

beyond retrieve

a volume of poetry

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Abstract

Beyond retrieve is a volume of poetry in four sections, each introduced by a tone or theme setting song lyric. The broad theme is one of a journey of retrieving creativity and writing as the centre of my life, and moving forward or beyond tentativeness around, for example, identity and intimacy, to both confidence and calm as part of the reassertion of creative focus. This structure also frames that of this exegesis and its theoretical foci. The pieces in the first section have, in the main, emerged as palimpsests, and this forms my thematic and theoretical consideration. The second movement has involved the formation of an alter ego, and notions of camp and my performance history are a focus. The poems and song lyrics of the third section are, in essence, eulogies, and I discuss the place of personal subject matter. This includes reflection on the personal in poetics from the earlier twentieth century developments on, and the lasting impact of academic study is part of this discussion. My use of an abiding innovation of the modern genre, the open form, is my focus for the final section. The influence of music on my practice is part of the consideration here, and I conclude the exegesis by considering a performance I organised and presented recently.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

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Grazie tutti.

DEDICATION

for Caterina de Nave

vai bene, Cara Cugina, ciao ciao.

Exegesis

beyond retrieve

Poetry

In general use ‘beyond retrieve’ is a noun phrase with both literal and figurative application for something that cannot be recovered or re-established. It is also the title of my creative thesis (Giacon, 2015), a volume of poetry, and frames the research concerns of this essay, and is used figuratively, a pun on the accepted meaning, a reversal that, along with embarking on this year of study, and indeed on personal redirection over the last several years, aims to convey retrieval and going beyond. As with these few lines thus far ‘re-’ words have dominated the personal and creative transition that my volume and this exegesis have come to represent: review, reflection, *Risorgimento* - a time of renewal and renaissance. A contemporary use of the variant phrase ‘beyond retrieval’ in Textual Case-Based Reasoning (TCBR) appeals to me. A problem solving approach to, in the main, text-based situations and experience, the language of some samples of my reading on TCBC resonate as a found poem I have coined describing, in the images of a body of text, language use, a writing process, and theme, my notion of going beyond retrieve:

issues that go *beyond retrieval*
mining the semantic web
analysing the corpus
in natural language
free-form vocabulary
images referenced from text.

Retrieve, Reuse, Revise and Retain
lessons-learnt documents
hybrid approaches
theme. (Bridge, Gomes, & Seco, 2007).

My volume of 48 poems and six song lyrics is shaped to reflect the process of going beyond retrieve on a number of levels. The volume of poetry is in four sections or movements, each prefaced by a song lyric, Greek Chorus-like, suggesting the broad theme and tone for the section. The first is prefaced by my song *Nothing New* (Giacon, 2015, p. 10).¹ Thematically, the song and pieces have a sense of provisionality with a focus on work-creativity imbalance. The poems are largely from 2000-12 journals that, in being busy with work and career, were not worked up. By doing so for my portfolio, pieces have been retrieved as *dissecta membra* fragments, and the reassembled poems are presented on the page with a palimpsest effect. The process of formation using these poetic constructs, and how this is reflected thematically, frames my theoretical concerns in the first part of this exegesis.

Funny how the clown (is the loneliest guy in town) (Giacon, 2015, p. 35) introduces the second section, a sequence of poems titled, *Argento in no-man land* (Giacon, 2015) which has formed as part of this year and study. Argento is an alter ego, which is also my theoretical consideration here. The subject matter is the gay milieu Argento inhabits, and the tone ranges around a certain whimsy.

Light at Sea (Giacon, 2015, p. 55) introduces the third section. The pieces here consider loss and remembrance, and notes of transcendence and love beyond despair. They are largely from the last few years. Here I wish to consider personal subject

¹ See Appendix.

matters.

The final section is introduced by my lyric, *Under the moon of love* (Giacon, 2015, p. 73), and based, in the main, on more recent work, around a broad theme of journeying: physical, imaginative, spiritual. My theoretical focus here is genre and form regarding my writing, and includes consideration of performance as an aspect of connecting to the world.

The above synopsis of my creative work can serve as an indication of my personal motivation in writing and, indeed, undertaking the Masters in Creative Writing (MCW). I have long wanted to centre my life and identity on writing and performing. I was a star-struck teenager who wanted to be a Beatle, to write songs, be in a band, and sing. I still do, and have the folder of the early songs I wrote as a 14 year old. Furthermore, I had a singing voice and enjoyed being on stage in school plays and choirs. Writing and performing shaped my developing sense of self.

My upbringing in a large Italian-Kiwi family influenced my creative instincts. The Italian side dominated. I was immersed in the rituals and mysteries of the Catholic faith, still imparted in Latin in my pre-teen years. Our family home was a mini palazzo of marble and terrazzo, our family business. Socialising and entertainment were central in the Italian community with weekly family lunches, get togethers in canteens in West Auckland vineyards, and the Italian Club on Sunday evenings after Mass, with Silvio de Pra² and his piano accordion, and le signore in satin cocktail dresses and black stilettos being lead around the dance floor by local versions of the late Italian film actor, Marcello Mastroianni, including my three elder brothers.

² Silvio de Pra (1925-2012) was an acclaimed local entertainer and piano accordionist.

My educational and professional focus has been English literature and language. I was the first person in our family history to go to university, doing a Bachelor and Master of Arts in English Literature at the University of Auckland. These years were, in effect, full-immersion in the world of imaginative writing and writers, and I have tended to frame my reading and writing in an academic setting, a motivating context for me as with this year, part of which has been to connect with developments in theory and practice in creative writing since my initial exposure in the 70s. My first job was as an English Master at Auckland Grammar School. After my father's death in the mid-80s, I lived in Italy where I began teaching English as a Foreign Language, and upon return, I co-founded the English language school for international students at what is now AUT University. In the 1990s my work focus was largely communicative language teaching, and developing the school as part of a team. These activities have always been on the creativity spectrum for me, and they complemented a prolific period of writing and performing. I also had 9 to 11 weeks of very useful leave per year.

In recent years my desire around creative focus became the stuff of numerous professional development sessions – the elusive work-life balance. From the early 2000s, I was entering my professional peak and by the time I left at the beginning of 2012 I was fully occupied as Director, and as an international director at the University with a rewarding career: professional development including a Masters in Language Teaching to Adults through the University of Auckland; teaching and promotion to Senior Lecturer; being part of the internationalisation and development of the University and of New Zealand education; extensive travel and income. However, my creative core was stagnating and diminishing. Creative energy went into the above yet no writing over this period celebrates this. For example, none of the extensive travel features. By contrast, this year I have been to China and Vietnam on

University work and the last section of my volume has a number of poems that reference this.

Another aspect, like no other, of this wider period was caring for my mother in her physical and mental decline, and death. This was my life and emotional focus for a long period. I was also admitted to the coronary ward of Auckland Hospital in the mid-2000s with what was eventually diagnosed as a stress-related condition.

Malaise came to characterise my creative practice and content and I obsessed about being uninspired. The lyric that prefaces the first section of my volume, *Nothing New* (Giacon, 2015, p. 10) is, for example, as much about creative patterns no longer serving me as about life as work. Since the early 90s the key event in my creative year has been an annual summer holiday to the Tutakaka coast in Northland to reset and reconnect my creative practices and identify, to walk, barefoot, what the late Maya Angelou suggests every writer has, a private, secret pathway to their muse (Angelou, 2011). This poetic image is not an uncommon way to talk about writing, suggesting the inspirational and emotional, and the psychological. My volume, the first section in particular, is imbued with imagery of pathways of sand or light, of the beach, the moon and stars, my favourite surface, sand. A recurrent motif is a man on a rock, musing.

In the afore-mentioned interview Angelou goes on to detail the practical and disciplined reality of her process – keeping a hotel room in her town, turning up at 5.30 am to sit down and work, tools, totems at hand - The Bible, a bottle of sherry. My annual pilgrimage, which I refer to in my prose poem, ‘Perpetual Light’ as ‘a self-centred week, moon full of the lunatic me’, has always served such ritualistic functions with the intention of transferring the behaviour and inspiration back to the city and world of work:

By sunset I'm layered and perfumed with repellent. Fresh towel as prayer mat and cross-legged to the east awaiting la luna. I'm modern and symbolic with i-pad and pen, martini and incense for the blessing of my pages perfect to the horizon. (Giacon, 2015, p. 64).

I did write consistently in journals into the new millennium, but less so as it advanced. Apart from song lyrics, I only worked up one poetic piece, a eulogy for a Book of Remembrance. The last few years in permanent, full-time work centred on the struggles of failing budgets, resulting in the tumult of a Business Case, Review and Change Proposal to close the school. A key book I read in this period of transition was, *Crossing the Unknown Sea – Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* by David Whyte (2001), which considers the significance of work in our lives and identity. Whyte recounts a moment of realisation about his physical and spiritual exhaustion in a conversation with a mentor about the workplace who suggests wholeheartedness as the antidote: 'You are only half here, and half here will kill you... You need something which can give you your full powers. You know what that is: I don't have to tell you.' (Whyte, 2001, pp.132-3). He wanted poetry as his work.

I left work at the beginning of 2013 with three aims: for the school to continue, for me to leave, and to retrieve my inner life as the centre of my future being. Thus far all three are progressing. I had a body of mainly polished work ³ from the 1980s and 90s, and set myself a goal to submit this to a national poetry competition with a mid-2013 deadline. Some of this had appeared in HERO Festival magazines, or in shows I presented as part of the Festival, the main Rainbow/LGBTIQ ⁴ celebration of the period. Doing something about the writing from the first ten or so years of the 21st century was

³ The submission title was *La Fine Del Secolo* (Giacon, 2013), Italian for 'Fin de siècle' (n. d.), commonly translated as 'end of the century', as my themes of personal relationships and intimacy increasing suggested ennui or cynicism, traits associated with end of century, the 19th in particular, literary, cultural, and political developments and movements.

⁴ Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer.

an aim for this year. I set about retrieving lines, pieces, fragments, from my journals and scrapes of paper, including scrawled lines, transposed by hand from small notebooks I carried with me out on the beach in darkness or moonlight during my annual northern adventure. I followed a chronological sequence, separating pieces by dotted lines, and typed what was originally written using notation such as ‘/’ for alternative phrases, ‘XXXXX’ for indecipherable words, striking through for cross outs, as in the sample transcribed from my journal, March, 2007:

.....

1. High on this other time
 3. the first star appears/is there
and this is my wish
 2. feels like a kiss
 4. can have my wish/something to / wish
- I’m finding the XXXXX

.....

My MCW mentor, Mike Johnson, in the initial weeks of the course, asked for these transcriptions in sections, and suggested we each note possibilities for development, and then compare thoughts. Our subsequent communications suggested the fragmentary nature of the pieces, with a range of luminous phrases and lines that could be worked up amidst a majority that seemed less potent, perhaps inward looking or tending to abstraction. Other longer pieces suggested potential poems. Mike felt this material conveyed a sense of privacy and provisionality, an elusive affective centre in the body of work, particularly in terms of the outside world or reader where the sentiments do not often reach out but further self-reference a tenuous self. He suggested that in form and theme the work diffused what T.S. Elliot (1920) called the ‘objective correlative’ by which particular emotional responses are evoked in a reader, through, for example, connections of imagery or descriptions.

My initial thoughts towards this first retrieval was to abandon what is now the first section because there was a lot to do to work it up. Was it beyond retrieve? However, with the pieces laid out, and some fragments highlighted, I did have a sense of loose connections of imagery and theme, particularly as the writing was concentrated on my Northland excursions as the decade progressed. It was also my instinct to fathom the emotional character of the work, and form what I could. This centred on several approaches to selection and editing under the notion of retrieving and going beyond. With the qualification that I was sourcing from self-generated material rather than, for instance, recycling from magazines or advertisements, I was in a sense creating found poems. Found poetry can focus the selection process on all aspects of what constitutes poetry, to form or refresh responses to the original material (Green & Ricketts, 2010). The writers also note a 20th century impetus in the recycling and repositioning of found poetry coming from Surrealist and conceptual art.

On a practical level I adapted another related practice, the William Burroughs' 'cut-up', cutting along the dotted lines between the sections of my material, and while my assemblage did not follow the spontaneity of classic cut-ups (Burroughs, 1963), the process was very exciting in that as I began moving fragments and longer poem-like pieces around, making matches and connections, retrieving, solid objects or forms emerged from the fragmentary mass. This was guided by collating themes around the emergent sense of a self, albeit tentative, and imagery of night, cloud and moon, beach and bay, and music, were key in this. Sound and rhythmic elements from separate fragments were also associated as in *heaven upended*:

the skin snaps
 needs a feed
 gets hungry
and even counting fingers

in the this most rare rarest of nights overnights
it's been love and its shadow
burning bright (Giacon, 2015, p. 18).

Rhetorical devices such as questions emerged from the mass as hooks, for instance, in the first half dozen poems in my creative thesis.

In both the sense of and the actual emergence of pieces objectifying, what I knew of the palimpsestic effect seemed both an imaginative and practical construct for what was happening, and Mike also saw this as a way to reflect the retrieval processes at play. At this time I also had a meeting with Prof Welby Ings, (AUT University, Art and Design, Postgraduate), to discuss aspects of performance in regard to this year. Our talk ranged serendipitously to art and design projects under his supervision centred on palimpsest and also disjecta membra. The latter can be regarded, 'as poetic fragments, or parts of a corpus that are still identifiable after being separated from their original whole' (Ayr, 2012, p. 40). The appeal of disjecta membra, particularly in the context of my first section, is as a poetic construct of fragments from a 'corpus' imagined as my journal writings and song lyrics identified and represented as they are in the first section, with the focus still on the tone and character of the original body of work.

Under this umbrella concept, the poems in this section have been edited and presented as palimpsests. In relation to editing, the work of the Alexandrian born poet, C.P. Cavafy has been described as palimpsestic in that he printed and privately distributed folios of his work, often recalling them to alter lines in a home bindery, 'with makeshift tables covered with stacks of folders, each stack a poem in all its versions over time' (Chiasso, 2009, para. 22). In the introduction and overview section of her creative thesis as part of Master of Philosophy studies at AUT University, photographer and filmmaker Mairi Gunn provides a definition of palimpsest, as well as how she has used it conceptually in her project: 'Although the term is most commonly

associated with layered script on ancient parchment manuscripts whose surfaces are then scratched back to reveal the text more clearly, I employ the word as a conceptual frame for understanding and expressing erasure and reclamation of identity' (Gunn, 2014, p. 31). This conceptual framing resounds with me, suggesting a submerged journey floating, as in *through a smoulder gel*, to the surface as deeper, hopefully affective shapes that solidify:

I want to forget
to/then lose the way
and can't think why
and I'm a man on a rock
I am in love with myself
here where art is elemental
making a map to remind me
how to get here/ and where else I can be./
when I'm back inside/ and far away./the day
I keep pining for the future
I'm driven by the past
my favourite surface
is sand (Giacon, 2015, p. 22).

In 2004, the American visual artist, Jen Bevin, published 'Nets', a book of poems created as palimpsests 'found' in Shakespeare's sonnets. In her process notes she alludes to the writer-material-reader dynamic. An aspect of this is the visual effect, as above, of a poem on the page as a palimpsest engaging the eye and interest of a reader. Bevin also conceptualises her specific project and the broader concept of palimpsest as making or finding space for, 'a divergent elsewhere. When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, preinscribed in the white of the page; when we

read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest.’ (Bervin, 2004, para. 2). Along with the compelling suggestion of writer at work with a blank but clamorous page, the resonance for me in these lines is in the sense of writer or reader with or against, going beyond a retrieved elsewhere.

Argento in no-man land (Giacon, 2015) is a sequence of poems I have compiled this year that comprises the second section of my creative thesis. Argento is an alter ego. He inhabits a gay milieu, and considers love, actual or longed-for, sex and lust, ballet boys in tights. The sequence engages with and develops the abiding ‘going beyond retrieve’ conceit of my project in that it brings together pieces from different times and re-presents them in a new guise and voice. The introductory song lyric, *Funny How the Clown (is the loneliest guy in town)* (Giacon, 2015, p. 35), is mostly found lines from newspapers or overheard conversations, inspired by a sad sack clown who provided the continuity in a circus I attended in the 2000s. It is a slow blues, reflecting the poignancy of the clown character, and also, in the current retrospection of my writing from then, the sense of personal provisionality I have been considering thus far. In this suggestion of tone, as well as in forming a character, there is a bridge between sections.

There is a further aspect of retrieval here in that I have something of a history with alter egos and gay milieu. An early exposure to both was in the 1970s with rock star David Bowie, in his various incarnations, as the sound track to my coming out.⁵ I made posters of his song lyrics for my bedroom walls, and stomped outrageously at parties, hair hennaed, in platform shoes and silks to his 1973 *Aladdin Sane* album:

The Jean Genie lives on his back
The Jean Genie loves chimney stacks

⁵ *Scenes from a gay play* (Giacon, 2015, pp. 77-81) in the final section of the volume refers to this time.

He's outrageous, he screams and he bawls
Jean Genie, let yourself go, whoah. (Bowie, 1973, side 2, track 9).

In the 1990s a series of cabarets began in Auckland and a group of gentlemen friends invited me to be part of a troupe of exotic dancers, The Suckettes, a wholly unsubtle gaggle of drag queens.⁶ Becoming Coc'O'Crème was a transformative experience. The first time I stepped into the spotlight was a charge of testosterone, truly wicked. I was able to do and say things in public, and project a blatant sexuality that I have not quite managed since as my everyday self.

However, along with these enticing possibilities of self-expression, there was a strain of misogyny in the troupe in language and references towards women and their bodies that did not belong with the evolved social consciousness of the time. At these events and others I encountered another performer, a lesbian who performed in the mould of Connie Francis, a 1950 and 60s American pop singer. From the notion of a woman singing live as another woman I developed an enduring alter ego, Ms Fancy Stitchin', based on the song, *Fancy*, by Bobbie Gentry (1969 - 45 rpm Vinyl Disc), a pioneering American Country and Western artist, among the first women in that setting to compose her own material.⁷ Initially, Fancy's performances centred on my own poetic pieces and acapella renditions of the signature tune. These evolved into shows for HERO and private performances, usually with backing from my jazz-styled combo, 'The Mood Swings', with titles such as, 'Can you handle what you Fancy?'. Fancy, a global woman of financial independence and mystery, and I, shared the bill, with her in

⁶ An example was, 'The Lewd and the Ludicrous', produced by Paul Hagen and Carl Skinner with assistance from the Northern Regional Arts Council.

⁷ Gentry described the song, 'Fancy' as, 'my strongest statement for women's lib ... I agree wholeheartedly with that movement and all the serious issues that they stand for—equality, equal pay, day care centers, and abortion rights.' (White, 2015, para. 3)

the first half characteristically passing world weary comments on ‘sweet, suburban Michael’, and me in the second somewhat in awe of her. Original songs and poetry were a feature of these shows.

These alter egos reflect what Susan Sontag noted in her 1964 essay as camp sensibility. Sontag was both fascinated and repelled by the mannered nature of camp, characterised in her notes by, for example, androgyny and exaggerated sexuality, and what she describes as ‘the theatricalization of experience’ (Sontag, 1964, note 33). This theatrical and experiential notion, reflecting as it does my performance history, encapsulates why, at least from the vantage point of the six or so months since Argento landed in no-man land, I describe the voice as an alter ego rather than an assumed identity or persona (‘Alter ego’ and ‘Persona’, 2010). This is, perhaps, a fine distinction, especially as the personality and expressive possibilities of Argento evolve into an Eliot-like persona, as in, for example, ‘The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, where the poem is more objective correlative than an expression of an actual personality, the latter not a tenet in Eliot’s critical canon (Wayne, 2002).

The personified voice of Argento surfaced in a vignette I wrote as part of a creative writing night class I attended in late 2014, and evolved into *IV. Argento tells a bed time tale - ‘Comet Landing!’* (Giaccon, 2015, pp. 38-41). I feel it has a sexiness and light-heartedness of tone around intimacy and connection that I do not hear in the first section. Apart from placing the key poem in the initial part of the sequence, the order and chronology have an organisational randomness, and there are also gaps. For example, there is at present no actual poem number IV. or XXX. With this open-endedness I wanted to encourage a sense of anticipation and even intrigue for the reader.

I wrote other pieces that seemed to echo the social environment of no-man land,

and wondered where they belonged in the greater volume. They seemed to fit into a burgeoning narrative sequence such as in *Cinema* by Helen Rickerby, where the dust jacket has the poet writing, ‘about the personal using the lens of a camera and the world of cinema through an unfiltered eye’ (Rickerby, 2014, outside back cover).

Imaginatively extrapolated, the volume could be considered on the same spectrum of personified voices as an alter ego, with the personal content directed by famous auteurs, and love and longing in Lower Hutt⁸ resonant with characters and plots from classic movies.

Around the same time that I was working on the original vignette I reacquainted myself with *Lunch Poems* by American poet, Frank O’Hara (1964). Writing to mark the fiftieth anniversary of their publication, the critic Marjorie Perloff characterised them for, ‘lightness of being ... their seemingly casual diction and immediacy belie their very careful construction’, and ‘a gay man, the poet refuses to play victim ... mix of pathos and humour’ (2015, paragraphs 13 and 15). In *Personism: a manifesto*, O’Hara declared that when writing, ‘You just go on your nerve’ (O’Hara, 1959, para. 1), and as Doty (1991) observes, many of his poems, ‘have been labeled "I do this, I do that" poems; they report whole chunks of experience, days of walking, conversing, noticing, with careful specificity’ (para. 1), as typified by *On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday*:

Quick! a last poem before I go
off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!
onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
playing the horn? (O’Hara, 1964, pg 7).

I would like to think that the Argento voice channels or at least defers to the

⁸ Lower Hutt is a city at the end of the North Island of New Zealand.

spirit of ‘Lunch Poems’. A piece in the sequence, *XIV. Argento and Romeo (and...the chick)*, begun in the early 2000s and retrieved this year, references O’Hara and the high culture elements of his New York milieu such as the ballet, the composer, Sergei Prokofiev, Shakespeare, the orchestra, in language that is external and interior, exclamatory, rhetorical – camp - , and I hope, is dancing with energy:

Red satin
always makes me cry
love imploding
to timpani
the rolling doom of bassoon
and Romeo
oh yes, Romeo
in danger, in briefs
“Look out!” I cried, inside. (Giaccon, 2015, p. 48)

As the character developed the range of experiences and reactions in my oeuvre that might or not be part of the voice began to interest me, and I thought of a mosaic, giving effect to a whole of mixed emotions: on-line dating ‘apps’ are scary, a one night stand, months in the making is, ‘much enthuse, not so much asm. And yes, there is no ‘i’ in that!’ (Giaccon, 2015, p. 41) ; the sand of the moonlit Northern beach bites, black-eyed Paolo is straight, and Raffaele is always beyond reach and enigmatic. Argento is new in town but in shades of Fancy, and contemplating a Marcello Mastroianni moustache, he wears his heart on the sleeve of his Giorgio Armani suit to the ballet, going as I have, by preference solo, but not alone, *Lunch Poems* pocketed. It is an intriguing flirtation: ‘I seem to be defying fate, or am I avoiding it?’ (O’Hara, 1964, p.

50).

In the first two sections of my creative thesis the constant pronouns for the speaker or voice are ‘I’ or ‘you’. In essence, my work reflects the personal but not necessarily in a direct manner. The Argento alter ego considered above is akimbo to the personal, and somewhat staged, while the palimpsests were created this year from journal materials from over a decade ago, revealing a distant self in which I recognised a vulnerability and solitude that felt at odds with my more recent and enlivened resurgence. The emotional nature of this endeavour, centred on telling a story characterised as what the poet Lucy Dougan calls ‘self-renegotiation or self-reconstruction’ (as cited in Hetherington, 2010, p. 9), seems one consequence of channeling such a process through formal study as suggested by Kroll in her comment that the association of the critical and creative in an exegetical setting engenders the ‘daring and the dangerous’ (as cited in Hetherington, 2010, p. 2).

The third section of my volume, *Light at Sea* (Giacon, 2015), is comprised of poems to family and friends who have died, some of whom I name or address. They are personal and intimate eulogies, the love poetry of my volume, and grouping them together is part of this. On leaving school and starting university in the early 1970s, two writers, James K Baxter and the Canadian singer-songwriter and painter, Joni Mitchell, were an abiding influence on me for the directly personal nature of their poetry. In the creative fulcrum of that time, I idolised them. I have already mentioned my early attempts at song writing as an adolescent. In the mid-1970s I wrote a song about sailing away to peace and love in California. I somehow became aware of a Mitchell song that referenced the state, and out of interest bought a compilation LP with her song on it. Mitchell remains my primary muse, and a key factor in this is what she has described, with particular reference to her *Blue* (1971) album, and its follow-up, *For the Roses* (1972), as the ‘bare bones, guts . . . on the outside’ personal nature of her lyrics (Marom,

2014, p. 57). I recall realising some years later that in the excitement and tumult of the first years of university, I was rendering myself in the emotional tones, the love, loss and ambiguity of Mitchell songs such as *The last time I saw Richard*:

The last time I saw Richard was Detroit in '68
and he told me all romantics meet the same fate some day
cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark café
You laugh he said you think you're immune
go look at eyes they're full of moon (Mitchell, 1971, side 2, track 10).

At this time, along with my first encounter with the Romantic poets and, in William Wordsworth's well-known phrase, their 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (in Brett & Jones, 1963, p. 246), my local poetic hero was Baxter, whom I meet twice shortly before his death in 1972. His effect on me was visceral. In this potency was Catholicism, my developing social consciousness, his embracing of the poor and addicted, and of Maori culture. In fact, the impact of Baxter as a person, of what he was writing about, and of his death, influenced me to forsake Italian and study Maori as part of my undergraduate degree. In later years I carried *Lunch Poems* with me. Back then my poetic touchstone was the 'increasingly personal and confessional...broken lyricism' (Green & Ricketts, 2010, p 88) of *Autumn Testament* (1972):

11

At times when I walk beside the budding fig tree
Or on the round stones by the river,
I meet the face of my dead father
With one or two white bristles on his chin

The safety razor missed. (Baxter, 1972, p. 19)

The use of the personal in poetry is not, however, without controversy. An early example of this for me in the scholarly context was in a 1977 Masters in English Literary Criticism paper when I used the Mitchell lyric quoted above in a critical analysis essay. The professor assessing the assignment hesitated to consider the lyric as poetry, describing it as confused and self-indulgent. Reference has already been made to the canon of impersonality in 20th Century theory and practice by Modernists⁹ such as Eliot, and in a commentary related to that mentioned above concerning Baxter, Ricketts refers to an apparent parody, and ‘a sharp attack’ on the poetry of the late Lauris Edmond by the current New Zealand poet laureate C.K. Stead, who, ‘as a modernist, inherently distrusts any such claims [in Edmond’s ‘The Lecture’] to truth-telling, to honesty as such in poetry’ (Green & Ricketts, 2010, p. 342). Ricketts tempers this statement by acknowledging that readers appraise personal truth in poetry differently, and there is, possibly, a suggestion here of developments over the last 50 years or more in thought and practice regarding the poetic genre that not only highlight the significance of the reader in contemporary poetics, but also shifts in the treatment of personal subject matter, as posited by Hoover (1994): “In the 1960s, in opposition to the impersonal ... , the postmodern revolt was primarily in the direction of a personal, oral, and “organic” poetry.” (p. xxxiv).

A Pinch of Thyme (Giacon, 2015, pp. 82-85) from the last section of my creative thesis is something of an homage to the poet, Billy Collins, whom I have come to admire this year. It references his poem, *Table Talk* , from *Horoscopes for the Dead*

⁹ ‘The early 20th-cent. movement or trend in which certain artists and writers, esp. those ... of the period between WWI and WWII, broke with established traditions and sought new modes of expression’ (‘Modernism’, n. d.)

(Collins, 2011). The way the poem begins in seemingly domestic or personal detail and moves imaginatively with wit and cleverness to intriguing other places encapsulates my admiration, and, indeed, aspiration. Collins has described in a Paris Review interview how for him the origins of his writing are secretive and diary-like. While acknowledging in the same piece that the everyday, including the comic and the trivial, are for him often departure points, Collins feels that a poem ‘works best when it manages to transcend its subject or at least finds a safe place to hide from it.’ (Collins, 2001, para. 110). The day I read *Table Talk* and began my poem was busy and frustrating, and a line from the tenth stanza of the poem about the person you love crossing a room into your arms stopped me in my tracks. The plainly drawn image was not necessarily a metaphysical moment of transcendent truth, but whispered to me of intimacy or, actually, its lonesome absence.

To transcend is to go beyond. In this sense the retrieval of the original inward looking and private material of the palimpsests is an attempt to connect the personal to the world, and my ego altered in Argento in no-man land should, theoretically, have modernist appeal. The eulogising of the *Light at Sea* section (Giacon, 2015) is by its nature an act of transcendence both private and public. In the three poems that close the section I write about the friend to whom my volume is dedicated. The last piece, *The Deeper Blue* (Giacon, 2015, pp. 69-71), is an unfinished portrait of her full of life, always, in our favourite haunts. It is a fond retrieval, a transcendence, and a safe place, sometimes, to hide.

In the early pages of this exegesis I noted that a motivating aspect in undertaking the Masters has been to update my awareness of developments in the genre since my English Literature studies in the 70s. I have felt, for example, ‘out of the loop’ on post-modernism, several characteristics of which have been referred to previously in relation to Ricketts and Hoover. This desire to update is essentially to reflect my

practice and processes in enduring 20th Century poetic genre developments and their evolutions. What has transpired is a realisation appropriate to the pervading retrieval dynamic of this year that in those earlier studies, in particular through a paper on 20th Century American Literature, a key text for which was, ‘The New American Poetry 1945-1960’, edited by Donald Allen (1960), I encountered a range of diverse poets, O’Hara, for instance, who have more recently been described by editors such as Hoover as pioneers in post-modernism, and beyond.

Innovation in form has marked the last century or so of poetic endeavour – I have already alluded to Surrealist influences, for example – and central in my practice is the open form. Green describes openness of form as where the writing occasions the form rather than using an established formal plan such as ode or haiku might. The form is open to possibility which, in terms of modernism and its developments into contemporary times, was avant-garde and experimental, as the writer ‘subverts, modifies and plays with all the poetic devices that contribute to the regularity of a poem’s form, such as line lengths, stanzas, metre, and rhyme’ (Green & Ricketts, 2010, p. 98). This modification implies that crafting is very much part of the open form, and I have found the organic impetus that Green suggests in the writing finding the form to be very compelling. For instance, the connections or juxtapositions of the palimpsestic pieces emerging from their contexts; the eulogies tending to be left-indented, and more conservative in structure. Robert Duncan’s *The Torso* *Passages 18* from those earlier studies retains for me its powerful effect, not only for its homoeroticism and tenderness, but the energy that characterises open form poetry in, ‘the way rhythms syncopate, words clash, echo and kick, and the way white space stutters’ (Green & Ricketts, 2010, p. 98):

a wave of need and desire over taking me

cried out my name
(This was long ago. It was another life)
and said,
What do you want of me? (Duncan, 1994, pp. 32-34).

Duncan was influenced by the ‘projective verse,’ ideas of poet and theorist Charles Olson who suggested that poetry was ‘shaped by the rhythms of the poet’s breath, and “composition by field,” in which the page becomes a field of language activity beyond its traditional use of margins and spacing.’ (“Biography Robert Duncan”, n. d.). Notions such as rhythmic syncopation and breath underscore a key propulsion for me regarding open form: music. The first albums I bought while at school were *The Beatles* (1968 - aka *The White Album*) and *Abbey Road* (1969) by The Beatles. Both had the formal elements of pop music structure but over a complexity of styles and rhythms, and experimentation with collages, the second half of *Abbey Road*, for example. A later more direct musical influence was that as the 1980s dawned I discovered jazz, and for me this meant jazz singers. I was given a box of 45 rpm vinyl singles for my jukebox and among these were recordings by Sarah Vaughan ¹⁰. My listening and singing changed forever because of the reverie of her voice which, ‘.. had wings: luscious and tensile, disciplined and nuanced, it was as thick as cognac, yet soared off the beaten path like an instrumental solo... a four-octave muscle of infinite flexibility’. (Giddins, 1998, p. 301)

¹⁰ Suggested listening: Lullaby of Birdland (Shearing & Foster, 1953, on *Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown* (1954, side 1, Track 1).

While musical elements have a natural place in the open form of my poems, the six song lyrics in my volume have regular and recognizable forms. They include poetic qualities such as metaphor as in *Light at Sea*:

Light at sea, life, chugging home to safety
following the stars, flashing in the deep.
No moon glow, gone, all point to the horizon
sunset had my soul, harbour has my heart. (Giacon, 2015, p. 55).

As mentioned earlier, composing songs was the wellspring of my writing and I include them here as thematic introductions for the four sections, and to represent this side of my creative output as part the spectrum of the poetic genre for me. My instrument is my voice so I compose the songs around the occasion of inspiration, words and melody – syllables, rhythm, breath – together. Most of the songs here have a jazz feel as this is how my singing voice and has evolved trying to attain space and openness of feel within a structured form.

I end the final section of my creative thesis, *Under the moon of love* (Giacon, 2015), with *M&M* (Giacon, 2015, p. 99). I have worked on a musical setting for this which I hear as an open form jazz improvisation, imagining myself channeling Vaughan and indeed, Mitchell.¹¹ *M&M* also references, as ‘Now is the hour’, a 20th Century Maori farewell tune, *Po Atarau* (Kaihau, Saunders & Scott, 1920), and the poem that precedes it, *A Faith Menagerie* (Giacon, 2015, pp. 95-98), flashes back to a song lyric fragment I wrote thirty or more years ago. This poem, as with others in the volume, also

¹¹ Joni Mitchell introduced jazz styling and musicians to her music in the mid-70s leading to a collaboration with jazz bassist Charles Mingus at the end of the decade. This culminated in ‘Mingus’ (Mitchell, 1979).

has sound elements such as assonance, that, for example, set the scene of the piece in groups of lines with 9-7-7-9 syllables, and repeated stress patterns:

A
crucifix
of candles
shimmers

attendants flutter
in flames
down side aisles
on a mission
white robes fanning
red sashes
flying (Giacon, 2015, p. 85).

This sound aspect was not planned. I wrote what I saw in my journal in words much as they are above. The form on the page was crafted as I wrote more, but this was also a natural impetus that seemed to suit the sense of ascension, physical and spiritual, rising through the piece. Part of this is also that on the page, whatever its formal qualities, a poem engages with the wider world as reader. The discussions with my mentor this year have included how the form of a poem can be a source of such interest. Centred on a Good Friday service, the poem has a concrete element in its church spire shaping as above, that is mirrored in its final section, a subtle homage to the shape of *Easter Wings* by George Herbert (Herbert [1663], 1964).

Furthermore, the line length and spacing, and the white space stutters of my poem can suggest to a reader what they might hear if I performed it, traversing its eight or so movements. The language of *A Faith Menagerie* is part of the engagement. It is almost O'Hara-like in its everyday descriptions of doing this and that:

teenagers giggle	friends wave across pews
like high fashion models	re-congregate for a chat
caught in the excitement of selfies	Some have snacks.

(Giacon, 2015, p. 97)

A Faith Menagerie featured in a performance I organised to reactivate this aspect of my creative profile, a key motivation for undertaking the MCW.¹² The concept behind the aims of the event, which was introduced by my mentor, was to represent this year:

- to reflect the thematic arc of retrieval and beyond in my creative thesis
- to present some of the writing processes in this
- to go beyond the page and take my text to the audience/world
- to include the multi-modal and genre nature of the volume
- to collaborate inter-departmentally, utilising the resources of the University
- to incorporate technology including an audio-visual recording of the event
- to do something artful, enjoyable, and hopefully, novel, for all concerned

To realise the above I selected pieces from the four sections of the volume and presented them as readings, sometimes in tandem with PowerPoint slides. For example,

¹² See Appendix

a PowerPoint slide was able to replicate the palimpsestic effect of fade in/out as I read. Other slides built the poem word by word or line suggesting movement and sparking interest. I formed an acapella duo to focus on words, voice, and rhythm and melody. Something of a costume change was involved with an appearance of Argento and *Lunch Poems* (O'Hara, 1964).

I feel that the performance, along with my creative thesis and this year of study embodies my desire to have writing and creativity at the centre of my life. I have a strong sense that the end of the course is about going beyond. In my creative thesis I see possibilities for more writing, for publication and submissions, and for recording and performance, and also further study. A deep breath, and on into the *Stranger Zone*:

A walk in the stranger zone
Nay, stand and unfold
this bundle of confidence
that balancing
act
on stage with cues
sitting
on a bus that smells
of celery
intrigued, locating the source
turning
a page
you would think I'm sure
expecting a state of heart
as/or
art
old hats worn sideways

bonfires set
under fire bans.

I am of an age, again. (Giacon, 2015, p. 75)

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Appendix

‘Beyond Retrieve’ was a 45 minute performance presented under spotlights in a blacked-out space, Gallery 2, in the School of Art and Design at AUT University, on October 22nd, 2015.

There was an invited audience of around 35. The performance was filmed by Emil McAvoy and Marcel Allen, and produced by Marcel Allen.

(Fee provided).

Many thanks to Liesl Ploos van Amstel, Charlotte Huddleston, Harriet Stockman, Karen Rutherford, and Marie Shannon for their assistance with the performance.

All pieces performed were from *beyond retrieve* (Giacon, 2015) as follows:

open to influence (p. 75)

consequence (pp. 10-11)

Nothing New (p. 9). PowerPoint slideshow with soundtrack*

The Shadow Blues (pp. 25-26)

night light (pp. 13-15). Reading and PowerPoint

I. Argento Kurious (p. 35)

XIX. Argento and Romeo (and...the chick). (p. 47)

XX. Argento tells the naked truth (p. 51)

Electric Skin (p. 62). Acapella duet.

Harbour View (pp. 66-67)

Three Pools mirroring the Moon (p. 91)**

Future Spring (pp. 92-93). Reading and PowerPoint

A Faith Menagerie (pp. 94-97). Reading and PowerPoint

Under the Moon of Love (p. 72). Acapella duet

Stranger Zone (p. 74)

* Demo recording Brown Street Studio, Auckland

6/11/06. Engineered by Justin Schilder. Key boards: Brett Higgott.

Arrangement: Brett Higgott/Michael Giacon. (Fee provided).

** Found poem sourced from Hangzhou West Lake Panorama tourist map.

