

Terry McDonagh
A SONG FOR JOANNA

BLAUPAUSE BOOKS

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**Hamburg-Melbourne
A Journal In Verse**

BLAUPAUSE BOOKS

To Joanna Longster

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Poetry
isn't in my words
it's in the direction
I'm pointing.

If you can't
understand that
and you're
 appalled
at the journey
stick to the
guided tours.
They issue return tickets.

– Colin McCahon 1919-1987 New Zealand –

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

– Australia 2001 –

Hamburg

I will always remember your eyes
whispering to me, before fading
into the last bend

on the stairs.

You left for work. I left
for the airport with your
blue-green stone
breathing joy into my pocket.
It would be a time for
strong buds in the blazing sun
and afterwards
a man and a woman seeking
a quiet place at a railway crossing.

The taxi-driver kept breaking
silence
with soulless parables, tales
of trapped water and pensions.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Heathrow

Heathrow is a warp
 in a cauldron
of loud speakers and wispy voices.

It's an overstocked corner-shop,
offering:

milkshakes to the hungry
in diet cages,

biscuits to bishops coming out
in Bangkok,

keepsakes to caretakers on
a welcome break,

pork slabs to Arab princes
without horses or Allah,

temptation to lanky models
whimpering at the gate,

frilly underwear to weightlifters
holding hands in the dark,

hope to people running from sounds
they cannot bear
to places that never rest.

Some record their coming and going
with petitions, upturned palms and prayer.

I hold on to a blue-green stone, a photo
and keep my dreams to myself.

Next stop, Hong Kong.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Hong Kong

I flew east on Ash Wednesday,
to where the sun rises.
I wouldn't be fasting.
There'd be spicy chicken on bikes
and barrows at street corners,
old seas smashing
 at my back
and new tides
defying my name
on their shifting sands.

We landed,
 safe as homing pigeons,
at the new airport on Lantau Island.

Terra firma.

Hong Kong is a dark machine
on a hill
and I was a money-box
on foreign soil
where dragons once had a home.

At the sight of a Guinness truck
violating Kimberley Road,
I turned and dragged myself
to a place where the guide-book
suggested quiet shadows
to process the layers of passing time.

*

I probably missed out on dreaming
on the twelfth floor of Hotel Windsor
but I did sense Feng Schui
in the Museum Of Art and on
the skyline of Hong Kong Island.

Tour-guide Connie told us
the new airport was no apparition:
it had been reclaimed from the sea,
which had given ground
 without a whimper
but loud enough
to drown the lament of grieving dolphins.

*

I think I paid twice
for the same camera
on Nathan Street.
I had my fortune told
by a man in a turban
who assured me
I'd be happy on March 14th.
He took my money
like a bounty-hunter,
even though I assured him
I often needed God for
my next line too.

I left
by night for Melbourne.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Melbourne

for Yogi

I'd left minus four in Hamburg
and landed to thirty-three
and plus

– it hadn't rained for weeks.

The fields were fallow
and evergreens had it all
to do:

provide food, shelter
and stand as proud survivors
on the landscape.

My friend met me at the airport
with a bag-full of survival tricks:

*In this country, sure remedies
for homesickness
are that big sky and the outback
waiting to come to the rescue.*

*

By March 14th, I'd staked my claim:

– listening for secrets in tram-wheels
– reading into Irish street names
– hearing life begging for release

– seeing that big sky over Australia
– knowing your stone
had made itself at home
in my pocket.

*

I've always loved the sound of
the Yarra, not the river
– the word.

The river is brown and sloppy
and doesn't slice Melbourne
the way the Thames does London.
But when the sun lifts its head
like a bread-knife
above the trees of Victoria
and the farmers scratch their heads
at the antics of the selfish rain gods,
the Yarra opens one persistent eye
and closes it,

not caring for silk
on Southbank.

Its curves
are green enough
to take the rush of animals
and trees drinking for their lives.

This old river knows its place
and leaves other things, like
poetry, landscaping and love
to those who can't live without.

I like the sound
of the Yarra.

*

for Val Rogers

We went willingly to
Kafka's Trial at Caulfield.
I felt the dark poet
stir in his old words
from our high perch
among jury members.
We all found Joseph K.
innocent
but he wasn't set free.
The verdict was postponed
indefinitely.
The Trial goes on.

*

The other day, a man told me
some early settlers
had faced their houses south
to catch the sun.
They'd looked this way and that
with screwed up faces, slits
and puzzled squints when
the sun peaked in the north
and water went down the pipe
the wrong way.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Autumn

Autumn in Melbourne
is a time for silence
and simple living
on slow pulse and karma.

If I could, I would try
to describe the morning
as it caught me
at Glen Waverley, or
the very different set of words
it takes to paint trees
that don't change from green
to brown and yellow.
They gladly house animals
that never struggle with hibernation
or give up eating.

It rained in great lumps
the other night and yesterday
rough grasses were fighting
for the right to be called green.

You walk softly in such a climate.
There no reason to rush

– the air

doesn't let you.

 You want to stop,
look at a postcard
of the Snowy Mountains
or dream of a slow train-ride
to Mildura.

At Port Melbourne, a cooler breeze
was blowing up from Tasmania.
The moon lay on its back.
I buttoned up, walked up Bay Street
all the way to Flinders Street Station
to catch a train to my home
 – for now.

*

for Frauke

At a table where stories begin,
a white feather
caught my eye. I blew it.
It was stuck – held down
as lost as a butterfly out of season.

I coaxed it with my fingertip.
It reacted like life in a field.

Perhaps it had been on a wave-crest,
had a battered heart
and was happy to be at peace
in the shadow of my thoughts.

It cannot tell me which solar paths
it followed
 – even free-fell from
but it did hang on skin and bone
and has a tale
tough as the kick in old spirits.

I wished it well
as one might a friend
in a foreign place.

*If I lose my sense of place,
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

New South Wales

On this slope, I want to paint
my song to the stillness.
Life's boiling for all it's worth.
No matter how much I spin the globe
I stay in the southern hemisphere.

On the way here, we took hours
– on a near-deserted highway –
to cover a tiny piece of map
from Melbourne to Pambula.
But the map had no sense of smell,
pepper-tree flavours, big butterflies
or the buzz of being close to the
High-Country home of Banjo Patterson.

There were water dams
by the hundred, little creeks
and swamps named after Jones,
Whelan

– even Dinner!

and rivers:
Snowy, Nicholson and Mitchell.
I saw kangaroos, a tiger snake,
exotic birds and woods burning.

Your soul could burst
out here.

We passed through towns:
Stratford on Avon and Eden
– not Paradise
but richer in clinging koalas
and sand castles.
Everybody wears a hat and
a cockatoo sings from a gum tree.
I can hear the waves
and see the beach from up here.
These sounds are good sounds.
They come from the heart.

*

Six weeks have gone by and
your blue-green forget-me-not
has kept its place in my pocket.

I've placed it on grass,
on burning beaches,
held it flat
on the palm of my hand
against the sky, or alongside
blue and green breakers

of the South Pacific
and it hasn't once lost
the magic of your song.

On the phone, we talked about
its qualities and colour
 – whether it was of jade
or a substance long forgotten.
I told you I'd take it to an expert
– an alchemist,
 a stone-mason
or an old person
to match my star-sign
with your humours
 but I won't!
If it's got a secret, perhaps
we can discover it together
– and failing that,
 hold our breath.

*

With my hands deep in my pockets
and my chin firmly in place,
I searched Merimbula and Pambula
for evidence of a pub and found
none

– they must be dry towns!

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Return To Melbourne

We returned the road we had come,
richer in silence and gentle names
like Wallaga lake, Umbara villane,
Tilba Tilba or Thurra river.
I'd seen rain forest nursed
like a rich uncle in a posh part of town.

I'd walked lanky beaches
alone
except for the company
of old gum trees dancing like
skeletons on the many shades
of late afternoon tides.

I feasted my heart on isolated
tin-roofed farmhouses
and gave up counting cattle
on the plains of Victoria.

The old bridge at Genoa
stands tribute to those who
fought bureaucracy to save it.
There are fire-blackened trees
fighting back and
old stumps defiant as war heroes.

I felt like one of the living
as the streets of Melbourne rummaged
for light to guide us home.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Ballarat

for Homer, Georgie and Ruby

It's May 4th. I'm on a train
for Ballarat.

We've just passed containers
marked Hamburg Süd
to remind me of Tall Ships
and other seas.

We are north of Melbourne
with the land reeling out
to the blue and distant

Dandenongs.

Even the train dances
like an urgent desire or
one that wanted to be a horse
as it waits to let another pass.

The sun sparkles on evergreens
and the dams are full.
We're climbing through red earth,
gum trees and spectacular plains.

Ballan is a railway station and a
footie oval surrounded by sheep.

Lowly Mount Helen,
of French origin,
seeks attention in the distance
as we pull into Ballarat
like gatecrashers.
The town looks so wise and choosy
in its older coat and bush horizons.

A new Irish pub stains Sturt street.

My hosts treated me to a five-star-life
through seams and centrepieces
of recent Australian history. This land
is a sanctuary now. The mines
are out of sight and the torrents
have washed away the public blood
at Eureka Stockade.

Peter Lalor is revered in monuments
and in the crevices of market places
where old wounds can't be got at.

Sovereign Hill is a living museum
trying to seal in the hopes
and memories of those early years.

We went to an exhibition, a party
and a noisy room where poets
were loved.

Some husbands and wife scholars
misunderstood each other
but stayed in town with all eyes
on display and culture,
it is said.

Reluctant to return
to the mod cons beyond,
I left as a child does after playtime.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Homewards

Your stone never once left it's place
in the three months.

I could pass myself off as an adult
when I was a child again.

You and my friends in Melbourne
gave me the slot in space
to be silly in a world without elbows.

There were no limits, mentors,
crowds or estate agents.

I was a bird listening
 in the distance.

I could crash out on bean-bags
with desperados,
imitate the walk of the town
or cry for Ned Kelly
 in Melbourne gaol.

There were black pepper parties,
and Gordon's Harley-trip
beyond the fringe of the daily grind.

I will always have memories
of tears hang-gliding
at Flinders Street and trainloads
of exotic animals water-skiing
on treadmills to Tasmania.

There's been the madness
of the open-mike
and the high-stepping lilt
of the Celtic Club.

A woman on a tram told me
of her husband's dream on a cattle station
and Homer Rieth wrote of Siberia.

Val took me to Tullamarine airport
– to Cathay Pacific
where they talk of local time at origin
and local time at destination.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

Australia From My Distance

From my distance, it looks so sweet
and creamy, but I can't help feeling
this earth must be strangling
in the long stripes of harsh sun.

Yet, there are cycles of song and
story from a time before the sun –
from the time of Dreaming.

I have never been to Arnhem Land
nor seen its big sky
but I have read stories
 – from before our time –
when the earth was black and silent
and the sun a beautiful woman
in a dark cave.

Wild horses, kangaroos, snakes,
birds, and insects live out there
with scrub, tufts and waterholes
– enough to go round.

There's mystery in a place
where bushes are thick with spirits
and soil doesn't give generously.
This ground will hold out
until you learn to hear the rattle
of its chains and the summons
of the Thunder Man to ritual.

This is not the home of Oedipus
or Lear

– no one's there to kill them.

They would have passed away
in the scoffing sun and on the
Dreaming paths of the patient earth.

Here, you don't die easily or
bravely among soldiers

– you go

quietly. Perhaps, not quietly
but certainly

alone

except for an army
of salivating predators,
poised to glean the rotting remains
from between your last finger
and thumb.

And there won't be a stone
to mark your passing
or a place with your name
in the sand
but there will be a bundle
of bones
 – bleaching.

Early settlers died of rattling teeth,
decomposing feet, ignorance of stars,
loss of a Roman god or madness
when the sun climbed high in the north.

Some did see the bones
 but they walked on.
They were the indigenous people with
songlines, dots, figures and ancestors
under the earth and in the big sky.

When our sinners go to chapel,
they dance worship to the White Eagle
and the Rainbow Serpent
 in their own place.

I have seen the work of their artists,
heard the song of the soul, sensed mystery
and touched on a Dreamtime
much older than wild horses on red clay.

Today, they walk in smaller numbers
but they still move tree by tree
to hunt alongside birds and animals.
They call on leaves and insects
to share and share alike.

They want to tell their story
from grandfather to father to son

of honey ant and owl
from grandfather to father to son

of lizards and frogs
from grandfather to father to son

of great spirits and criss-cross trails
from grandfather to father to son

of six seasons and waterholes
from grandfather to father to son

of dream and story and song
from grandfather to father to son

from grandfather to father to son.

from grandfather to father to son

from grandfather to father to son

from grandfather to father to son.

from daughter to mother to son
from grandfather to father to daughter
to mother to grandmother to son

to the lost children

– to the future.

*If I lose my sense of place
and my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

After Melbourne

After Melbourne I can only rely
on silhouettes unravelling:
– faces bearing the strength and poise
of the outback,
– faces from the dead bog-people
of my Irish ancestry.

Tube-cramped above the clouds
dreaming was a holy potion: you
a three-dimensional puzzle
hacked out of giddy memory,
while the weathered drone
of aircraft personal prompted
thoughts of sacrificial killing
in an attic space, beer
on the roof, or dabbling in DNA.

In Hamburg, I'm trying to reroute
to sun over deserts I didn't visit.
I curse cleavages between people
and the semi-nomad and predator
chiselled into me by the everlasting.

I'd strolled past totems and legends
of lost children near Flinders Street
and shrank from the ritual verbiage
summoning refugees to the slip-knot.

Here on the dyke ridge, I stroll
the length of the close horizon,
wallow in the muffled clouds
like a man of clods. The big sky
is far away

– out of reach
like a monk in a distant cell.

*If I lose my sense of place
And my way in the wind,
I'll look up – that's it! I'll look up.*

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Other Publications by Terry McDonagh

Poetry:

- »The Road Out« – Olaf Hille Verlag, Hamburg
- »A World Without Stone« – Blaupause, Hamburg
- »Kiltimagh« – Blaupause – A selection of poetry in translation. Translated by Mirko Bonné – grant aided by Irish Literature Exchange, Dublin

Prose:

- »Elbe Letters Go West« – Blaupause, Hamburg
- »One Summer In Ireland« – Ernst Klett Verlag, Stuttgart

Christmas Story:

- »Es ist voll wunderbarer Dinge von weither« – First published in translation by Hamburger Abendblatt – translator, Rainer Kühn. Later published in »Weihnachtsgeschichten am Kamin« – Rowohlt, Reinbek

Drama:

- »I Wanted To Bring You Flowers / Ich kann das alles erklären« – Fischer, Aachen

- He was shortlisted for Tandem Poetry Prize in 1997 and Mini-Saga award 2001

- A selection of his poetry is being translated into Indonesian by author, critic and translator, Professor Damien Toda.

- Twelve of his poems have been put to music for voice and string quartet by Eberhardt Reichel

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