs, the crackling cough
hiding behind the fingers of my ribs
which jut outwards when I raise my arms.
I hold my breath and turn when I am told.
Pneumonia, a word I can spell now,
like catastrophe or penicillin.

Mother's Day

Women walk with daughters along Sunday streets.
A grandchild plays the violin in the café.
We all smile.

In the evening, I make dinner for my sons.
They've come with garden vouchers, book tokens,
they're eating the chocolate they had meant for me –
Saving you from it – and waiting for the call
from their brother in Australia. We put it on speaker phone.
His voice distant and crackly: *I'm at the top of a hill
where the reception is better.* They take turns to joke,
plan visits. He warns about snakes, describes spiders
in the shed outside his house. They talk about
music and cars and work.

Twenty-five years ago: a different house, dog
underfoot and in the dark outside, a large garden
and paddocks – *Let's play spotlight* – I couldn't
have imagined today; how I would wish
I could be with my mother,
instead of here in this kitchen,
being the mother to my sons.

Talking Books

There are books in all the photographs,
in laps, under chairs, on the lawn. Inside
that house there must be bookcases, shelves,
cupboards where Agatha Christie might be leaning
against Dickens or Virginia Woolf, although
Virginia must have seemed difficult. I'm imagining girls
with novels from the library, *The Weekly News*
stacked by a fireplace, *Little Women*, Bunyan, Bibles
in the front room. *Married Love* concealed in brown paper
under petticoats in a drawer and everyone reading
at the breakfast table and before they sleep.

I'm thinking about this need for words and pages to turn
as I search the Blind Foundation's catalogue.
My mother prefers mountaineering to fiction and,
now that sound is replacing sight, men's voices to women's.
I'm writing up a list in large black letters, agreeing that her book
about Peter McLeavey seems to have disappeared.
She used to visit his gallery. "I can't read it," she says, "but still,
I wonder where it's gone." She doesn't go into town now,
the numbers on the buses are too hard to see.

She has been listening to a book about a young man
who climbs without ropes. I find him on YouTube;
she watches as he scrambles up El Capitan.
She's been there, seen the climbers,
heard their voices high above her. There is an album somewhere
with photographs of Yosemite; I'll look for it.

My mother wonders about the climber Albert Mummery
who perished on Nanga Parbat in 1895. Perhaps
he was a distant cousin of her grandfather. Wakeful,
in the middle of the night, she listens to her radio,
disembodied voices calling out to her
like mountaineers, from the other side of the world.

26 Wicksteed

Blue ink on a white label. My mother, eleven or twelve, laughing with her brother in a garden. Their house is in the street where the doctors lived: there is a brick wall, a flowerbed. She could be me at that age; straight dark hair, the same fringe. In the next shot, her father in suit and tie, a hat, hand cupping a cigarette, the same garden. In 1939, they were all smiling for the camera – my mother, her brother, her father.

We are visiting my mother's childhood friend. An album on the table among tea cups. They went to the same school, lived in the same street. Her friend hated school: the silly rules, petty indignities. Left at fifteen for an office. My mother did not hate school; she turns the page to a class photograph. They discuss their teachers as if this Monday it is 1940 and Whanganui, not Auckland in 2016. They remember assemblies, shoes for walking on the tennis court, the girls in the photograph and their sisters, recall my mother's brother, their children and grandchildren and Wicksteed Street.

"Don't make me live in a place like that." We are driving home now. The walls are white and there is no sun in her friend's apartment. "How would I find room for all my things?" "You won't be living in a place like that," I say, "although, if you wanted to return to school, the rules might seem familiar."

When I google Wicksteed it still seems to be the doctor's street. The school is planning an anniversary. "I won't be going," she says, "I won't be going." The album is back in her bag. "Nothing will be the same." The clock on the kitchen wall is an hour slow, I reach up to change it. My mother has found a card from her friend in her purse. She peers at it – scrolls of black ink floating across the envelope connect this morning to their remembered pasts – hands it to me: "She still has the most beautiful handwriting."

Sunstrike

Dolphins leap in the bay as dawn breaks over the Coromandel. I pause to watch their dark muscled shapes in the waves until the sun becomes an incandescent

flare and a blinding afterglow burns orange and green behind my eyes. In the quiet morning streets I push my body on through air like cooling water until the colours

recede and I can see again; unlike my mother, who believing she had sunstroke, stopped her car and waited while a blurring hole formed in the macula of one eye.

All summer she noted browned grass on the street berms, dull leaves on trees and talked of drought as colours began to melt away. When I call to describe the

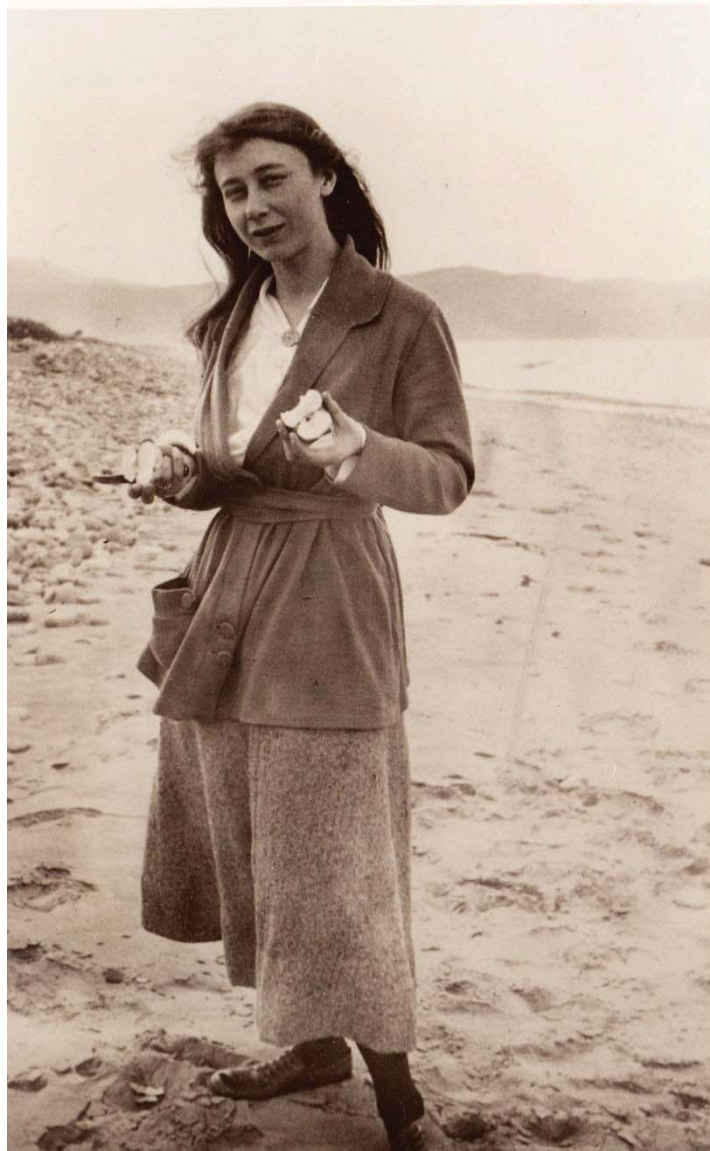
dolphins, she reminds me to take care of my eyes. Becalmed behind wooden fences, overlooked by curtained windows, in slowly fading suburbia, she mourns for the sea.

Sea Glass

At the edge of the print, there is a gauze-like whorl; the hem of a white petticoat or sea froth. She was always slipping out of frame for shells, a piece of sea glass – waves might carry them away, bury them among pebbles as water drained and returned, grinding and polishing. She held a piece of green to her eye, and for a moment, his finger on the shutter, he had thought of taking her like that, while she could not see.

He holds the negative to the light. The whorl could be a print left by the index finger of her right hand, although it is not her mark. He thinks of contour lines on a map, tracings on sand left by incoming waves. He could measure them, assign an interval – months or years, the length of time it took for glass to weather, cease to wound. He thinks of mourning like that: crystal clouding like mist.

Ida Evelyn Row
1896 - 1932



Notes:

The Row family photograph album that inspired *Sea Glass* was begun in 1921 with additions c. 2000. It is a brown cardboard album (26x18x1.5cm) containing a collection of black and white amateur snapshots of Ida and Les Row and their immediate families interspersed with shots of airplanes, scenes of the Whanganui and Napier regions, and postcards.

The letters from which quotations have been taken comprise: two letters dated February 1914 and December 1923 in their original envelopes addressed to Miss Ida Mummery by Les Row; one letter from Clearwater written in pencil to Ida by Les, no date but c 1930; two letters from Ida to her sister Agnes dated February 1931 and January 1932; and one letter from Ida's mother in Patea to Agnes dated Wednesday (March 16, 1932). Both album and letters are part of the author's personal collection.

“from *The Press*: December 16, 1909.”

Lines in this poem are taken from *The Press*, 16 December, 1909.
The Press [Christchurch] 16 Dec. 1909: 2,7,10. Papers Past. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

“Visiting.”

Information about Matron Kelly (Leonora Flight Kelly) taken from Radford, Pat. “Leonora Flight Kelly – Nurse on Horseback.” *Taranaki Stories*. pukeariki, 26 Jan. 2006. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

“March 1932.”

The expression “Captain of the Men of Death” was coined by William Osler in 1918 to describe *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.
Gennaris, Alexandra and Jean-Francois Collet. ““The captain of the men of death,’ *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, fights oxidative stress outside the ‘city wall.’” *EMBO Molecular Medicine* 5.12 (2013): 1798-1800. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

The description in this poem of the progress of pneumonia is taken from a discussion on the work of Bullowa in the early 1930s into the efficacy of antibacterial therapy for pneumonia.
Singer, Mary., et al. “Historical and Regulatory Perspectives on the Treatment Effect of Antibacterial Drugs for Community Acquired Pneumonia.” *Clinical and Infectious Diseases* 47. (2008): S216-24. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

“Mishaps.”

Lines at the beginning of this poem are taken from newspaper articles retrieved from Papers Past.
Fielding Star 3 Mar.1917: 2. Papers Past. Web. 28 Jan. 2016
Hawera & Normanby Star 6 Jan. 1922: 4. Papers Past. Web. 28.Jan. 2016.

“Women’s Corner.”

Lines in this poem are taken from *The Press*, 18 March 1932.
The Press [Christchurch] 18 Mar. 1932: 2. Papers Past. Web. 14 Aug. 2016.