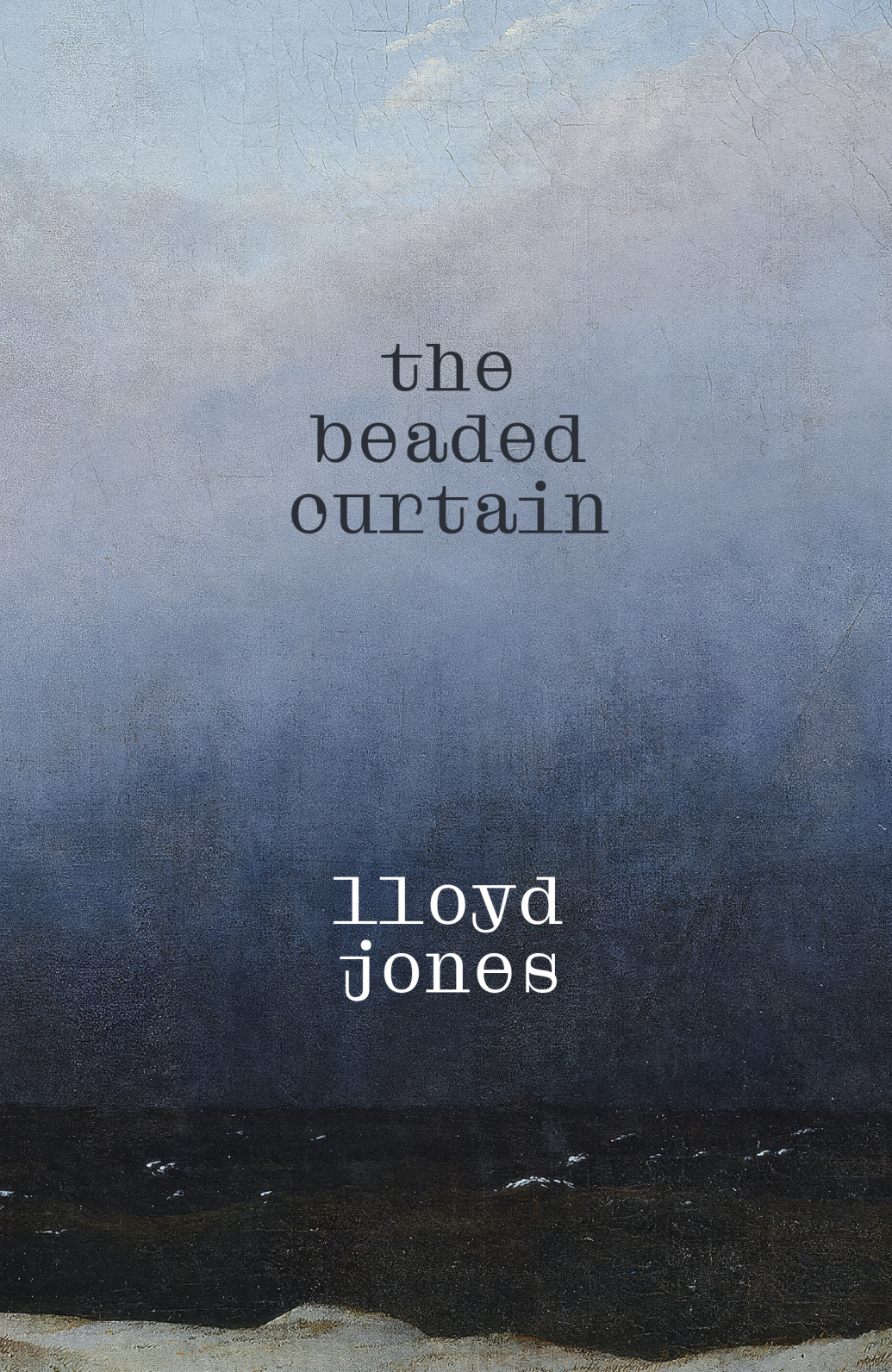
the
beaded
curtain
lloyd
jones

the beaded curtain

lloyd jones

MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

Also by Lloyd Jones

Swimming to Australia and Other Stories

Biografi: An Albanian Quest

Choo Woo

The Book of Fame

Here At the End of the World We Learn to Dance

Mister Pip

Hand Me Down World

The Man in the Shed

A History of Silence: A Memoir

The Cage

High Wire (with Euan Macleod)

The Fish

The Empty Grandstand (poems)

Napoleon and the Chicken Farmer (illustrated by Graeme Gash)

In memory of
Ian North
1945–2024

I have nothing
I might truly
call my own.

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion*

I found the poems in the fields,
And only wrote them down.

John Clare, 'Sighing for Retirement'

Contents

1.

2.

3.

4.

1.

Huia

‘In a few seconds, without sound or warning of any kind, a huia came bounding along, almost tumbling, through the close foliage of the pukapuka, and presented himself to view at such close range that it was impossible to fire. This gave me an opportunity of watching this beautiful bird and marking his noble bearing, if I may so express it, before I shot him’ — Walter Buller.

The bird is beautiful. Its problem is it is too beautiful.

A girl at school hid her beauty behind a wing of hair.

The huia charmingly unaware of its beauty bounced towards its caller.

Someone was always calling to her across the playground, turning her beauty inward.

I know certain aspects of my sister that she cannot see. What is available for others to see. Her easy determination to overlook the beauty that resides in her face. At the same time, an awareness of her own attraction occasionally drifts back into the corners of her eyes.

She loves to read and once, famously, forgot to pick up her child from kindergarten.

The huia’s favourite resting position was to cling in a vertical spread against a tree trunk.

Odysseus had to be tied to a mast until his ship had sailed safely past the sirens. We tie up our dogs. But soon we untie them — and the mad fools dash off down the side of the house onto the road. The braking car, the terrible dog screams.

My sister had very dark hair and olive skin. Her 'dark' looks were highly prized. Cars drove up and down the street outside the house at all hours, male heads turned, eyes mounted like crocodiles'.

Sometimes a garland of dried heads was woven into a flaxen headband, so that as the wearer moved the banging huia beaks produced a thin clattering. They were called pōtae huia and limited to women of high rank.

The bird was named after the female's distress call — 'a smooth unslurred whistle, sounding like the words "who-are-you-u".'

My sister travelled the world asking the same question.

Later, boyfriends from Scotland and Germany and Malta flew across the world to sit on our sunken couch and look up at her black-and-white portrait on the wall.

Some of them had their own photos to show — her smile was clearly prized.

Likewise, the tail feathers of the huia. Sooty black dipped in white.

The huia was the largest of the New Zealand wattlebirds, with strong legs but short round wings that made them weak fliers.

It was greatly prized by Māori who expertly imitated mating calls to attract the unsuspecting male into the same trap that had captured the female — a noose at the end of a long pole.

She was a sucker for a foreign accent, a foreign anything . . . marvelling at a species thought lost to our street.

At the time of European settlement, the huia's habitat had reduced to a corridor of bush on the lower eastern side of the North Island.

A huia feather was planted in the hat band of the Duke of York on a visit in 1901. Soon the feathers were seen garlanding hats everywhere in London, hastening the decline of the huia population.

Clearances had an equally devastating impact. The huia liked to grub over forest floors. But in second-generation forest there are no rotting logs.

The last confirmed sighting of a huia was in 1907.

Canterbury Museum has the only known huia nest in the world.

Gollans Valley, Wainuiomata. I knew those old huia tracks as a teenager. I often ran them.

I heard your silence. I did not know what it meant.

Sheep

Odysseus got each of his men to cling to the underbelly of a sheep, and when Cyclops moved the boulder from the entrance of his cave, the sheep trotted out with Odysseus and his men.

Cyclops swings his gaze from one corner of the class to the other. I have chosen the window seats. In the afternoon the windows are blinding, and the Cyclops ready to throw the duster at someone who takes his fancy misses me in the haze of sunlight and dust motes.

Part of me, quite a big part, wishes to be Odysseus. And that gets me into trouble.

First in my university holidays at the woolsheds in Gisborne. We have done the work. We have loaded all the wool bales. Now what? We are waiting for the big hand to swing round to the 12 on the wall clock. We can't leave until five o'clock. But why can't we leave? We have done everything asked of us. There is nothing more to do. There will be nothing more to do until morning. The older men, some as old as fifty, weary, with sun-cracked faces, wander out to the plimsoll of shadow where the interior of the shed meets with the broad sunny world outside. They go no further than the shaded edge and there they stare out in wonder of the days that have been stolen from them. They won't leave. They listen to my argument and shrug. An older man tries to get me to sit down and have a smoke. But I don't smoke. It is a failed rebellion because the only one I persuade to leave is myself. I am at the opening of the roller door when the foreman in a lazy drawl says I can't leave. I can't leave until five. I ask him if there is more work to be done. He says not until the

morning. In that case, I say, I'm off. See you in the morning. He says quickly, 'Leave now and you won't be seeing me or anyone here in the morning.' So, of course, I leave.

I am nine years old when my older brother brings a sheep home for me. A lamb with a tight curly fleece like the Steelo we used to scrape off the meat stains left on the roasting dish. At first the lamb lives in my bedroom. Sleeps on a filthy old blanket. Drinks milk out of a baby's bottle — my own, I learn. But soon it is shitting where it shouldn't. It is moved out to the shed, where it bleats and wails all night, every night. In quick time the lamb has grown into a sheep. I walk it to school on a leash. Mum says she has never seen anything so ridiculous in her life. But the sheep does not look ridiculous or appear to feel that way at all.

The sheep trots happily along at my side, it's true; it isn't much interested in anything, including the passing cars and astonished faces turned to look at us.

My brother's sports car parked in the street is like a bit of moon dust. A miracle. The neighbours stand round it and stare.

Although what they think is impossible to know.

My brother is not interested in cars. He knows where the petrol goes and that's about it. But he knows allure. He knows allure like he knows trout flies.

At school, the sheep stands patiently in a shower of admiration and wonder. The teacher says the sheep cannot come inside the classroom. It will be too disruptive. The sheep is tied to the school flagpole. There it passes the school day, its forelegs spread, its hinds tucked under, head raised, its jaw grinding emptily away.

Like the sheep, my brother can also look bored, as though the reflected world is a bit off or a disappointment.

After Dad can no longer bear the racket at night, my brother comes round in his red sports car to collect the sheep. It has grown since he last saw it. Even he is surprised. The sheep sits in the back seat. I sit in the front with my brother. We drive with the roof down.

Years later when I watched the film *Thelma & Louise*, I remembered the sheep and my brother's sports car. I hadn't thought about the sheep for years. Something about the blonde hair and sunglasses — and the wind riffling the back of the sheep's wool.

We continue along the old Hutt Road, searching for a new home for the sheep. Eventually we find a paddock with sheep in it. Long grass, farm fences, a windbreak of macrocarpa. We park. I get out to open the farm gate for my brother to back in the sports car. The sheep in the backseat looks across the paddock. It looks as we do, as though the paddock is a view belonging to others and of no interest to itself. My brother cracks open the back door, and the sheep bounces out, then stands in the gate as if at the start of a catwalk, chest out, eyes flared. Up the top end of the paddock the other sheep quickly bunch to look back along their flanks at an interloper.

My older brother is hardworking, clever, sometimes devious, often bold.

He has found a way through commercial property to escape our cave and its humble furnishings.

Now, years later, he writes to me in France where I am on a writer's residency to say he's been offered a knighthood. No one in our family has ever received such an honour. Officially, it is amazing news.

In his very recognisable cursive writing style, his letter lists the reasons why he will accept it — none of which I believe, such as 'for the perks' since he already has abundance, in abundance — but I agree 'Mum will be pleased'. That is true and later borne out in the photograph taken of the ceremony at Government House

that same year. She looks happy, but also unsurprised, emotionally constrained, shall we say. Dad is dead. She won't have to worry about him scattering ash everywhere at Government House or the endless hitching of his trousers above his paunch or his rocking up to 'important people' with his vulgar eagerness.

But after I put down his letter, I am left feeling disappointed at my brother's acceptance of a knighthood. It feels like a capitulation to the absurdity of honours and their bright tinsel, and the toy soldiery theatre of it all.

How is a knight supposed to be? Humble? My brother isn't, except when he tries it on, then everyone can see it doesn't really suit him.

What is he supposed to do with his smirk? Tuck it behind his ear where our father used to park his cigarette?

I accept it is fun to try on a different persona, for a while at least, to see how it goes.

At primary school, I was Tom Sawyer in the school play. My best mate played 'Ben', who begs Tom for a turn at painting Aunt Polly's fence. My schoolmate was quite funny, but unintentionally. The moment he opened his mouth one of my sisters in the audience burst out laughing.

Anyway, he ended up in jail. So, there is no telling where a role will lead.

My brother used to give me his shirts to wear as hand-me-downs. Their armpits smelt of historic deodorant. Pulled a bit tight across the shoulders. Their colours didn't work either. In those days he had dark hair. Plum colours he could get away with. In the same shirt I looked like a beetroot.

Once from Peru he brought back two Aztec shirts for me. I put them on. In the mirror I looked like a twelve-year-old wearing an Aztec shirt. I might as well have worn chain armour. The role possibilities of wearing an Aztec shirt were unclear to me.

At the age of thirteen, I shamelessly badger my mother for a pair of Levi jeans. I don't want the local-made Keans. I will look like a cunt in Keans. Twice I wear the Keans into the world and both times I am disappointed. Also, the guy in the poster with the Levi's wears a black t-shirt. It looks cool. Even though I hate the word cool and anyone who aspires to be cool. I still want the black t-shirt. But my mother comes home with an orange t-shirt. She says it is all they had left. To please her I put on the Keans and the orange t-shirt. It's all downhill from there.

Cynicism in the young is deeply unattractive, says our neighbour who dresses up as Father Christmas each year. Who am I a little prick to judge him or anyone? Father Christmas looks ready to take a swing at me.

I am told to watch my manners. Or I will fall out of the nest.

But that is what I want most — to fall out of the nest, to crack the shell and step out of it. Of course, I will need clothes for when I do.

Johnnie is a model friend of my brother's model girlfriend. She says I need to go and see Johnnie at His Lordship's. He'll fit you into something. Johnnie is a West Indian, the only black guy living in Wellington in 1975, but this is something we are both at pains to overlook. He swoops around me with a measuring tape, goes to a rack and pulls out a black pair with a perfect bevelled edge running down the thigh to the shin — it is like wearing the sheath a sword comes in. I look and feel sharp. I look too sharp. The bottom part of me is sharp. The top part ends in a mop. Three years later, I still have them. I've worn them twice. I decide to pack them in my bag to take to America. I take them out again. I am unsure what doors those trousers will open for me. I switch them for a pair of old jeans, a proper pair, Levi's. That's it. I aim to blend in, pass unnoticed. Then at the last minute I squash in His Lordship's trousers.

I pull on my old jeans and a shirt and boots I salvaged from the rubbish tip.

I look like a scruff. I feel it is the truest picture of who or what I am.

I am tumbleweed.

I do not look convincing in a tie. I end up looking like a guy who doesn't normally wear a tie. Like a criminal turning up to a court appearance, or a rugby league player. I look anxious to please. Worse, like I am trying to sell you something.

In London as a twenty-two-year-old I wear a tie to get inside city offices to sell them an entry of a line or two in *Kelly's Business Directory*. Sometimes I get to have tea and biscuits with a polite grey-haired business titan. My soaked shoes now resting on his white rug. My face red with cold. I am wearing a tie, of course. Then there is my accent. He can't quite place it. Or my attitude or bearing, or what is it exactly? He is surprised, I think, at my lack of surprise at finding myself where I am, talking to him as I do, knowing something about his commercial property business. I am a puzzle with whom he must sit down to renew his company's entry in the directory.

I desired those Levi's for the same reasons young men in seventeenth-century Germany took to wearing the yellow waistcoat and blue coat of Goethe's sad young man Werther. I read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 2007. I was in Berlin on a residency. Part of the deal required I attend daily language lessons at the Goethe Institute. At lunchtime I was free to explore the library, and that is where I read the story of young Werther's unrequited love. He has fallen for beautiful Charlotte who is committed to an older man. Werther's despair leads to him ending his life. In for a penny, in for a pound — as the saying goes. The death of Werther inspires other young men suffering in the same way to take their own life. In some instances, a copy of Goethe's novel is found near the body.

In 2012, on a walk in a park in Heidelberg, my host for a talk I'm scheduled to give later that evening points out the bench where young Werther had poured his heart out to Charlotte. This day, however, the bench is unoccupied, as though out of tasteful respect for its famous occupants unsighted for two centuries. Goethe's tale of unrequited love is based on real people who swanned around where we stand gazing at the modest bench and down a leafy slope. So potent was his tale that dressing up like young Werther was forbidden in some places — and in Denmark and Italy the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was banned.

Live shipment

Where the truck was parked across at the yards is now pixellated with tiny balls of sheep shit. Empty, but ghosted, like the wharf my mother and I stood on among the broken streamers and confetti after the ship with my older sisters aboard glided across the still dark waters of Waitematā Harbour.

Mum and I are still looking back at the night where we had seen an excited face and a hand raised from a ship deck nearly as high as a building.

The hills let go and the ship with a cargo of 38,000 sheep is tapped out to sea.

The hills shrink back to a green world, then fade into dusk. Night falls thickly, and evenly, and the sheep enter a world of motion, of rushing forward, rising, then falling.

Sheep don't like anything that is new. The word for it is *neophobia*.

My older sister wrote of Neptune suddenly arriving on deck like a lump of seaweed had climbed out of the sea. This was as the ship crossed the Equator. It was the first of many encounters she didn't know what to make of.

She posted back to the street of lawnmowers a black-and-white photograph of Neptune with a trident.

My sisters were dunked with a bucket of icy water. An 'initiation' — the word is in the letter but without an explanation.

In Colombo, in Ceylon, in Alexandra, they aimed their Box Brownie

cameras — the dark-skinned people glared back. The sisters took photos and posted them to the street of lawnmowers.

The white froth of the waves and the sea breeze riffling wool lock away a thought in the stockman's still eyes.

A stockman must think as sheep do. He must anticipate their unhappiness. In heavy swells, the pens are rearranged to cram in more sheep so they can support one another.

After a week at sea the sheep must wonder what has happened to the world of grass — to the sweet lacing smells of thyme and lavender. The sheep are rotated in pens below deck; the lucky ones brought up on deck for fresh air blink back at the sea.

My sisters had left the world of cut grass and the railway station platform with its cold winds and unpleasant draughts from the public amenities.

The ship stewards spoke Italian. The Italian stewards brought them cups of tea in bed. Some of the Italian stewards jumped into bed with them. It seemed to occur naturally — from the pour of the tea to the quick embrace of the unfamiliar. Especially when the ship rocked in heavy seas — then the Italian stewards were a source of great calm.

The heat is thick and heavy. The air is suffocating. Above deck the sky is egg blue. The sun beats down.

The sheep moan in the shimmering heat.

One sister 'fell in love' three times. The Italian stewards made her happy. With their cups of tea and their attention. She said they looked at her when they spoke to her.

The younger sister became 'infected'. Eventually she travelled to Italy where she fell in love with an air steward who worked for Alitalia. The synchronicity appeals — but as an afterthought captured in a smile many years later.

Arriving by sea — and taken by air.

In Rome, she moved in with the air steward's family. How far she had come from the street of lawnmowers — to the city of light and dreams. She found work as a typist. Once she was employed to type the dreams of an American novelist living in Rome at the time. He smoked a pipe on some kind of fellowship or other.

The pens are rotated, and as the sheep smell land each of them tries to raise its nose above the others. The sea narrows, the land keeps dividing — until one morning the ship arrives at the white concrete edge of an enormous container port. Beyond the containers is Jeddah, a crumble of white buildings, a crisp blue sky.

The crew line the deck to watch the sheep file down the ramp onto the wharf.

As the crew did on the *Northern Star* and *Castel Felice*. Smiling at those faces looking back to whom they had promised eternal love.

The sheep know only that they have at last arrived — to what will remain a mystery up to the moment a hand grabs their jaw and stretches out their throat for a knife to pass over it.

Steps

1. I am an autumn child. Near the Hutt Hospital where I was born stands a large egg-shaped boulder dragged up from the Hutt River. Its bare face commemorates a bloody encounter between local Māori and the British garrison.

2. Others were here before me. The depression in the bed, the worn sheets passed on to me, the well-trodden hall carpet, bare in places. Lethargic clouds pass like old photographs, or ancestors, ghosts who once stood where I do now, in the threshold, looking out at the world from the front door.

3. Often, I have a sense of having been put down in the wrong place. The floor to begin with, next to the shopping. Sometimes the floor mop. Put down then picked up again repeatedly during those first years. Then, for the first time, looking up to the end of the street, which meets with another. What can't be seen appears to offer a much better alternative. And so I set off in its direction. There follows endless corridors. I cannot begin to count the number of doors passed through.

4. *The new world.* I don't remember a single material thing about the first day of school. My heart was thumping. My breath was trapped in my lungs.

5. Of the artefacts: a dead boxing glove — my brother's — lies in the grass beneath the clothesline in the backyard. A brass shell from a cannon in the corner of the bedroom. It belonged to someone my older siblings call 'Granddad', but he is dead, and the shell is the only thing to link me to him, and to the First

World War, where he travelled, taking with him the horse he used on his milk run.

6. I like to push my fingers into a mound of pastry, amazed at the effect of my fingers, at this brand-new idea to do with the receptivity of things, which exist, so it seems, to record my passing.

7. All around me things are being named — 'bad dog'. Instructions are firmly directed — 'Eat your food.' Calmer voices arrive from a large wooden box with a glowing panel — 'A cool southerly change is expected around midday.' It arrives just as the voice inside the box said it would. Chilling the air, silencing the trees.

8. Age five, I am put on a bus and delivered to the public library and there set loose. I am no longer surprised to find others already ahead of me, grazing at the shelves.

9. Age ten, I pull down a big book of pictures by Rembrandt. There he is dressed as an Ottoman Turk. But he is also a Dutch painter responsible for the picture of himself in dress-up from a life he has no experience of.

10. My family is ordinary. Yet ours is the only house in the street to play *In a Persian Market* on a record player.

11. Our desert is made of tarseal, burning hot in summer, sheeted with thin ice in winter.

12. Every house in our street smells of roast beef. The stench depends on how well the grease has been scraped and the surfaces cleaned, and windows and doors opened.

13. My left eye offers 20/20 vision. According to tests I possess a 'lazy' right eye. I can see well enough to thread a needle and to bait a fishhook. I can see well enough what is in front of me. Sometimes I add to it. It is more interesting, though, when something is subtracted.

14. Like the incomplete view a beaded curtain offers. Such a curtain

hangs in our back door. The curtain is made of heavy threads of beads to let in the air and keep out the flies. The beads come in all sizes. What they have in common is that they all cling to the same thread. In a breeze they come together, clack, then, as they move apart, a bit of the outside world is flashed inside. It can happen so quickly, you end up questioning what it is you believe you have seen.

15. We are overtaking a cattle truck in my parents' car when a dark marbled eye shows up in the truck's siding. An animal, obviously. A cow, I think. But only its eye is visible and then it is in passing. A shiny thing in a dark space. Slowly we overtake the truck and accelerate away. My mother in the front, on a list, arms crossed. My father's blank eyes fixed on the road ahead. By such gestures the received world is passed on. The cattle truck is nothing worth thinking about. A bit of a nuisance as it held up the traffic. A source of an unpleasant smell. But then we shot past it and the air instantly cleared.

16. Local noises — the radio tuned to the BBC, horse races, dogs whining, barking, squealing, misfiring car mufflers. The new car passes up the street before the admiring front windows of every house.

17. Vast areas of the world wait to be named. There is a plant whose name I should know. I tread over it nearly every day. And after a quick glance down at its bruised and trampled condition I tell myself — again — I must find out its name. Naming is a matter of moral imperative. But that thought will occur only decades later — far too late to save the flowering plant. Just as the word 'sorry' is far too late to save the dead. There is another plant that looks like a pin cushion — it is resilient, you can step on it and it bounces back up. All its radiance is bound within itself. I am often stopped in my tracks by its sparkling ambition to trap my attention, then left puzzled for what it can or can't gain from my interest. So much of history is like that.

18. *Otherness* is represented by dogs until approximately 1961, which is when the young Cook Islands woman shows up next door. Dogs outnumber cars until approximately 1967, two years before the moon landing, twenty-two years after the bombing of Hiroshima. I have no idea what the place I was born to looks like from the air. I have never been up in an aeroplane.

19. *Horror*. Still largely self-made, attached to night, shadows, unfamiliar dogs.

20. A slow accumulation of language grated off the following individuals: Mum & Dad, education stalled at twelve. Three sisters, their education stalled at fifteen, fourteen, fifteen. One older brother, one year of university.

21. Other prominent voices: Agent 99 'Max, Max, are you sure?' Donald Duck quack, quack.

22. Subconscious — discovered at nine in the Naenae Swimming Pool, at the deep end, swimming under the dangling legs of older girls, then breaking the surface of that world to gulp in air and go down again.

23. First killing — when the neighbour Mr Brown in his white office shirt slaps a chook on the block and brings the cleaver down.

    Second shock: the sight of blood-splattered grass.

    Third shock: the chicken whirring around in circles without a head.

    Fourth shock: the killer in our sitting room accepting a beer off a tray held by my mother. 'Ta very much, Joyce. I don't mind if I do . . .'

    Fifth shock: seeing a live kangaroo at the age of twelve.

    Sixth shock: reading a description of a kangaroo by D. H. Lawrence and realising at twelve I had felt only my surprise.