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Poetry, Place and Transition

A critical and creative thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Master of Creative Writing

at Massey University, New Zealand

Tracey Sullivan

2023

Abstract

This thesis uses two methods of investigation — a critical essay and a collection of poetry — to explore ideas of transition in contemporary poetry through the lens of place.

The critical essay examines Lynn Davidson's 2019 collection, *Islander*, in terms of both theme and technique. It considers themes of family, belonging, ancestry and home and techniques of repetition and echo. It argues that notions of transience and impermanence are manifested in the collection through Davidson's use of non-places and liminality; places of belonging; change and continuity; and flight and migration, leaving and return.

The creative component of the thesis is a collection of my own poems, *how we come home*, which has been shaped both by lived experience and by the investigation of the critical essay. This collection is also concerned with notions of movement; transience, impermanence and continuity through the lens of place. It is thematically similar to Davidson's *Islander* in its consideration of family, belonging and home.

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I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my Massey University supervisor, Dr Bryan Walpert, and the teaching staff of the Massey Creative Writing programme, in particular Dr Ingrid Horrocks, who was coordinator of the programme in 2022, and Dr Elspeth Tilley. An early version of “thought fish” appeared in the journal *Six Cents*.

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“We’re all either here, or we’ve been here /
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Notions of Transition in Lynn Davidson’s
Islander

Introduction

The critical component of this thesis looks at the poetry of Lynn Davidson, with a focus on her most recent collection *Islander*, which was published simultaneously in 2019 by Shearsman Books in the UK and Victoria University Press in New Zealand. The poems in *Islander* move between New Zealand, Australia and Scotland as Davidson herself did during the writing of the collection. I explore how Davidson's poems respond to place, and how place functions within them as a lens through which ideas of transition are considered. This has bearing on my own poetry as I will explain in the bridging statement after this essay.

Davidson, (1959 -) has published poetry, essays and fiction. Born and educated in Wellington, she is a graduate of the IIML at Victoria University of Wellington and holds a PhD in creative writing from Massey University. She published four collections of poetry between 1999 and 2019: *Mary Shelley's Window* (1999), *Tender* (2006), *How to live by the sea* (2009), *Common Land* (2013), and *Islander* (2019). These are collections saturated with place. Reviewing *Islander* in *Landfall*, Michael Stevens observes: "She writes with the deep sensitivity of a psychogeographer." Quoting from one of the early poems in the collection, "Ancient light," Stevens asserts that this collection "makes a good argument for place being the true wellspring of poetry — our greatest and most consistent antecedent" (Stevens). A much earlier collection, *The Daughter of this Place*, was self-published in 1983 when Davidson was twenty-four years old. On the back cover of this collection she wrote a short introduction:

I have lived most of my 24 years in Pukerua Bay, where four generations of my family also live. Living in hillside houses we suffer the gale force winds and watch salt spray attacking our cars—in return the rugged coastline offers seclusion and inspiration. (*The Daughter of this Place*)

She goes on to mention travel in Europe four years earlier. In this early writing, then, she indicates what will become an enduring interest in the importance of place, themes of family and relationship, home and ancestry, and importantly for the interests of this essay, the movement between places.

'Place' is not simple to define. Poet and geographer Tim Cresswell asserts, "While we hold common-sense ideas of what places are, these are often quite vague when subjected to critical reflection" (Cresswell 11). At a basic level place is space invested with meaning (19), it is a "meaningful location" (11). When we think of the world through the lens of place, in this sense, we can think perhaps most readily of the materiality of place, of the world being a set of physically locatable, nameable and quantifiable places, in some way set and bounded and separate from each other. But there are also less concrete ways of approaching place, whereby it is not just a thing in the world but also a way of understanding the world. Cresswell notes it is as much a way of seeing and knowing as it is an act of defining (15).

Doreen Massey, in "For Space," proposes "the event of place" (282). Massey's definition characterises place as process, therefore changing over time. She moves away from more traditional conceptions of the separation of time and space. For Massey place has multiple identities dependent on when it is experienced and by whom. Massey's places are not clearly bounded or enclosed; their uniqueness is defined relationally: place is "an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories" (299). This is a world of attachments and connections, meaning and experience. Cresswell also writes that "place is made and remade continuously" (Cresswell 39). He aligns in this respect with Massey:

Place in this sense becomes an event, rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence." (Cresswell 39)

This is a useful conceptualisation of place to use in conjunction with Davidson's *Islander* as it moves in and through scales of time which are personal, ancestral, geological and cosmic, as well as in and between places.

In 2016, twenty-seven years after her previous visit, Davidson returned to Europe. She lived in Edinburgh in Scotland until 2020 and published *Islander*, her most recent collection, from there. My examination of this most recent collection finds what seems to be a poetry of place that is not easy to further categorise. While it shows a keen observation and sensitivity to the natural world it could not be described as either ecopoetry or landscape poetry. While it reflects on the relationships between place and personal identity, family, heritage and home, it never enters the arena of identity poetics, polemic or politics. It is a poetry neither swayed by what is current, nor as Scottish poet and academic Alan Riach comments in the blurb, "given to the common gestures of banal defiance." Riach further describes Davidson's writing in *Islander* as "simply slipping away from the traps of rigidity and subscription." What I understand from Riach's comments, and concur with, is that Davidson is not interested in belonging to any movement or group or sub-genre of poetry. However, neither does she react against these categories or explicitly separate herself from them.

Davidson's writing in *Islander* may not fall easily within the boundaries of category but one aspect that characterises this work is the pervasive sense of movement. Paula Green writes in a review of *Islander* for *NZ Poetry Shelf*, "One of the pleasures of this collection is the eclectic movement" (Green). Whether this movement is "born from departure, from the sway between presence and absence, birds in flight, the ripple of water, the movement of a musing and contemplative mind" (Green), there is an accompanying sense of transition and impermanence. It is this transitional movement and sense of impermanence that interests me in my own work — and so it is this, rather than

any effort to strictly categorise her use of place that interests me here. In the following sections of this essay I will argue that through the lens of place, Davidson's collection *Islander* explores notions of transition in both theme and technique. I consider the themes of family, belonging, ancestry and home. Though these seem to suggest a singularity of place, ideas of movement, transition and impermanence run alongside, and perhaps surprisingly, through them. I consider technique involving repetition and echo in language, image and ideas. Specifically, I will argue that ideas of transience and impermanence are manifested through Davidson's use of non-places and liminality; places of belonging; ideas of continuity and change; and migration and flight, leaving and return.

“further along the road”: Non-places and liminality

One of the ways in which a sense of transience and impermanence manifests itself in *Islander* is in the use of liminal and non-places. “Non-place” is a term first used by the French anthropologist Marc Augé to describe spaces such as airports, motorways and their service layovers, hotel rooms, shopping malls, and “the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked” (34). They are spaces where individuals remain anonymous, unconnected, and alone. They are liminal, transitory spaces, in between the more meaningful and connected ‘places’ of our lives. It should be noted, though, that the non-place is subjective. For example, to a person who works there every day, the shopping mall is a place. It has meaning, a connection to identity, and possibly community. Arguably in the writing of a poem located in a non-place, meaning is gathered, and through this gathering it also becomes place. However, the sense of transience of the original, real-world, physical non-place remains.

Davidson introduces ideas of liminality and locations in non-places from the very beginning in *Islander*, in fact from the title of the first poem, “My Stair” (9). In this poem the

speaker describes the view from the window of her rented flat and plans to fly home to see her father whose health is deteriorating. A stairway is a liminal space, an in-between space through which you move from one storey of a building to the next. The possessive “My” lays some kind of claim to permanence and possession but is undermined later in the poem with “I am / a lodger here,” signalling that this is a temporary habitation not owned by the speaker and not permanent. Well before these lines however, the first quatrain establishes a sense of both the in-between and the transitory:

Between the sea and my window
the bus depot where
late at night, double decker buses all
empty and delicate and full of light

The first word of the poem, “Between,” adds to the sense of liminality of “My stair,” which is layered once more by the end of the first line where “window” mediates visually between inside and outside. That is, while you can see through it, the window also provides another example of betweenness. What can be seen through this window is the bus depot, another transitory non-place, which lies between the speaker and the sea. Even the sea itself suggests passage and has historically been considered as “great expanses of space” to be crossed, rather than a place in its own right (DeLoughrey 15). In this poem it contributes to the image of an interim space between shore and a far-off horizon. By the end of the first quatrain of this poem then, there is a strong presence of the transitory, impermanent and in-between.

In the second stanza, of four, this state of unsettled impermanence is extended to the subject of the speaker’s father, whose “heart is failing.” As she explains, “I look for flights” — the ideas of distance and transitional movement or travel continue to build. Her father is at the centre of this poem in a literal sense. He and his illness are returned to in the first line of the third stanza: “My father’s heart is failing, he fills up // with fluid (like an

empty bus fills up with light?).” The bracketed comparison brings together the temporary and ephemeral nature of buses at the depot at night, and her father’s state of failing health. The image of the empty buses late at night, introduced in the first stanza as a literal description, is used here to suggest her father’s illness and the buses return in the final lines of the poem to offer an even broader perspective:

... where buses lightly lumber
into the yellow depot
like bubbles back
into solution.

The image of bubbles returning to solution suggests her father’s mortality in their mutability of elemental form, and by extension human transience and impermanence which are central to the poem. Throughout the poem then, there is a series of suggestions around light and air and fluid, fullness and emptiness, and elementally changing states.

Several other poems in the first half of the collection take place in non-places as well. These include “Lineage” (28) in an airport bookstore, “Interislander” (22) on the ferry between the North and South Islands of New Zealand, and “The Desert Road” (23) in a car traveling the length of the North Island. In “Lineage” (28), the liminal space is one of waiting. The airport bookstore is a kind of non-place within the non-place of the airport. Airports are usually places of transition between the city that you have been in and the aircraft, the vehicle that will take you to the next place you are going. In this case the speaker is in transition to parenthood. She waits, generationally, in the middle between her parents’ arrival by plane and the arrival of her unborn child. The poem’s speaker states this in the first line: “I was nine months pregnant, and waiting.” As she waits, she passes time in the airport bookstore. Again, in this poem Davidson touches on both physical life and what lies beyond it. While the title, “Lineage,” and the presence of three generations might suggest a linear concept of time, the poem’s ending somewhat belies this. The newborn

arrived and “brought us stories (both good and terrible) / from this world, and the other one.” This suggests that there is another simultaneously existing world the baby arrived from. It also engages with the idea of the temporary or transient nature of human life; that this is somewhere we are passing through.

Again, in “Interislander” (22), mortality is addressed as the transience of human life, while the place of the poem, the interisland ferry, is itself moving between one place and another. The poem begins with a passenger who has suffered a heart attack in the ferry café and who is literally in transition between life and death, as the ferry travels between North and South Islands. A distanced pragmatism runs throughout this poem. The speaker explicitly and unflinchingly states: “Those of us not so obviously dying walked quickly away from the café.” The phrase “not so obviously,” brings attention to the fact that we could all be seen to be in the process of dying. The poem begins with the observation that “a man with a heart attack wouldn’t release the route guide / for the Kepler Track, which in his fist went damp, land-shaped; / a contour map.” The map suggests journey, movement and transition from one place to another. It also accentuates the fact that the man will not be reaching his destination, the land on the other side of the Cook Strait, and suggests as well its lack of usefulness in the journey he is now on.

The poem as a whole moves from holding on to letting go. The holding on is manifested in the man who “wouldn’t release the route guide,” “who clutched and grimaced,” and explicitly by “the helix twist” of the ferry’s propellers that “wouldn’t let go.” “[T]he helix twist” suggests both the spiralling water beneath the turning ferry and the double helix of DNA in the living humans on board, as well as in the man who is dying. The final couplet, wherein “talk lifted like gulls above our bodies,” points to both corporeal and spiritual being and letting go. There is the suggestion of souls rising from the physicality of bodies whereby, in spite of their self-distancing, the other passengers are also implicated in

the impermanence of life. From the transitional space and non-place of a ferry and its journey between islands, the poem considers the transitory nature of life.

In “The inbreath” (48) Davidson explicitly inhabits, for a short time, another kind of non-place, as she pauses on a journey — the edgelands:

I went further along the road towards Ardbeg
and stopped by another crane
paused and forgotten, arm extended
where it has lifted water from the river’s mouth,
water the slipstream from shipping lanes
spiked with oil spiked with rust.

Rob Macfarlane notes that “Victor Hugo called it “bastard countryside,” the landscape theorist Alan Berger called it “drosscape” and the artist Philip Guston called it “crapola” (Macfarlane). The more neutral “edgeland” is the term first coined by environmentalist and writer Marion Shoard, in an essay in 2002 (Macfarlane). It denotes the hinterland between the rural and the suburban. In “The inbreath,” Davidson avoids the sentimentalisation for which Macfarlane criticises British poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts in their collection of poetic essays, *Edgelands* (2012). While there is a kind of imagined nostalgia to the conclusion of the poem, (as Davidson considers how it might have been to be a teenager there), and a slightly bleak edgeland beauty in the imagined “bright snow,” the poem remains grounded by clear-sighted physical description — “another crane / paused and forgotten,” water that is “spiked with oil spiked with rust” — and the social observation of what the boredom of teenagers in this area might lead them to do:

Then I wondered if, out of wildness,
the teenagers might go there —
bright snow on the inbreath, and on the bottle’s lip.

The poem is geographically located in the first line as being “further along the road towards Ardbeg,” where the speaker of the poem pauses in contemplation, much as Robert Frost’s speaker does in his non-place based poem “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening”

(Frost). In both poems a pause in a journey allows contemplation which broadens from the physical surroundings to more metaphysical considerations. In Frost's case it is the journey ahead; in Davidson's, I read it to be to an imagined past, as she moves through her ancestral homeland and wonders how it might have been to have always lived there. This is not explicit in the poem. However, lending credence to this notion are a number of other poems in the collection in which the speaker looks somewhat wistfully back on her youth or a youth that might have been.¹ Also, in Davidson's manner of recontextualising and adding meaning through repetition throughout the collection, the "wildness" of the teenagers echoes the poem earlier in the collection, "Wild" (37) which begins "All that's left that's wild / is in my head" and ends with: "as imagined in the deepest most inviolate / (unhurt, virgin) wild part of me."

"The inbreath" (48) moves from observation of the liminal edgeland/non-place surroundings to imagined lives, or a life that may have been. In this poem it is the crane and the speaker's surroundings that "unsettled" her with their "creepy sudden creaks in the northerly —." This also echoes a poem earlier in the collection. In "Bonfire" (20) the speaker states "the groan of stone on stone unsettles / me as I unsettle them." This reinforces ideas of unsettledness, impermanence and perhaps uncertainty of belonging in both Scotland and New Zealand. The regular, repeated occurrence of non-places and in-between places accumulate throughout the collection contributing not only to the pervasive sense of being on the move but to a sense of the provisionality of place, being, and belonging as well.

¹ For example, "Wild" (37) and "Talking about back home" (61).

“Standing Places”: Places of belonging

“if even the rocks are on the move the question must be posed as to what can be claimed as belonging”

- Doreen Massey from *For Space*

“The complex and shifting entanglement between the sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots.”

- Elizabeth DeLoughrey from *Routes and Roots*

The longest section in *Islander* is titled “Standing Places.” While it is not stated explicitly, given Davidson’s personal and family background and interest in belonging, it seems most likely to me that this expression comes from the Māori concept of *turangawaewae*. Te Aka Maori Dictionary defines *turangawaewae* as a “domicile, standing, place where one has the right to stand – place where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and *whakapapa*” (Te Whanake). The plural of “places” in this section’s title simultaneously suggests the non-singularity of places one can belong to and contains an implicit transitivity: a belonging here *and* here, this place and this other place, and the implied movement between. Throughout *Islander* Davidson considers how movement and transition, either individually or generationally, can complicate a sense of belonging in a place or places. She does this through close attention to language, ideas of provenance and personal history and connection with the land or natural environment.

While her poems locate themselves predominantly in two places of significance for her, New Zealand and Scotland, Davidson’s interrogation of the complications of belonging are notably most often geographically located in her genealogical home country, Scotland. In the poems “Standing Places” (53) and “Muirhouse Library” (62) Davidson directly addresses localised language/dialect/vernacular as a denoting insider/outsider status, who belongs and how. In both poems language dislocates and discomfits. In the poem

“Muirhouse Library” the traditional language of the place, the language that is implicitly used at home, is discouraged by a boy’s mother. She corrects him:

Boy walks into the library —
all his energy before
and behind him.
Sees his mother, calls to her something
about going hame.
Home, his mother says. Not hame. Home.
It is funny how his energy falls flat.

“Hame” is the subtitle, or perhaps second title, of the poem, which draws attention to the word and its importance from the outset. Attention is drawn to the sounds of the language in the poem by the repetition of “Home” and “hame” and the alliteration of other words beginning with ‘h,’ like “help,” “haines,” “him,” “hurt,” and “hold.” They are piled up in the line: “Help, like hinder halt or hitch.” The assonance of “hame,” “haines,” “shame,” and “strains” further emphasises the soft and open sounds of the Scots dialect and makes a connection between these words in meaning as well as sound. The mother, not sharply, but “shyly” corrects her son. This can’t help but call to mind questions of how separating people from their mother tongue, first language or family language, dislocates them from their standing places and their sense of belonging: “Home. Like hame. But farther.” “Home” for the child is a more distant word, less natural for him to use, less comfortable — natural and comfortable, both qualities associated with ideas of home and belonging. His mother wants him to use the words that she understands will help him move into what she sees as a ‘better’ life.

Rather than social mobility, the focus in “Standing Places” (53), is migrant transition. The speaker of the poem buys sticking plasters from a young man at a corner store. He has a Scottish accent, but his “dark / hand” sets the speaker wondering about his origins and the effects on his family’s self-consciousness of their own language:

... if his parents
or grandparents sometimes stand
at the end of words
to worry over their version
of *jug, bench, bach, bush, plaster*
and what strange sibling word
might lead them home.

This puts the poem's speaker in relationship with the (assumed) migrant status of the young man's parents. The poem's speaker worries that her words, "sticking plasters," will not be understood. She and the young man speak the same language nominally, English, but the accents and vocabulary are different enough to cause anxiety. She notes that his accent is local:

... with that Scottish forward
press on words, so wound is almost
manifest; it blooms.

The colour of his skin signals that his family is relatively recently arrived in this land, as she is, even though the place may hold attachment for her in her genealogical history and even though he may have been born there. Through "sticking plasters" and "wounds," the simple transaction at the corner store moves on to consider other hurts and tender points and how to protect them, including the speaker's son and father, the boy in the store, and her own points of hurt or pain:

the slantwise cut
caused by changing points of view,
the wounded aspect.

Here Davidson repeats the word "wound." Earlier in the poem the young man's accent in pronouncing this word signalled his belonging in the place. Here though, she moves it into the figurative "slantwise cut" and "wounded aspect," representing perspectives or positions of hurt, in this case through feelings of displacement or not belonging due to differences in language. In both these poems Davidson moves through acutely observed particularity of

detail in language, to more perceptual notions of comfort and what belonging might mean or look like in a place. The poems together show the power of language — accent, dialect, local vocabulary — as a signal of belonging, and how it can complicate easy movement between places socially and geographically even when the base language is the same.

Ideas of the relationship between movement and belonging appear in other sections as well. The previous section, “Return to Islay” contains poems such as “An Tigh Seinsse” (44) where the speaker’s “hot chocolate comes with its provenance” and leads her to think about her own provenance and how she came to be in the place that she is. In this poem the idea of where the speaker comes from and how she has arrived here, is allowed to rest in the whimsical notion of cocoa pod as coracle and the attached unlikeliness of arriving anywhere in one:

She asks
Have you seen a cocoa pod?
I have. I have.
It’s this size, like a draw-purse or a wee coracle,
You could go to sea in it,
I did. I went to sea in it.
And here I am.

This connects the unlikeliness of going to sea in a cocoa pod with the unlikeliness of the speaker’s travels to bring her to this pub in a small village on the island of Islay. In the poem “Wherever I am,” (45) in which the speaker shares a walk and conversation with a friend, provenance and belonging are treated more directly. The title, “Wherever I am,” is followed by “I am marginal, a guest.” These words are attributed to Scottish poet Sorley MacLean and the poem’s speaker considers the truth of this statement:

Sorley MacLean writes this
and it sounds true.
Still, doubt’s little motor
turns

The speaker of the poem walks in the “shallow russet hills” and talks “about home” with a friend. The land and the two friends’ memories weave together as they walk in the hills and “incline into” their “conjurings.” The speaker muses, “and I want to say undulating / but that’s us, so up and down,” merging the geographic with the personal — that is, with their conversation and relationship. By the final lines of the poem Davidson lets the mineral make-up and process of the place stand for the human experience of her speaker’s history in a seeming comparison between geological processes and the movement of people and peoples, past and present:

drumming up memory and rites of passage
over this shifting underlay
of mica schist and limestone.
Salt blows from the coast
into the hinterland.

The “shifting underlay / of mica schist and limestone” recalls Doreen Massey’s question in *For Space*: “if even the rocks are on the move the question must be posed as to what can be claimed as belonging” (149). Perhaps, by the end of the poem, Davidson’s speaker would agree with MacLean but sees also that transience and even marginality are not necessarily indicators of *not* belonging. This would be in accordance with notions of transience and impermanence more broadly demonstrated throughout *Islander*, and with the idea that while places of belonging may be multiple, complex and open to change over time, they may also be simultaneously valid in their provision of a sense of continuity.

“Like bubbles back into solution”: Change and continuity

Ideas of change and continuity are addressed in *Islander* in at least two ways: in how people and places both change and don’t change over time, and through the sense of human mortality which runs alongside ancestral and elemental connection through time. While Davidson is a New Zealander and has spent most of her life in New Zealand, Scotland

is her ancestral home. She spent several years living in Scotland during the writing of *Islander* and the poems in this collection can be mainly located geographically in New Zealand and Scotland, with a few poems set in Australia. Davidson refers to New Zealand as “home,” for example in “Talking about back home” (61) but also displays a strong affinity and connection with Scotland. For example, “Ancient light” (11) concludes with lines that suggest her kinship with that country:

we call our hunting and foraging mothers and fathers
our first ancients, our dear ones,
in from the hills. Back from the sea.

These lines demonstrate both a long ancestral connection back to the time of “hunting and gathering” and the intimacy of kinship in “our dear ones.” It also connects this relationship and ongoing presence to physical places as the “dear ones” are called “in from the hills. Back from the sea.” I would suggest that it is possible to recognise in the sense of deep connection with more than one place — and the at times simultaneous sense of dislocation — the ongoing negotiation and unsettlements that many Pākehā New Zealanders experience between New Zealand and their former, or genealogical, home countries. Within New Zealand, Davidson has also lived in a number of places, including the Kapiti Coast, Wellington, and Nelson, and written about some of the moves between them in her earlier collection of poetry and essays *Common Land* (2012). Perhaps it is in part due to living temporarily in a number of places, including in Scotland during the writing of *Islander*, plus this notion of negotiation and unsettlement, that there is also a pervasive sense of impermanence in the collection. However, as in the previous section where we see complexity and non-singularity in notions of belonging, here ideas of change, with the accompanying sense of the temporary, interim or provisional are seen to be compatible with ideas of an underlying continuity.

In most of the poems in the first section of the collection, "Light," both the speaker and the places of the poems can be read as located in Scotland. There is an idea of ancientness in Scotland that does not exist in New Zealand, both in geological and human historical terms. Davidson extends this idea of the long history of the land and human habitation also to the light in Scotland which she often characterises as ancient. It is an easy extension to make. The natural light in Scotland is less sharp, harsh, and bright than in New Zealand. Though of course the light that reaches Scotland is no older than the light that reaches New Zealand, it can be seen as softer, and figuratively corresponding to ideas of being more worn and aged. In this section "light" or "ancient light" appear repeatedly in all but two of the poems. Both light and water (usually the sea), which also appears repeatedly in this section and throughout the collection, are both everchanging and consistent and contribute to the pervasive impression of both mutability and continuity.

In the final poem of the first section, titled "Even though it is not the beginning of the world anymore" (15), Davidson writes: "Ancient light still comes lapping in from space." This poem brings together the history of the world, its continuity, and the presence of light in the momentary present of the poem. Light in a literal sense allows us to see. Simultaneously, in a more figurative sense, all that has passed, including the long journey of light from its source, creates "a place in which vision is possible" in the present. There seems to be an implicit acknowledgement that all that has gone before is present and contributes to what we are able to see now. This extends further than to light alone. In an earlier poem in this section, "Ancient light" (11), Davidson uses similar ideas and language. The light "makes the space in which vision is possible." The poem "Even though it is not the beginning of the world anymore" (15) repeats ideas, phrases and words from this earlier poem, including "ancient light," "light," "ancient," "obstruction" and "admission." "Ancient light" and "light" repeats and runs through the poem suggesting the way in which light

itself runs through and fills the space around things. Repetition and recontextualisation of words from poem to poem perform ideas of movement and transience or impermanence, but nonetheless consistency and continuity. The final lines of “Ancient light” suggest that just as the light we see by today has existed all along, through time and in its journey through space, so too the presence of the ancestors has existed and is with us in this place and present time:

In their light

we call our hunting and foraging mothers and fathers
our first ancients, our dear ones,
in from the hills. Back from the sea.

This passage draws a parallel between light and ancestry, calling on associations of ‘ancient’ and ‘light’ elsewhere in the poem and in earlier poems. Human experience is linked to the natural ordering of the universe and just as the “ancient light” is present with “us” so are the ancestors. This poem and this section as a whole provide a comprehensive illustration of Davidson’s interest in the simultaneous presence of both impermanence and continuity.

In the section “Return to Islay,” Davidson goes back to the “wondrous cold island” (“Bere” 42) of the section’s title twenty-seven years after her previous visit. The poems within this section demonstrate a longing for permanence, what is gone or what might have been, but they also often contain a sense of reconciliation through elemental continuation. The idea of the continuation of the relatively ephemeral human body through the natural processes of the earth presents itself in the opening poem of this section, “Distillery” (41). The ancient and the current are connected through the whisky made on Islay: “... the glass / contains glacier and winter rains.” And the ephemerality of the speaker’s own life is put into geological perspective:

After twenty-seven years the glass

contains glacier and winter rains,
the endless ploughings of our head
down big-shouldered moon,
the peasant's body deep in the peat,
deeper still the grains in his gut.

The short-lived human life of "the peasant's body deep in the peat," and the reminder of his daily life, "deeper still, the grains in his gut," are then brought together in the final lines of the poem suggesting connection and continuity between the past and the present:

... Old grains from earthly cracks

stirring up weather. Stirring up weather
right here right now in my head.

The relatively short twenty-seven years are thus given perspective by the timespans suggested by "glacier" and "endless ploughings," and the idea of the Scottish peasant's body long dead and buried in the peat of the land which also gives the whiskey of the title's "Distillery" its flavour. Time passing, elemental change and mortality are all contained in the glass of whisky, in the land and in the poem's last line, "right here right now in my head," demonstrating simultaneous ephemerality and continuity of presence and affect.

In "Bere" (42) there is the suggestion of the loss of a loved one in their imagined presence, the deceased addressed as "you":

As if not dead, you duck your head to hear
the whisper-sound of my palms
rubbing together — a drift
of barley flour

for bread.

As the speaker of the poem reflects on this loss, she also contemplates the relationship between the land and sea, and the salt that pervades both:

... Up lifts the wave
to saturate the peat with salt.
We will be salt-drenched
before we are brackish dry.

On this wondrous cold island
this is what I hold in mind —
you cannot go inland enough
to avoid the salt.

This salt is therefore also infused in the barley grown in the soil on Islay. The relationship between the person mourned and the barley is in the history of the language. The barley, “Once called bere / ‘body-like,’” is used for making both the whisky and the bread — an intoxicating liquor and a daily staple:

and it will rise up through the still
and even
through the broken bread.

The “you” is therefore made present in the continuing quotidian now through their connection with the sea, the salt, the barley, the whisky, and the daily staple of bread.

If “Distillery” and “Bere” illustrate simultaneous ephemerality and elemental continuity, the poem “Moorland Estate” (46) considers the idea of mutability and impermanence within a single defined place. It contemplates how even place itself is transient in a specific geographical location over time. The speaker visits “George and Fiona” to whom the poem is dedicated in the epigraph, at Moorland Estate after twenty-seven years and observes how the place has changed and not-changed, both over this period and over the built history of the estate. She notes “(the pale stain on a dirty wall/where a famous mirror isn’t anymore),” and that “A fair-haired child is a steampunk fairy now,” but also that “Nothing has changed,” and that “in the courtyard peacocks / drag or fan their tails / both twenty-seven years ago, and now.” The poem’s speaker thinks of Fiona rescuing seals and playing the violin just as she did twenty-seven years ago: “I try to imagine that sort of continuity, / and fail.” She imagines the repetitions in routine, repeating “all” for emphasis and piling up small details one after the other:

All those cold dawns and dusks and splashing days.
All those notes and strings and long, slow bows.

The quiver of fish, the turn of a head, the stain of sun on oily sea,
the pock of rain. All those everydays.

The repetition of “all” emphasises the idea of lives spent in daily practices and routines and maintenance (a few pages earlier in the section, the poem “Salt” (43) opens with the line “I’ve been thinking about maintenance and continuity,” thus introducing the idea). “Moorland Estate” ends with the sense that both the speaker of the poem and George and Fiona are reconciled to the change and deterioration of the place over time in spite of their continued loyalty, presence and attention to it:

All the holding in place. This piece of earth.
The crumbling castle.
(Others say *decline* and *terminal* and *shame*.)
George and Fiona are letting the trees grow through it.

Place is shown to be in a process of change. “Letting the trees grow through it” demonstrates an acceptance of both impermanence and a natural or elemental continuity over time.

The simultaneous absence and presence of the dead occurs again in this poem alongside the ideas of mutability and continuity of the living:

... We look through layers
to find each other. We greet the dead
across a cup of tea. The dead are wearing jeans
and push their sleeves like us.

The continued presence of those no longer living is normalized in their imagined attendance at such daily activities as drinking tea, and in the similarities between the living and the dead, e.g. their manner of “wearing jeans” and pushing their sleeves up just “like us.” In addition to the continued presence of the dead in this poem Davidson also draws attention to how both people and places simultaneously change and remain the same over time. With the trees growing through “The crumbling castle” she also suggests a broader

perspective whereby when both castle and humans no longer remain, the underlying place will still be there, and is in fact already in the process of asserting itself.

An interest in states of change and continuity occurs in *Islander* in both the ways people and places change over time and in the sense of human mortality and ancestral and elemental connection through time. Throughout *Islander* the continuity of human history and the vastness of the physical universe in time and space are set alongside the relative fleetingness and impermanence of individual human lives. Elemental continuity and cyclic repetition are means of ordering the world. This can be seen both in the worldly sense and in the continuity and repetition of 'elements' of language and ideas that contribute to a sense of stability and coherence within all the change and transition and movement of *Islander*.

“We tilt into thin air”: Migration and flight, leaving and return

Islander provides a sense of constant movement between places: migratory birds in “Leaving Bass Rock gannet colony” (10), human flight in “My stair” (9) and “Leaving Wellington” (30), a whole section titled “Return to Islay” (41-50), and even a poem where “A hillside of houses leave” (19). If poems leave and return to geographically defined places, they also return to and revise thoughts and ideas, words and phrases. This sense of return is demonstrated in the final lines of the collection which return to recurring themes in the book:

My loves.
My light.
My dearest islanders. (80)

“My loves,” encompasses family past and present; “My light,” evokes aspects of seeing, hope and understanding, fleetingness and continuity; and “My dearest islanders” includes, by this point in the collection, ideas of place, sea and land, and the flight/transitions of birds,

(particularly the migratory northern gannet) and people — all of which are connected through ideas of movement and transition to flight, migration, leaving and return.

One of the ways in which Davidson brings a sense of periodic migration, leaving and return, into the collection is through the recurring presence of the Bass Rock gannet colony. The island colony, off the coast of Scotland, is the largest in the world. It is home to 150,000 northern gannets, migratory birds that spend six months of the year on Bass Rock, and the other six months in East Africa. The metaphor seems clear. Like the northern gannet, Davidson and the speakers of her poems have two places that they consider home: the one island home where they were born and raised and this other home far away to which they intermittently return. The northern gannet appears on the front cover of the book, and Bass Rock is embedded in the body of the work as well. The poem “Leaving Bass Rock gannet colony” (10) appears early in the first section, bringing the visceral description of the fishing bird’s last meal before flight into a kind of allegorical relationship with human explanations of the world:

It takes a final flight, blowing
Bass Rock into the feathery pieces we call

aura or
atoms we called
father or
Adam

The title of the final two-poem section of *Islander* is also “Bass Rock,” and both poems in this section contain reference to the gannets. In “Loom: When a ship moves slowly up and down” (79), the young gannets are seemingly compared to young humans in the lines, “The chicks are chicks yet / The youths are in clubs,” and are likened in another passage to youthful graffiti artists:

Have you seen what they have done with the cave?
Thrown bright paint at the silence At darkness.

The final poem of the collection, “Even though” (80), also concludes with the birds:

There. That spray of feathers.
Those birds soaring, looking for a place to land.

We’re all either here or we’ve been here
or we’re coming.

What tanglement.
What cacophony on the rock. What babble.
What song.

My loves.
My light.
My dearest islanders.

Thus the collection begins (with the front cover image) and ends with the northern gannet and its associations with migration and flight, leaving and return. Furthermore, with the assertion “We’re all either here or we’ve been here / or we’re coming,” Davidson reconciles here, as she does elsewhere in the collection, relationships between movement, change, uncertainty, identity, place and belonging.

The poem “Leaving Wellington” (30) considers a different sort of leaving and flight. It traces human physical and emotional departure not only from Wellington but also from New Zealand and from a distinct phase of life as a parent of dependent children. As the speaker drives to the airport, the early morning sun catches the windows of a hillside of houses, and she contemplates the way in which this implies the lives lived within the rooms of those houses, the comfort and shelter they provide: places “to escape the wind, to circle in, to slacken,” and by implication how this is in contrast to her own current situation of transition. Of course, this hillside of houses also recalls the earlier poem “A hillside of houses leaves” (19), in which a hillside of houses is re-imagined as a flock of birds taking off. Already then, “Leaving Wellington” contains the suggestion of impermanence and transience. The world’s solidity and certainty is brought into question further by thoughts of the speaker’s children leaving home. Her children “just by naming / assembled all the

solid things of world,” but a few lines later she considers how this is reversed: “in a kind of via negativa / they composed two empty rooms by leaving home.” This stanza stands between two sets of couplets. The first couplet imagines the aircraft’s shadow as “an anchor”:

The plane drops its grey shadow in the sea
and the shadow pulls back slightly, like an anchor.

The second couplet revises this image. On reconsideration the “anchor,” which is solid and designed to hold in one place, becomes more “like a kiss,” an event rather than a concrete object:

I said it was an anchor but it’s not.
It’s a shadow roughly like a kiss.

The images in these couplets effectively bracket the description of the life the speaker had with her children in Wellington. They move from the certainty and solidity the children brought (an anchor), to a point of leaving where the former solidity now takes on the fleeting nature of an event: a kiss. The sense of being unanchored and in a place of uncertainty, or uncertain safety, accumulates throughout the poem with lines and phrases such as “we tilt into thin air, that fragile outspace,” “as though there is a place for us to hide,” and the disorienting “first wild moments of strange waking / from the dream’s uncanny tilt.” However, characteristically by the end of the poem there is a kind of reconciliation between the impermanence and a continuity, with the idea of ‘self’ providing an ongoing dwelling place in spite of external change and geographical movement:

Inside our cells the numbers of our children.
Inside this surface life a living room.

The “living room” recalls the comfort and shelter of the imagined rooms at the beginning of the poem, and the connection made between “our cells” and “our children suggests both ongoing connection and familial continuity. These lines also anticipate the later poem

“Pearls” (60), in which the world is described in the quantum physicists’ more unpredictable and uncertain terms of being a world of happenings rather than of things: “More a kiss than a stone.” “Pearls” also moves from the external “world” to the interior world of the individual:

We are also each a world
of happenings. A kiss
then a stone.

“Leaving Wellington” then, considers human flight and leaving in both physical and emotional terms. It also considers the constancy and continuity of family and self in such times of transition.

Returns are also performed in the way the collection returns to and revises thoughts and ideas. The poem “Return” (50) simultaneously contains ideas of both return and leaving as it begins, “I walk the thin road back,” and ends with the image of a village of houses, again appearing as if they were birds, as they did in “A hillside of houses leave” (19):

to Port Ellen where all the white-washed houses
are birds

standing on one leg
at the Bay’s gleaming edge.

Thus carrying the suggestion of leaving from the earlier poem into this one. Another obvious example of this is the final poem of the collection, “Even though” (80), which returns to the last poem of the first section, “Even though it is not the beginning of the world anymore” (15), by echoing the first words of that title. This poem contains repetitions and echoes of earlier words, phrases and ideas. For example, “we have the eye socket. / We have the space for light,” echoes lines from “Islander” (12), “the eye socket / —the lacuna for light” and “— also the place for light.” “That spray of feathers” in “Even though” recalls the earlier poem “Leaving Bass Rock gannet colony” (10) which contain the

lines “blowing / Bass Rock into the feathery pieces.” “Loom” from the title of “Loom: When a ship moves slowly up and down” (79), reappears in “Even though” in a different sense to the previous poem:

Because the body is a loom
the words weave through. By which, from silence,
words and names

and also children. The children also
move through the loom.

The many correspondences of words and phrases return our attention to the beginning of the collection, or to various places throughout, paralleling real world migrations, leavings and returns where memories, thoughts and ideas, as well as more concrete baggage is carried with us.

The sense of movement between places in *Islander* is accompanied at times by an explicit unsettlement and sense of transience. A hillside of houses can leave as easily as a flock of birds, (“A hillside of houses leave” 19), and even our corporeal inhabitation is short-lived: “People curl inside their bones that keep them / that will not keep them long.” So what can be seen as permanent? Unsettlement also runs in strong currents throughout the collection, in poems set in both New Zealand and Scotland, though notably not in the poems set in Australia. Perhaps this is because there is no expectation of feeling settled there. In the poem “Bonfire” (20) on the beach in New Zealand, Davidson writes: “The groan of stone on stone unsettles / me as I unsettle them,” and while on the island of Islay the speaker stops by an abandoned crane: “I sat with it and it unsettled me.” (“The inbreath” 49) However, impermanence and unsettlement, the knowledge of imminent departure, does not preclude a deep sense of attachment.

In the poem “Wherever I am” (45) the title is followed by “I am marginal, a guest.” These words are attributed to Scottish poet, Sorley MacLean:

Sorley MacLean writes this
and it sounds true.
Still, doubts little motor
turns

This doubt is characteristic of the ongoing negotiation with place and roots and home expressed throughout *Islander*. In the eponymous “Islander” (12), early in the collection Davidson explicitly addresses this uncertainty of belonging to a single land:

Lacklander
is the word

for those who don't
have land.

We don't have land.
We have the sea.

Later in the poem “Salt” (43) which begins, “I’ve been considering maintenance and continuity,” she writes about the connection and relationship between Scotland and New Zealand: “Because our countries know each other.” As in “Islander,” discussed above, there is the shared presence and connecting element of the ocean: “we have our glossy bodies of sea.” However, perhaps for Davidson, and the speakers of her poems, as for the migratory northern gannet, it is not necessary to belong in one place and one place only.

In “Different hemispheres” (74), Davidson’s speaker revisits the relationship with her now adult children:

So much is made from thin air
including daughters and sons.
Also distance.
Mine are thin
thin air away

The poem starts in full sentences but then fragments. Unfinished sentences appear in the way that sometimes happens with the delay on long distance calls, or perhaps in relationships where individuals know each other so well they can finish each other’s sentences, or don’t have to:

... It's just not viable
when
to come when you
to
listen
it's not
it's hard
because we
for so long

we

The poem considers how it is not to be present with her children for large and small events and how it is to re-enter each other's lives:

I have to think how to re-enter gravity,

to *put down* my

and back inside and
then here
we are again.

The anchoring "gravity" of "we" is contrasted with the "thin/thin air" and "Also distance" and how "then they flew." Again, this poem contains both leaving and returning, movement and transience and flight, but also continuity and an ongoing presence. While there is emigration in Davidson's familial past, it is a more seasonal/cyclical migration that is present in *Islander*, with a leaving at the beginning and a return at the end, flight of birds and humans and imagery of birds and flight appearing throughout the collection but all still with a continuing connectedness through both time and space.

Islander is a collection full of transitional movement: movements from place to place, movements through time and space, movements of relationships, elemental transformations. But it is also a collection concerned with coherence and continuity where threads of self and family and ancestral history, through place and time make sense of the world. Birds and humans and language migrate, leave, return, find themselves in between

or marginal but only for a time: “We’re all either here, or we’ve been here / or we’re coming” (“Even though” 80). *Islander* is a collection permeated by impermanence but is also deeply connected to both its past in its “first ancients” (“Ancient light” 11) and its present in “we” (“Different Hemispheres” 74). The sequencing of poems, and the links between them through echoes and repetitions of words, phrases, images and ideas, perform both cyclical/migratory movements and transitions, connections, reconciliations and continuity:

... and the languages come out
in constellations and even though we don’t know how
we follow them to familiar places.” (“The Desert Road” 23)

Place is often seen as a physical location. But Davidson uses the lens of place to explore ideas of transition and impermanence. Throughout *Islander* — thematically and via repetition and echo in words, phrases, ideas and images — she brings them into coherence with ideas of connection and continuity through the themes of family, belonging, ancestry and home.

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Bridging Statement

The creative component of this thesis is a collection of my own poems, *how we come home*, connected to the critical essay by an interest in transition and movement, their themes of family, belonging and home, and the use of place as a way of knowing the world. It is not the collection that I intended or expected to write. In its earliest conception the thesis arrived as three words: land, body, home. As an expatriate New Zealander, who had been abroad for twenty-five years and moved countries frequently, I knew that the notion of place would be important. The natural world, and ideas of home and belonging also already featured in my writing and I was interested to learn more about the literary context in which I was writing and where my poetry might sit, on what I thought would probably be the ecopoetry/New Nature Writing axis. What I didn't know at that time was that events, both global (in the form of the Covid 19 pandemic) and personal, were about to collide, that my children and I would be returning to New Zealand and that while the aforementioned interests in "land, body, home" remained, my writing would take a slightly different direction and focus.

Both this change of course and my continuing interests have been helped by my close reading of Lynn Davidson's most recent collection, *Islander*. On her own return to New Zealand from Scotland, and having published *Islander* in 2019, Davidson took up the position of Randell Cottage Creative New Zealand Writer in Residence, 2021. In a video made during this residence, she says, "you know, you don't move countries and cross worlds and then that's it, you've got this new life disconnected from the old life. I don't think it works like that" (Lynn Davidson: Randell Cottage). Neither do I. Davidson is referring to migration and more specifically to her family's move from Scotland to New Zealand in the 1920s and her own continuing connection with Scotland as her ancestral

home. The time scales and directions in her work are quite different from mine, as Davidson considers her connection to the home of her ancestors while I consider return to the place of my birth and youth. However, there are enough similarities of interest for Davidson's work to provide a useful model for my own. These include ideas of home and belonging, transitions and repetitions, movement and continuity.

Edna O'Brien credits Flannery O'Connor with saying, "If you want to write you'd better come from somewhere" (Cooke). I read this to mean that you need to have a place that you belong to and call home, a place of deep attachment that you are able to write from. And it sounds true, but at the same time, as Davidson writes in "Wherever I am" (*Islander* 45), "doubt's little motor turns." Seemingly echoing Charles Brasch in his memoir *Indirections* when he writes, "New Zealand lived in me as no other country could live, part of myself as I was part of it" (Brasch 360), Davidson writes in an interview about *Islander* on the Te Herenga Waka Press (formerly Victoria University Press) blog, "Aotearoa New Zealand is at the centre of me – I am made of it –" (Lynn Davidson Q&A). I feel the same. The snowmelt of the Southern Alps built my bones, and whichever way it has been expressed through the years, and by many more writers than three, the sentiment remains the same. However, as Davidson also continues, "I can no longer entirely believe in a single mapped homeland." Even though the places Davidson calls home are very much present in *Islander* in poems such as "Talking about back home" (61) and "Leaving Wellington" (30-31), the feeling of being between places runs through the collection in its leavings and returns, non-places and liminal spaces. Home is manifold/plural, impermanent and often elsewhere as well as 'here'. In "Different hemispheres" (74-75) it is about the ephemeral "here" of where family is gathered:

wherever I stand in this world —
even at his place
in Brisbane's heat or hers on a wind-torn

hillside in Wellington —
I have to think how to re-enter gravity

to *put down* my

and back inside and
then here
we are again.

Thus home becomes wherever “we” is.

My own writing also considers the possibilities of home, how it might look, and the often elsewhere-ness of it, as in the conclusion to “Cold Summer”:

Whatever the season
always far

from an illusive
home

in the antipodes.

In this poem I hope to suggest a parallel to the migratory habits of the arctic tern. Wherever the speaker is at a given time, it will be at the other end of the world from a place they consider home: furthermore, that singular home may in fact not exist. A sense of distance and dislocation is also found in the first poem of the manuscript, “the promise and improbability of home” where the speaker wakes from a jetlagged sleep to find herself momentarily disoriented and with the feeling of “not being tied to place” at all. The poem concludes with thoughts of a “small island far away,” also home. This final section of the poem is in italics and a different register, signalling I hope, the distance and difference between the two places. The poem “I am Island People” explicitly considers belonging and concludes as Maya Angelou does in the epigraph to the poem:

they belong

nowhere and everywhere
— they belong.

Home then, is a place in my poems, but perhaps not in the singular and certain sense of one defined geographic location. Rather it is in the more processual sense of Doreen Massey's definition as "the event of place," (Massey 282) and of Davidson's poem "Pearls" (*Islander* 60):

The physicist says the world
is not a world
of things, it is
a world of happenings.
More a kiss than a stone.

So too home becomes a more complex and ongoing process.

My interest in Davidson's writing extends beyond theme to technique. I was particularly interested in her use of transitions and repetitions which have provided both awareness and example for my own writing. Her poems are layered in meaning and often move from concrete observation to perception. An example of this is the poem "Backtofront" (*Islander* 24-25) about the end of a relationship that essentially occurs during a car journey. The poem begins with "My lover and I" and "we were so / so in love with everything —." She provides a lot of concrete detail about a country fair where the couple stops and watches an obstacle race in which children run with dead piglets strapped to their backs. "And my lover laughed" signals the turning point of the poem, and implicitly the relationship. They continue on their journey, but the mood has changed, and the poem concludes with the relationship's deterioration:

You just felt something in me
and between us fade.
We followed the thin road down the mountain
until the mountain too gave way
to distance, growing shapely and distinct
in the rear view mirror.

The poem moves from the concrete observations of the fair to the perceptual observations of distance and clarity equally applicable to both the landscape and the relationship. It uses perception as a means to transition to evocation and feeling.

My own poems at times, I hope, work towards a perceptual transition. For example, “St Clair” begins with the concrete observation of a treacherous sea and the very narrow safe swimming area flagged on a Dunedin beach where small children are swimming. The poem turns to the observation of Dunedin city where students, also “our children,” are sent to the small, safe, figuratively flagged area of the university. The poem begins “Two metres between the flags/and we send our children out —.” The turning point is with “sheets”:

a stiff breeze that would crack sheets
instead shreds clouds at the horizon

the sheets are used as togas
in the city behind us

Attention then turns from the beach and small children to the university city and the young adults who are sent into the more nebulous dangers of youthful independence. The poem ends with the reflection that the ability to protect remains limited, and the children’s exposure inevitable, whether to the immediate physical dangers of the sea or the dangers and choices of the wider world:

two metres between the flags
and we send our children out —

surfers, students, our children
we send them all out.

Another example is in the poem “Solace” where the speaker, having found the word “solace” on the label of a shower curtain, experiences the comfort of realizing that she considers the water tank not half empty but half full. This realisation can be proverbially extended to her understanding that she is more broadly taking an optimistic view of the world:

... the rainwater tank
is only half full.

I laugh,
and reach for my towel
— the tank is half full.

Again this can be seen in “birthday poem” which begins with observation of things in the physical world that are not straight literally or figuratively:

... birds unravel
their crinkled yarn of sound
into wet bush.

It rained in the night
a corrugated thrum

and now I wash my face in rainwater —
wavy stream

The poem moves from these observations to more abstract ideas of memory, tenderness and time, and concludes with a statement of broader awareness:

nothing
in this world
travels in straight lines.

Within *Islander* there are many transitions between places, and poems are often situated within transition or travel, e.g. “Leaving Wellington” (30), “Return” (50), “Interislander” (22) and “The Desert Road” (23). This was useful to me given my own interest in transitional spaces, such as on a train in “NS 8 minutes from Haarlem” and midflight in “It was very calm and beautiful”:

By the time you got my message
I was hours behind you

flying backwards into time.

In my poems there are more often arrivals than departures. One such example is “Kingfisher” which considers not only the difficulties of describing a kingfisher but also how what you see changes depending on which angle you look at it from:

When I return to the Island
the light has changed. It enters
in low leafy bars across the floor.

Other examples include “The Island” which begins “my waka / tipped me out here;” “the promise and improbability of home” as mentioned above; “I land” which begins, “here, where the path dips / below the level of the road;” the arrival of a loved one in “tender;” and of course the eponymous “how we come home,” which offers a range of ways in which “we come home,” so that—if the poem works as I hope—in addition to home as a plural notion, arrival becomes an iterative process as well.

The returns and repetitions and the layering and recontextualization of words and ideas within a poem or a section or the collection as a whole, add a sense of continuity to Davidson’s writing. In *Islander*, light begins and ends the collection and provides a sense of connection throughout. The first section of *Islander* is titled “Light” and is full of examples of light and its ramifications. Light provides the means of seeing. It also provides continuity as day touches day throughout time, and in *Islander*, gives not only connectivity but also the dimensionality of time. For example in the poem “Even though it’s not the beginning of the world anymore” (15), “ancient light comes lapping in from space / Making a place in which vision is possible.” In the poem “Who am I again? Are you lost again?” (48), light is connected explicitly with time as “past and future,” as well as place, “here and not-here”:

Just do me this favour,
stop divvying up past and future
here and not-here
or there’ll be no vantage point
that isn’t just a trick
of light.

The time frame in my collection, *how we come home* is more limited and the distances are more often geographical, but this sort of repetition and echo appears in my poems as well. While there is often movement, as in Davidson’s towards the light (“how we come home,”

“small world”) the dominant connecting element in my manuscript is the sea. In “Sea Change,” the title poem of the first section, “the first storms of winter howl in off the North Sea.” The collection’s first poem, “the promise and improbability of home” contains both the “hem of sea” that is the Dutch coastline and the sea that surrounds “that small island far away,” Waiheke Island in New Zealand. The sea is both an element of transition and connection, and a place in its own right as in “Grace goes South:”

where sea is a place
not a boundary marker
and we start our days in it

Seagoing vessels to my mind represent a means of transport or transition in “I will build an ark,” “The Big Smoke” and other poems. They are intended to represent containment and what carries us in a more metaphysical sense in “The Island” with “my waka / tipped me out here” and in “abandonment”:

a vessel — more like a raft — you are
asked to carry much
while being totally unsuitable —
unstable —

In this poem, in the final line, “abandonment” moves into figurative comparison with waka huia, containers of highly valued objects. This is intended to represent the transformation of trauma and grief to something more precious and positive. The poem “tender” is intended to carry multiple meanings of the word: it can mean a small boat which runs back and forth between a larger vessel and the shore, an offer, gentle care or attention, and also the suggestion of the presence of something painful to touch. The repetitive, continual movement of the tide is repeated and recontextualized throughout the manuscript of *how we come home*: “tide of words now / racing in” in “the artist has eyes,” the “spoons / carved from tide wrack” in “I will build an ark,” and “the approaching / shallows” in “thought fish.”

The collection concludes under the Southern Cross in the “the cool dark waters” of the Pacific Ocean at night, and with the morning arrival of the incoming tide.

The collection concludes on the other side of the world geographically to where it began — it begins in the Netherlands and ends in New Zealand — but it also ends far from where it began in an emotional sense. I hope that with the ideas of transition and movement there has also been conveyed a personal and emotional journey from a place of trauma and grief to a much more positive place. In the introduction to the critical component of this thesis, I quoted Scottish poet and academic Alan Riach describing Davidson’s writing in *Islander* as “simply slipping away from the traps of rigidity and subscription” (Davidson *Islander*). I found this idea accompanied my investigation of Davidson’s writing and that it was one of the things that I admired about her work. Davidson’s writing in *Islander* has not only offered models and strategies for theme and technique in the manuscript of *how we come home*, it has also given me a certain permission to write my own story without finding it necessary to fit into a category or movement, or to take up a particular position. My collection was written through a period of uncertainties and transitions, and required working with difficult material, but with the accompaniment, and at times guidance, of Lynn Davidson’s *Islander*, I hope that *how we come home* may respond, at least in part, to the question posed in the poem “Comforter”:
“what is good and beautiful / that I can make of this?”

how we come home

tracey sullivan

all rime and spindrift
we stand

on the sand in the morning
waiting for the tide

I ask you to tell your stories
but you don't know where to start

start anywhere

1.

Sea Change

the promise and improbability of home

It is a blue skied morning in summer
and I wait for the rest of me
to catch up.

I had that falling feeling just before I woke
of not being tied to place

not knowing where I was —
before the volumes of air and the bay windows
reassembled themselves —
the park across the street, the flat
low sky
— a hem of sea.

I worry. About sentiment and darkness
and intensity.

As church bells toll I am grateful.
As church bells toll I am I sad —

and some of me stays for the moment
on that small island far away:

a blue moon
and the highest tide
sea rime on the bush
salt, honey and manuka
sea rhymes lapping
stars pricked bright

the mid-night sea
and the black-green night.

Aspire

Various spires rise, fine
they point
 to the sky
to something
greater than themselves.

They are not mountains.

The land rises only slightly
to the challenge of the sea.

Uphill then,
and into the wind I cycle

black and heavy
— what do I deliver?

More, what will I bring?

The bells
ring — complicated

and constant
until they are drowned

by the calling of the gulls
by the wind
by the sea.

Various spires rise
they are not mountains

the bells ring
they are not sea.

bovenwoning

It was in that temporary flat
in the Archipel,
the one with
sills so wide on the street side.

I would sit in the tall window
while the children slept,
with my knees drawn up
and my book face down.

I watched the moon from there
late into the night.
It curled at the edges and undulated slightly
developing like a photograph in the cold canal before it froze.

We spent winter months there.
Tree roots and the uncertain
earth of this flat land
buckled the cobbles at the foot of the steep painted stairs.

It rained a lot and the bicycles
weren't there yet, so we walked and took the tram.
There was a bakery at the end of the street
and the sand park when it was dry.

In the attic bedrooms
everything was white and bare
and cold despite the radiators, only
children's clothing spilling colour from a suitcase on the floor.

While you were away
we slept all three in the big bed sometimes,
sweet smelling hair and small limbs
curled, breathing warmth into the skylit grey of morning.

I could really only make the living space seem homely,
thyme and parsley growing on the countertop,
bought tulips in crayon colours on the table, new red mugs
and good food cooking in the kitchen.

One weekend morning you were there
and I was making tea,
I turned and
early spring sun spilled across the room,

felt tipped pens in tulip colours scattered on
the kitchen table.

Kneeling at their work the children
chattered, making their own stories.

With your back to them
you took a kitchen knife from the block,
both hands stacked on the hilt,
and held it to your belly.

You would kill yourself right there
you said, so the children would know whose fault it was,
would see it when they looked at me
blood pooling on the painted wooden floor.

Carefully, I put the cups down.

Glass House

"what we know about trauma is that it shatters us"
- Gregory Orr

I watch the orderliness of the world:
it is outside of me.

I see it through panes
from tiptoe, or with my cheek pressed against the floor.

There is rose-coloured glass
through which

all you can see is rose-coloured sky.
That saves me for a while.

*

Initially I run for miles
then walk
then one day don't stand up.

*

I place transparencies of day
night
day
over each other
until they make seasons.

*

Words, like mercury dropped,
rolled away as he entered the room,

thoughts scattered, became thin.

*

Someone says,
pretend there is a pane of glass between you

and I do.
It is old glass,
wavy and thin,

sinking slowly to the bottom of the pane.

red sky in the morning

I step outside,
and from my balcony I see the sunrise

sideways, in between the walls of buildings,
prophesying storm.

The sky blooms
like an old-fashioned rose.

At the unseeable horizon
there is pale apricot, a buttery yellow, and clear light,

but at the outer layers it is petally, billowing,
bruised with its own name,

and overblown, that season past.
Behind me in the house

he, no longer *you*,
is elsewhere.

No tangled and just cooling sheets,
no stripped-down lover standing in the steam,

the surface of my own skin quickly chilled,
in newly autumn air.

I wrap my arms around my self, look up, and
black against the morning's florid, troubled light

a single, dark winged bird soars,
turns, and disappears from sight.

desire path

Clouds flock
above the low countries —

four nights of riots in the Schilderswijk
and a heavy heart at home.

I am in the right lane,
she says,

I am in the right lane.

From here I can see
the wildflowers on the side of the road.

They are the real thing:

nod
lean
sway.

My heart is strung for travel,
it is a Blaschka in my mind —

dark box to white room.

This relationship is not made of glass,
he says

and she says,
from here, it is all up hill to the sea.

It is very calm and beautiful

By the time you got my message
I was hours behind you

flying backwards into time.
I was reading *The Rocky Shore*
again,

that bit about the couple
that run bound at the wrist.

He's blind. She
talks him through it.

I wanted to send you
both the poem and that last sunrise photo,

the one from the back of the
ferry. All black clouds and

churning water, all jammy, rosy
peach spread in between.

Though they don't match,
they match something.

*

And reading your message now
I think maybe

it has something to do with
how we — we as in humans

we as in people who care
for each other — we as in we,

help each other to see when
for whatever reason we can't.

Or maybe I just mean
you help me.

cold summer
from Iceland

and the sea gave me back —

salt-lipped and stinging,
wind still tangled in my hair.

It was a cold summer

with the reek of fish
and the creak of green ropes in my ears.

It is late in the season
for the arctic tern,

said the sing-song
language of the north.

I watched her,
cleft tail and
hollow bones,

eyes closed,
I still see
the ice-bird
purposefully fall.

Her flight path is longing

across clear flat light,
across storm
and great glittering seas.

Whatever the season
always far

from an illusive
home

in the antipodes.

Who taught me my life was not my own?

*“who taught me my life was not my own
who taught me to take nothing”*

- Anne Michaels

Not the last piece,
(a childhood admonition)
 extended to not any piece.

My hands became awkward
and wouldn't pick things up.

Speaking, there was no attachment
to the words, no connection to thought.

That I couldn't look another person in the eye
I began believing was proof —

couldn't sit in the middle of a chair,

or stand in the middle of a room
without an overwhelming nausea.

People milled around me
as if I were a table

with nothing on it but a dark polyester cloth
some small pieces of blank paper

and a free pen.

NS - 8 minutes from Haarlem

*"Child. We are done for
in the most remarkable ways"
- Brigit Pegeen Kelly*

It is
eight minutes

at the crack — and

I think it is the sound of

a crate yes,
I think a crate
placed on the track

to be shattered
as a prank

to be scattered

and there is a sliding
mm-dash sliding, through the clatter
metal screams.

*Rheumy and
wide-eyed pleading
from across the aisle
the old woman looks at me.*

*In a soft mac, rose pink
nails rose
soft shell pink around the rims of her eyes
shoes sensible
and alarmed
rimpled skin
she has an air of, 'this is
how I got this far.'*

Oil, I think oil
metal-metal
smear

and yes,
splintered
wood scattered
yes, a silly trick
it was a prank.

*I smile,
a small smile to meet her pleading.*

It means nothing
to the spring day

through the dust streaked
rain thrown, scratched and crusted double pane
of the carriage bound for Haarlem.

But then,
there is a
stilling.

The spring day for a
moment becomes still.

It is a photograph of a spring day.

Time leaks out no, it
bursts out,
it is cracked-exploded-forced
out,

Empty,

there is no air
in the moment
before inhalation.

Then

canal skin
shudders

and the trees
raise their arms in alarm,

yellow flowers turn their heads
and the sun makes an O —

shredded
clouds disperse,
turn away
from human choice.

I cannot look at the old woman.

I still tell myself it was a crate,
yes, it was a crate
placed on the track,
it was a prank

8 minutes from Haarlem.

Sea Change

As the first storms of winter howl in off the North Sea
days darken at the edges
grey vision, electrical disturbance —
a winter lens.

The cat comes close
curling in, feeling the new cold
and so do the children
but it's more complicated for them.

After the days of dissolve
I learn what it is to stay mainly afloat
though there are ribs staved in
and great waves wash through my chest.

I sort books, fold towels, add green to everything
and listen; each seems single but
there will be a new net stitching itself —
and sometimes stars will punctuate the night.

2.

Island

The Island

My waka
tipped me out

here,
hair

dripping
by sea-light

where briny and buckled
hill shadows

wrap
the shore.

The bay water
is inky and metallic,

then syrupy
under the moon.

Rays glide —
invisible protectors,

te wero wero crouches,
stands strong.

*

It will be a zig-zag
path up,

on *patient*
sublunary legs,

from a tideline
scattered

with driftwood
and broken glass.

It will be a crunching
and breaking down

path, slippery
as leaf mold decays

and nourishes,
quiet

and sometimes steep
in dappled darkness:

not knowing,
knowing,

not knowing,
coming home.

Kingfisher

When I return to the Island
the light has changed. It enters
in low leafy bars across the floor.

This morning as I stood in the doorway
a kingfisher dropped from the pergola
into the pool,

picked an insect from the buffet surface
and was a flash back up. It is this dive
and return I want to capture, to roughen

the surface of the words, to show —
but lines come like bars, birds like arrows,
all too pointed —

where is the soft body of the bird,
downy fingertip ruffle
of neat under-feathers on its breast?

Where is the lightness of bone, porous,
the powder-coated blue of one panel
of the jacket?

For this flash-return to the painted wooden structure
and the quick shake, 'moment'
is too long a word.

Time seems to slow only for me,
each drop of water —
I can almost count them as they

slow-fly from the body of the bird.
In each drop

perfectly reflective
replications of the world

at slightly different angles
in the early morning light.

the artist has eyes

"She goes into the world with such openness. She doesn't make jewellery with her head, she makes it with her whole being."

- Silke Ziehl

in her many walled glass studio we stand
and I look up —

the artist has eyes

like a swimming pool
caught under glass I think

(paperweight)

in sunlight
pinpoint pupils

we talk about ammonite
curled, and
roofing nails
and gold

we talk about 1989
when the wall came down
how the story gathers
around the stone

like a poem perhaps

(like this one)

and the word
that gathers

(transitive)

how we make the stone *stony*

or the opal
burst into flames

*

it's always
later,

walking

with the
changing tilt of the earth

shadows stretching like cats
in a sunlit afternoon

(faceted)

tide of words now
racing in

the lick of it

Air, but not wind
(maybe the wind)

a snowflake
on your tongue

salt,
from rime and spindrift

a bitterness
from coffee I accept
but not from the years.

If there is sweetness
it is manuka
breathed in from the bush

dropped from a spoon
onto
dark, soft, cold-country bread.

There will be metal
I think

of the snowmelt
that built my bones

and ferrous red,
the drop of blood that swells
on a fingertip.

*I want to call this poem
'Dirt Music'*

*but it's taken
and too grounded.*

If it were tree — pulped
and not the fruit of it

but the lick of a page turned
— sorrow,

that is a herb,
and it tastes better than fear.

Outside

I slept last night
under the rotation of
stars, an almost
moon, and clouds passing.

Between pohutakawa
and palms
I recognised a tui
by its wingbeat,

flip-book irregular,
movement through
air equals time.

Like the Eames'
Powers of Ten:
“the pivot is the human scale”
only because we are human.

Stars roll —
a zoetrope,
spout of a watering can,
a tealight candle holder pricked,
impersonating night.

Today

Naked ladies
droop in a jug on the sill,
hot pink and extroverted
but exhausted.

They came out
but were tired already
when the cashier handed
them to me, free

from a bucket by the till.
It's all toilet paper,
rice and pasta now,
no one's buying flowers.

You can't take anything
for granted: the hot pink,
the glossy painted white
of the sill, the living green outside

now the rain has come —
wavy through the old glass
at the bottom of the pane.
This is what today contains:

*tomorrow will be the same
but not as this is.*

So much for endings

The truth is things don't
really get solved
any more than the tide
does, or seasons.

The last tomatoes of May,
side-pecked by the glossy
blackbird, have already
dropped seeds into
the compost for next spring.

Words, whose printed point
has scurried off now, they will
build their twiggy palimpsest
for words to come.

Fractured staves,
a chest caved in
that rolled and swelled
with all its briny grief

will perhaps wash up
in patchy sunlight
somewhere sandy,
maybe even on its own beach.

happening now

We always lived in places where it rained a lot.

When it rained I said, *I can make something from mud,*
and I did.

I built nest after nest out of mud and words and arms
and bits of coloured silks.

The children grew with shiny hair and strong teeth.

In unknown lands where we wildered ourselves
I ran fast with the children down sodden forest paths,

sat alone on the turn of the stair late at night,
wrote round and round the grief.

In our houses many candles burned.

There was wind-howl in the forest tops
and fires as tall as ten-storey buildings on the beach.

Perhaps I could have hoped for less,
though that seems to squander the purpose of hope.

I want to say, *I am happening now and you can't stop me.*
Truth is, I still don't know.

Island People

"You are only free when you realise you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great."

- Maya Angelou

"Fear is the cheapest room in the house

I would like to see you living

In better conditions"

- Hafiz

I am island people
from island people
from the not-wild countryside
with the wild just at the edges

with the wild boxed or fenced or stored or sent away —
with the wild denied for human purposes
with the wild feared and far

— with the deadly surf and the roll of stones
and the inverse snow-laced mountains
just at the edges —

I am from few closed books
neat and dusted
on the shelves

*(Though I left the paperback
under the sycamore tree,
to be rained on,
swollen and ruined.
It was me.)*

I am from ironing the hankies
from whistling
as the stretcher rolls into the
ambulance for the last time.

I am from darning socks
and not making a scene
and cabled cardies, hand-knitted
from sheep's clothing.

I am from Anzac biscuits and fill up on bread
and not taking the last one.

I receive a legacy
of shutting up and putting up with,
making the most of —

pull yourself together? — yes, and no
don't dwell on it, I don't but

I have seen closed-down pain
and living a decent life
and never feeling good enough.

I want my children to know that they are no better
than the person with purple swollen feet
asleep on the opened-out cardboard box
in broad daylight on a busy street.

I want them to know that
and in that knowing, know they are no worse —
they are *enough*

and they don't need fear,
there but for the grace of god
has no place and every place with me.

I want them to read Hafiz
I want them to read Maya Angelou
and know in the centre of their being
that this is so —

that they belong

nowhere and everywhere
— they belong.

how we come home

slowly
in pieces

with stones in our pockets
alone

*

trailing limbs,
language,
a heart

tangled,
together

*

by sea-light

to whispered stories
of second sons and
women born to hardship

*

I carry
my children's milk teeth
with me
and we wake to green

*

to variegated bush
and petalled sunlight

the lancewood raises its arms

*

to sunlight cracking
open other days

*

to bird-flit

at chest height:
piwakawaka

*

pursued by everyman
and his dog

*

to barrow
what we value most

up the zig-zag path
and into the light

The Big Smoke

Each time I take the ferry to the city
downtown is more like anywhere
than somewhere

than here.

There is traffic chaos still
and a new mall
cavernous
at the bottom of the hill.

Cathedral to capitalism —
a few souls ascend
in quiet escalation
to empty hauseries, designer stores,
expectant, clattering food halls
while beggars sit quietly
in the street with cardboard signs.

I dog-leg fast off the dark
ravine of Queen Street

and walk uphill —

at Countdown Express
one apple, one banana, one dollar.

How far would *ten* dollars go for one of the guys on the street?
I have no cash since lockdown.
I have no cash.

*

I climb the suffragette stairs
to the city gallery in the green

to an exhibition called
Civilisation, Photography, Now
the world's built environments —
our hyper-connected 21st century lives:

- two decomposing seabirds full of plastic
- 30 square feet for a family

- of four in Hong Kong
- a chicken processing factory in China where all the workers wear pink
- tourists swarming over melting icecaps.

In a video installation
a disembodied voice accompanies the flickering screen
asking,

how will I die ...

who will carry my body ...

who will feel my after-effects?

and someone peeling fruit:

mangosteen
rambutan
lychee
custard apple
long-an —
the juice runs down.

There are no apples or bananas.

*

In the south atrium I stand
beneath *The Violet Hour*,

a brightened bruise-coloured
sunset, a glass wall

round, and through which

Auckland throws its
ever-changing light.

*

When I leave
it's getting dark, so I go to

Unity Books and hang out there for a bit
until it's time to catch the ferry.

In one slim volume,
How We Talk to Each Other,
there are

tender, tentative, care-filled poems:

*I woke to small silences
and entered them, it would seem
they had always been there.*

*

The ferry is fuggy and steamed up,
commuters drinking those teeny bottles of commuter wine and laughing
or frowning
talking about boat engines
and what they'll have for dinner.

(apples, oranges, bananas on their benchtops)

Island side I pick my grateful way
up through the claggy locals' carpark
sight smeared with night and rain.

Someone said to me, *ah, Waiheke*
you're living the dream.

I smell woodsmoke from somewhere
— the small smoke.
I breathe it in.

The day is chill and blurred

from the beginning
dewy hillside just outside the open door
through reading glasses,
to the condensation on the closed French doors.

Rectangles of glass, like Michael Dell paintings, they are
blurred, green, abstract —
there is a kind of landscape in them somewhere
I can co-create and I take small comfort

in that. Eyes back to the page
but it is no less blurred and do I want sharp
focus anyway? Don't I prefer the first-draft full of potential
to the wrangled and corralled

typescript off to slaughter? Don't I prefer un-end-stopped lines, whitespace
and enjambment to the document, no doubt fully justified,
requiring my signature and signalling very clearly

The End.

thought fish

I had things
that I had to do
later, and now

and I am doing
them by sitting
on a bowed seat

of driftwood, watching
waves peel
off the surface

of the bay
and curl in.
Fish jump

in the approaching
shallows. So many
fish, I think —

think it, but I
know it's all
lockdown relative.

And they come only
one at a time but
you never know where.

I try to keep
my focus wide
but on its toes

so I can see
all the fish
and can catch

the quality and
the shape of each
as it emerges

from the water,
— all unexpected
flash and flex

and hold —
suspended for

a moment

like a freestyle
trick then
falls again

always knowing
that it would,
falling not

like failing
but return
to breath.

The memory of trees

Driftwood strewn
across the intertidal zone

is salted and smooth but not reliably so.

There are the ghosts of
barked and branched and rooted lives

perhaps high on a hill overlooking the sea.

There, leaves like dreams
and how the petals fell

and the easy photosynthesis
that happened without thought.

Sometimes,

when the vegetable heart of this island
entangles me,
all volcanic ups and downs,
a crenellated coast and rampant green,
the epiphytes no longer *quaintly*
named the widow-maker,
roots and fallen limbs
and loops of trippy supplejack and shade,

I look for flat and simple ground
where I can see where I am going
— if only I keep going. Long laps
like whole days, one sure foot slap bang
in front of the other
and repeat until repeats become uncountable
and then I turn again
on broad, hard sand still low-tide wet,
reflecting only sky, and I can see horizon.

3.

Gather

Solace,

I find you
in the most
unlikely places:

on the tag
of the shower curtain
hanging

over an
impossibly deep,
pink bath.

“Solace”
with symbolic
instructions for care.

The water pressure
limps

and goose bumps
rise on my skin.

The rains
have not come yet,
though the cold has

and the rainwater tank
is only half full.

I laugh,
and reach for my towel
— the tank is half full.

Knitting

I am knitting a North Sea shawl —
a stormy one.

I have a cotton summer shawl already
stitched into ripples of light,

variegated colours of the sea at rest.

But this one is troubled
by its present and its past

like the darkly bruised winter sea at sunset,
long hours to come without light.

Stitched and unstitched
at least half a dozen times now,

crinkled yarn re-wound into tight balls
rolling fast and unguided

across wooden floors,
 looking back, across carpet, across marble, across slate, across time.

*

The first time I knitted with such confidence,
stitch and stitch and stitch,

you could rely upon it to grow slowly,
 a thin band,
 a torso length,

 enough to keep my legs warm while it grew,
enough to share with someone else.

I was knitting on Wieteke's handmade needles
small branches found in the forest

carefully stripped and polished
with a nut as a stopper on the end.

Short and bent, they were not efficient needles,
and neither was the knitting,

it was slow, and a little awkward. I made some mistakes.
But the yarn was beautiful,

like bowl, like bed

I have been thinking about words
and letters as containers,
as cups of meaning and memory:

look at the shape on the page,

like "bowl" with its upturned ends for
holding things inside. Like "vessel"
with a high prow heading into "waves,"

itself all up and down
with "w" and "v"
and the final crest of an "s,"

"dead" like "bed,"
only longer.

abandonment:

I erased you —
 long word of round letters
 like cups
 — porcelain perhaps,
 and *fragile* —

letters lashed together, with language
 in stripped lengths (I think of) harakeke —

 a vessel — more like a raft — you are
asked to carry much
 while being totally unsuitable —
 unstable —

 asked to carry much
while you surround yourself
 with words like
 fragmentation, crush, shame.

 It was a long and stormy night.
 The waves were labelled: *loss, grief, exile,*
 and engulfing *disillusion.*

Only later,
 is it noticed,

(as the sun also rises, and the nauseating swell and broach
 calms — intermittently)

 in your second half, the letters tip
 their meaning to the sea.

It is a twist in the chain
 I have not seen before.

And while I have to work out where to sit
 to keep the balance right,

I throw an anchor stone and gather. I
 learn to watch the stars at night.

I come to an agreement:
 you will also be
 my waka huia.

Matariki (ekphrastic)

The stars are stitched without borders,
they spiral
into the painted night —

when the fabric is held up you will see
tiny perforations —
they are leaking—pin-pricks of

light.

Often, I pause
to listen — though
they speak in a language unknown
to me

I like the musicality of it, the
lightness of the
right hand.

I like
their tendency to metaphor

to speak
as if they were
the currents that flow
around themselves —

as if they were the multitudinous lips of
the waves lit, the sea
paradoxically
under sun's light.

Gather

Eventually,
after the brutalities are over

I gather myself.
I make a new will.

I am not used to the holes in my memory
or the shardy bits

that I continue to cut myself on
periodically — still.

I gather food from the garden I have made,
tomatoes, rucola, basil, beans,

and my children gather themselves
at the outside table I lay.

I gather flowers from the world
as I walk to gather my thoughts.

I find the things that I have always said
were important to me

are the things that are important to me
— I gather strength from that.

I gather myself,
and find it is not figurative.

Found objects

The days press together
and often I'm done before they are.

Sometimes, out of revolt,
I walk anyway, before dark

in the space between cliff path
and inky rolling sky.

I hear my own breath on the up
path, and sometimes quickening
on the down.

At the foot of a cliff,
on a stony beach I find

a bird skull
bone white, it is

and smoothed,
the detail undone,

completeness
rolled over, rolled over rocks and

I still believe it will break
when, carefully, I

curl my fingers under it
and hold it loose.

I take the bird skull home, where

found objects find their place, and later
I stop chopping carrots just to go and look

at it there on the creamy open page of
an unlined book

with a feather, as perfect as if
untouched by weather or earth or human hand,

and the earthy skeleton of a leaf.

They throw soft shadows
in the evening light,

have their own stories
I will never know.

Never too short or long,
their own lived days —

could 'wonder'
be a round enough word

for a feather,
a leaf
and a skull?

birthday poem

It is morning

and birds unravel
their crinkled yarn of sound
into wet bush.

It rained in the night
a corrugated thrum

and now I wash my face in rainwater —
wavy stream

cold from the tap.
As I walk up the hill and down

it is the sea I hear
 calling
behind all other sound.

The curve of the bay,
curl of small waves

a winter sun on the wrinkled surface
of memory —

tenderness, touch,
the erratic velocity of time,

nothing
in this world
travels in straight lines.

St Clair

Two metres between the flags
and we send our children out —

little ones not more than five or six,
mouths open, shrieking, inaudible,
eyes wide — *don't turn your back on the sea!*

Waves shatter, a broken glacial green
they melt
to a frilled liquid again on the beach.

The sea is a continuous, mighty, laid-back roar,
a wall of big old bouncers
arms folded across their chests.

There is nothing else between
these Southern beaches and the ice.

A stiff breeze that would crack sheets
instead shreds clouds at the horizon.

The sheets are used as togas
in the city behind us

where broken glass
grits the streets in the winter

and old sofas come to die.

Two metres between the flags
and we send our children out —

surfers, students, our children,
we send them all out.

Grace goes South

After sunshiny months
of quiet, afloat on the hillside

with the doors flung wide,
the ups and downs

of the headland paths
with open beaches

and silences, and talk
that ranges, ranges

across hemispheres and hearts,
where sea is a place

not a boundary marker,
and we start our days in it —

and watch the garden grow
take care with water

and each other
and the crunch of the path

says welcoming, comfortable things.
Then Grace goes South &

tears come in
like a broaching sea

sideways, unexpected
a little unbalancing —

the deck tips.

Waiting

All through summer,
day lasted into evening

past dinner, past a run
or a walk on the beach,

a glass of wine with friends,
or planting out those seedlings
when the air cools.

But today,
working at the little
outside table, brought
indoors — cat at my feet,

I notice
with surprise that
darkness
has overlapped
the afternoon.

Outside, woodsmoke
laces the air, house light
from further up the valley

trickles down through
olive trees and a sodden
dankness hangs close
to the ground.

Only when I notice it
does the darkness
wash through me — like
sadness, like a loss

and I don't realise
until later

that the light leaves
in the wintertime

just when you
might have been
coming home.

Winter Solstice

Dawn creeps in
on the shortest day
of the year,

appropriately
slow and grey.

From where I lie,
tucked under
the tilt of the earth,

I watch the sky
above Atawhai Whenua
lighten,

the variegated colours
of the bush
resolve themselves,

then I get up. There's
a lot going on.

I turn on
the coffee machine,
find warm things

to wear — moving
my body
to catch up with my mind.

Pandemic, penguins, people
poetry, the land.

I leave only
these words
on the floor of a white room.

From here the days get longer,
the world gets lighter.

Let's see
what the lightening brings.

4.

Comforter

how it was

Moving from bed to sofa
to kitchen to sofa to bed,

we spend months
in this small orbit,

this box of paper and light.

Red blankets around our shoulders
in the long evenings,
more blankets in the night.

We sit close together when wind comes up
through the spaces in the floor,
we lean on each other.

I knit covers for hot water bottles
from yarn that used to be other things.

When we have no food, I go out,
face covered, to roam emptying shelves (anxiety),
re-filling shelves (it will be ok).

*

When the sun shines
I move to the edge of the cliff

and look at the white path
wind down the mountainside.

It is quiet.

When the sun shines, I open the doors.

*

I roam hillsides and cliff tops
and bush and road and street and path—

sometimes I see other people and we keep our distance,
if we know each other we call

*greetings — how are you? it's strange isn't it? I've had enough,
take care, be safe, ka kite ano —*

*

When the days lengthen
I plant things to eat later.

I don't know how to grow vegetables,
I am grateful that vegetables know how to grow themselves.

*

In the evenings
screens show made up versions

of how the world once was
or how it wasn't really.

Sometimes in real time
pieces of the world come in,

people we love come to us
as images on screens

untouchable,
abstract —

sometimes tender
sometimes afraid.

Inside wrist and elbow
pale and blue

the desire for touch pulses
60 times a minute when at rest.

I will build an ark

In a sea of illusory
gunmetal grey

shot with cool currents
and glancing sunlit surfaces,

I can see the sand
a foot below my dangling feet

studded with shells
shifting, shifting.

I am held, rocked in
respite from absolute gravity

as the queue snakes down
Moa, early in the morning now,

past the church
past everything we believed in.

RATS fail,
something is sinking.

I will build an ark
with a black cat in the prow

and one watching the stars
for navigation.

We will sail on gleaming
gunmetal seas,

we will collect you from the frilled
edges of the south,

we will have sails
and the wind will fill them just enough.

We will have spoons
carved from tide wrack

and it will rain.

January/tidal

"no ideas but in things"
— William Carlos Williams

The year is already relentless

— sky a flattened,
endless, blatant blue —

when like an uncertain tide
I wash in —

are you sure,
are you sure?

I bring books and dark summer cherries
from the land in the South

so sweet and so cold.

There are ladders and mirrors, calipers and nets
a marker buoy and a roily sea —

things pile up.

Half a step away from the ways of men —
weld and stitch, cast and print
safety and shipwreck

you sit
in the treehouse at night
sailing shadowy skies,

while debris bumps gently at the side of your boat.

By day I watch the
cauterizing of your heart

step by
technically difficult step
and bring you thyme and time again —

are you sure,
are you sure?

“nothing new, but still beautiful”

When you use it on me,
there is tension pulled across the surface
of the word *beautiful*

that I have never noticed before —

the “l” dips uncertainly below the line,
the “u” is skewed, the “i” looks coyly
towards the ground, and is “be” an imperative?

I ask myself. I look hard.

Beautiful is stretched,
not perfectly, across
the full surface,

to an almost transparent film —

like museum glass in a frame
there is still some reflection,
like clingfilm over a bowl of leftovers

to keep them good,

like steam disappearing
from the mirror
after you’ve showered,

like a window to a different world.

Can I hold you?

Can I get you to look at an image
for longer than a second?

Can I allow you to think about
skin
 and expression
 and light?

Landscape, though you do not
recognise it?

Can I offer you the freedom of
not giving all the information?

So you only think you know, or don't
know,

and like the olden days it might
be partial
 or partial

there may be only pools of overlapping
light,

but even so, it is more likely to be singular
and stay there.

Though you may never work it out

you can trust it will be
there, when you return.

Can I offer you the time it takes
to look again, to pause

to make a second reading?

Can I hold you?

tender

You arrive in the bay
when the tide is out
at a low ebb, not like you.

Anyway,
let me bring what I can

in small loads,
push out hard over the muddy regions,
watching for the sharp bits, the broken shell and rock in the silty sand.

Let me bring soft packages,
tied in oil cloth with string —
salt, a handstitched comforter, flask of broth —

let me bring the cool back of my hand to your forehead,
while you sleep.

Let me row out
under blue skies, light playing
on the lips of the sea

or at night, when cloud
scuds across the broad face of the moon.

Anyway,
let me not stay away

let me be your tender.

body

*"Only the body is bound by the laws of physics
and dimensions of space. And only the mind agonises
over their relationship"*

- Roger Horrocks

Soft machine,
how you move through air
with equal parts precision

and carelessness,

how air moves through you with a
comprehensive thoroughness
you fail to understand.

I simplify you to a thumbnail sketch
to manage your complexity
— then I ignore you.

Bruises bloom
in your thought patterns
as you navigate your time of being

by a complicated system
of desire paths, red thread
and mud.

It is always in the garden of
forking paths that we meet
with equal parts disdain and love for each other.

It has been noted that I cannot turn
a 3D object in visual terms.
You do not always know which way is North.

When we turn the map
to go where we are going
there is no more

than a fog-lit path
the next corner just out of sight
until we happen upon it
suddenly.

*

Soft machine,

but not alone.

*

Soft machine,
you are quick to respond
to that human.

With a low boil and a quickening
you will not be reasoned with,

will not take no for an answer
though nothing but trouble will come of it.

*

Soft machine,
you have never failed me
though I have failed you.

You have asked for help and I have ignored you.
I have taken liberties with you.

You have called out when *I* have needed help,
you know me better than I know myself.

You have always been my soft place to land.
Though I have blamed you sometimes

I have always understood we need each other
and we care.

We usually work well together
just sometimes we get the timing wrong
we get out of sync.

5.

that if I then waked

that, if I then waked after a long sleep

do you think my father's here?

yes

do you think he makes a difference?

yes,

see his arms are the widest point of the star

watch him shine

*

yet when the spring does come

at last

it comes with dislocating northern light

*

I ride through old industrial and
poor new-build housing

cars are funnelled
in behind Centraal

and overhead are
wires, the city braced with tramlines

somewhere,
under an over-bridge with graffitied concrete, litter drifts, barbed wire crowns
and grime

there is the smell of fresh laundry —
as if reflected from the spring blue sky

does my heart lift?

*

One day I see Klimt and Schiele
well-curated

at the Gemeente museum

Judith is spot-lit,
forward and golden, breast and belly bared
she stirs the very air

though it is Edith
doll-feet hanging, and eyes wide
in a wedding dress of many colours — yes, it is Edith
that makes me cry

*

I dream *he* as a cut-out

a photograph over-exposed
with an expression
that causes pain

he stands over me

and when I wake I am afraid

*

I

I

what *do* you?

*

Not yours, *he* says

for a long time

I didn't realise what it meant,

to be dragged around the world by my hair

not-screaming

*

outside the open door
gulls wheel

I am two flights up and
already the birds think this is sky

there are bars on the balcony

*

I dream *he* leaving
though I don't see him go

there are sheets of paper, like the pages of a book
falling
around me
falling and

falling

*

I am left

in the spaces where the pages don't fall

I am not the only one

*

I dream —

no, I don't

*

there is a plant
that bends as it grows towards the light

there is a room that is not white
where tulips open their mouths like wild animals

and I am afraid

*

some days
the border

I/not-I softens

I press against it, like the skin of a bubble
it gives
it is transparent
it refracts the light

*

sometimes

I am afraid I'll never see you again

that we will never sit in a quiet corner
(hands touching and that's ok)

you, talking of ordinary things
laughing, mouth moving, eyes alight

me, smiling and quiet with wonder

*

some days the border is porous
it lets in darkness that is not mine

seabird and oil-spill,
weighted wings

*

to be or not to be
was never the question

*

another spring,
I run through bush

and the smell is

sweet manuka and damp earth

I am a wavering line
that climbs and dips

all the way to the point

*

I dream

no, I remember this

bird call

and green tendrils
growing through honey-coloured boards

a white room

we use telephones like tin cans

and my ear grows hot
there is buzzing in the wires

tui

in the macrocarpa tree

*

I am

- a) pro-creation
- b) creation
- c) uncertain
- d) not

*

with pieces of string

I use

the tin cans to make stilts

when I stand on them, I hope to see as far as —

*

I am clunky

spine-fused, stilted and stiff

I don't know how to

give up, trust, untrust

I have forgotten hope, can't find anger

*

I am still allowed in the cloud and I
follow like a small child — not keeping up
trying, but not
caring that I don't

*

I will
need red thread to guide me
a line on a map, a curve, a net, a star

*

at the border

I stand on one leg
to know the difference

I stand on two
pressing my feet into the earth I feel the surface spread out

I feel the surface of the earth spread all the way out to home

*

be not afeard, this isle is full of noises

*

is my father's father here?

yes,

ink on fabric, ink on skin
blurred with age

and troubled history

*

here, on the Island
I sleep naked and alone

swim in cool dark waters,
watch the Southern Cross

move silently across the sky

I listen to a morepork call
and in the morning, when the light comes,
my heart swells with the tide

Notes

A 'bovenwoning' is an upstairs apartment or flat, often in one of the tall, thin, terraced houses found in Dutch cities.

The epigraph of 'Glass House' comes from a conversation between the poet Gregory Orr and Krista Tippett on the On Being podcast "Shaping Grief With Language."
<https://onbeing.org/programs/gregory-orr-shaping-grief-with-language/>.

The title and epigraph of 'who taught me my life was not my own' comes from the poem "Sea of Lanterns" in the collection *All We Saw* (2017) by Canadian poet and novelist Anne Michaels.

In the poem 'The Island' the lines "on *patient/sublunary legs*" comes from a letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds dated July 11, 1819, "I have of late been moulting: not for fresh feathers and wings: they are gone, and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs. I have altered."

The artist referred to in 'the artist has eyes' is Christine Hafermalz-Wheeler a jewellery artist, who describes her work as "creating stories to be worn."
<https://www.theartistgoldsmith.com/>

The title already taken in 'the lick of it' is *Dirt Music* (2013) a novel by Tim Winton.

'Outside' refers to "the Eames' / *Powers of Ten*," a short documentary about the relative size of things in the universe, made in 1977 by the husband and wife team of Charles and Ray Eames. Industrial designers, they made significant contributions to architecture, furniture design, manufacturing and photographic arts. *Powers of Ten* was also made into a flip-book.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKBhvDjuy0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj1bRY-HOSo>

The title of 'It is very calm and beautiful' comes from Jenny Bornholdt's poem "The Rocky Shore" in the collection *The Rocky Shore* (2008).

A 'desire path' is an informal track worn by pedestrians, cyclists or animals, usually a shortcut or easier route (<https://www.geographyrealm.com/what-are-desire-paths/>). In this poem "a Blaschka" refers to the work of the German father and son team Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka who in the nineteenth century created incredibly detailed and fragile glass models of sea invertebrates, plants and flowers that can now be found all over the world from the Harvard Museum of Natural History in the US to The Natural History Museum in London and The Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, New Zealand. They were so fragile that they were hung by threads inside boxes for travel so that with movement they would not touch the sides of the box and be damaged.

The "NS" in 'NS-8 minutes from Haarlem' stands for 'Nederlandse Spoorwegen,' the Dutch train system. The epigraph is from Brigit Pegeen Kelly's poem "Dead Doe: I," in *Song* (1994) and my poem is indebted to hers in a number of ways.

'Today' ends with the title of a painting by Colin McCahon, "tomorrow will be the same but not as this is" (1958-9).

'Island People' has a double epigraph. The Maya Angelou quote comes from an interview with Bill Moyers in 1973.

<https://billmoyers.com/content/conversation-maya-angelou/>

The other quotation is from the poem "Fear is the Cheapest Room in the House," by Sufi poet Hafiz.

'The Big Smoke' contains a number of references. *Civilisation, Photography, Now* was an exhibition of "over 200 original photographs by 103 contemporary artists from across Europe, Asia, America, Australia and New Zealand." At Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki (<https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/page/auckland-art-gallery-presents-civilisation-photography-now?q=%2Fpage%2Fauckland-art-gallery-presents-civilisation-photography-now#:~:text=Civilisation%2C%20Photography%2C%20Now%20explores%20our,multifaceted%20portrait%20of%20our%20time>).

The video installation was "Now Spectral, Now Animal" by Sriwhana Spong seen in an exhibition called *Honestly Speaking: the word the body and the internet*.

"The Violet Hour" was a commissioned work by John Reynolds, on the glass wall of the south atrium of the gallery. I also quote from New Zealand poet Victoria Broome's poem "The Morning after You Had Gone" from her collection *How We Talk to Each Other* (2019).

The epigraph for 'January/tidal' is the most well remembered line of William Carlos Williams's epic poem "Paterson."

The title of 'Can I hold you?' comes from an interview with American Photographer Catherine Opie. The first lines of the poem are also lifted from that interview.

<https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/catherine-opie-world-beyond-selfies>

'Body' uses lines from Roger Horrock's poem of the same name as an epigraph. His poem appears in his collection *Song of the Ghost in the Machine* (2015).

The 'that, if I then waked after a long sleep' comes from Caliban's "Be not afeard" speech in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, as does the line, "be not afeard this isle is full of noises."

The geographical locations in this manuscript move mainly between New Zealand and the Netherlands. As such the common language is English. However, I have also used words in Dutch and te reo Māori when I feel they better fit the meaning, context or feeling of the poem.