

# Stamps

Gail Pittaway

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Illustration: Juliann Smith

*A replica of a New Zealand 1942 Health postage stamp*



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HAMILTON

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## Introduction

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## Stamps

My Dad was a postie.  
most summers I'd work with him  
in the Chief Post Office;  
sorting mail into sizes,  
stacking parcels,  
stamping Christmas through a franking machine.

Sometimes we'd read the postcards in the airmail bin  
even though we'd signed a promise.  
Once my own hat went into a canvas bag —  
who knows where?  
It wasn't stamped or addressed.

I learned there the value of order  
and submission.  
Why parcels must be tied securely,  
what happens when the address is wrong;

Impeccable skills for an age where  
My only letters are bills  
and junk mail is so indiscriminating  
there is no stamp or address.

**The Sunfish on the Stairs**  
*(At the Whanganui Regional Museum)*

Sunfish  
are a species  
that roam the open sea  
relying on wind and waves  
to carry them from place to place

They are often driven ashore  
at high tide and left helpless at the ebb

Such was the fate  
Of this  
specimen.

Found poem: caption under the exhibit.

Note: As a child I would climb up the stairs and stare up at the huge flat disc barely believing it to be a fish. A few years ago I returned and read the caption, now being tall enough. The words presumably by a museum staff member seemed worthy of being exhibited, themselves.

## Platonic Rites

Within a walled scented garden  
made not only for the blind  
they groped a knowledge around the sky  
from imprints on warmed flesh.  
Animals twitched, dozed, grazed, nudged,  
unconcerned at this amiable gaming;  
woman, man, flowers, grass, showers, sun —  
ancient symbols; their own illumination.

"See the two air currents," he cried,  
"How higher clouds waft motionless and  
lower scud on by!"  
But she, sense betrayed  
by jabbing rain on sunned flesh,  
bite of lust and sting of lips  
lay rapt, whipped on by another current's course,  
blinkered to cause, effect, direction, pace.

The Charioteer, who does not show a face  
gives rein only for the passage of the skies,  
a sun to chase.

## Shag Poem

Once near a knobby headland  
a shag flung herself to fish  
down, direct into the shadowed sea.  
Barely a splash betrayed her plunge  
no ripples showed her path;

I waited longer than my lungs could bear  
to catch the triumphant rise  
but she never reemerged.  
Upon another rocky beach  
self-flung upon hot rocks  
my tears dried even as they fell  
leaving no trace, no stain engrained  
and I walked away quite healed.

Now I cannot pass a jagged coast  
without remembering  
that shag, that shady sea,  
those tears on lichened rocks —  
both gone mysteriously.

## Dreamtime, Troy and Pergamon

We sleep often, and dream much  
here, in the ruined land.  
We greet past shades with brief respect,  
then leave them to the longer vigils of reptiles  
to whom they now belong.

Did snakes slither around the palace of Eumenes  
so presumptuously then? Or lizards bask in the  
Hellenistic sun?  
Were the healing waters of Asklepeion  
also frog infested?  
And the turtles in the holy passages; did Galen kick at  
their shells distractedly  
as he mused upon remedies?

Reptiles lie low, sometimes never strike.  
they have waited long for this —  
coldly, slowly, to encroach upon  
the powers of the past.  
Now, save the odd tourist, cow or goat, who will pass,  
they share the shadows only with each other.



Perhaps this is why we, too, lie low and sleep;  
in dreams we learn from the snakes when to strike, The  
lizards teach us when to hide, the frogs to plunge; And  
the turtles teach us to receive the blows  
and still survive.

## **Silber See**

*(For Martin)*

We camped that night, in a rusting wood,  
By a lake called Silber See.

While dragonflies idled to the lull of the lake  
and strange night creatures called,  
came overhead a slice of new moon  
and the ache of an uncanny grief —  
the intuition of your Mother's death.

Another camp, another night  
an oval ripe moon in ascendance,  
by a weedy backwater, enthralled, we caught  
the irregular plop of the fly-catching trout,  
the flickering of distant fires —  
and you talked with her in a dream.

Two waters, a week, and a moon in the making  
these icons I take wherever I go:  
light on darkness, moon on water —  
the depths of pain in your Mother's eyes.

## Open Night at the School

He seems puzzled.

"Your son?"

"Yes, that's him  
in the group of students  
showing how it's done".

An awkward pause;

"What brings you here?"

I ask unnecessarily  
and smile at their youngest.  
A gap after the older two,  
she's keen to go co-ed next year.

We ramble on a little longer;  
our kids, the weather,  
the price of petrol,  
school bus routes;  
then smile vaguely as we part.

A charge of sorrow unsteps me then;

I recall  
my son, within,  
churning resistance  
at the hard wooden pew,  
while theirs lay still;

the tiny wooden box  
barely broaching the altar.

And the guilt  
Of bearing life  
Rising around me  
Like incense and hymns.

## **Charm**

*(For Marie Flynn)*

Apotropaic magic it's called  
when we say "bless you" after a sneeze  
or "cross my fingers and hope to die."

As you lay dying  
I became uncharacteristically tidy:

of course I gardened  
but I scooped up weeds immediately.

Books went into a new book case  
in height order

and my wardrobe found itself rearranged  
according to cut and season,

while all the hangers were made  
to primly face the wall.

At the clothesline I recalled your reputation  
for organising pegs by colour,

matching them to the clothes.  
I drew the line at that

but washing has been folded with particular care.  
Apotropaic magic.

Auspicious, not superstitious  
you'd have found it propitious

that a comet has visited  
in this of all weeks.

As you catch that comet's tail  
perhaps you'll look down and see

My rotary clothes line,  
like a rainbow tree fern?

In case, today, I'll hang the clothes in colour bands  
and size order, with matching pegs:

A Romany rag tree  
A Tibetan flag

Your patterning in me.

## **Leaving** *(For Alex)*

You leave.  
I follow,  
turning off  
the light, the stereo, the DVD, the computer,  
the heater —  
gathering mugs, plates,  
emptying waste baskets sodden  
with the cheerful detritus of  
a visit home.

Your room  
still wears your impress.  
sheets mangled,  
floor a horizontal pile:  
discarded clothes, papers, wrappers,  
lurid plastic containers still filled with shampoo,  
cleanser, toner, deodorant;  
all left,  
so you can pack tidily  
into three recycled carry bags.

You leave  
Me empty.

## **Unleaving**

*(For Alex)*

When you were tiny I'd wait ahead  
cheering on your tottering steps.

Today you ran ahead, around a bend  
out of sight,  
wailing when I caught you up —  
"I thought you'd left me!"

I did leave you —  
to run ahead.

You see,  
I couldn't keep up with you.

In time you'll run on,  
stop looking ahead or behind.

Into time you'll run on —  
and leave me standing by.



## **Missing Track**

*(For Max)*

You are back after a long flight  
And, unusually, keep the bedroom door open  
to allow the lights, sounds and smells of the house to  
reach and absorb you back home.

You recall how a decade ago you returned  
and heard the voices of your husband and son,  
a low murmur down the hall.  
How you could barely distinguish between voices,  
both with low tones, an even keel of intonations.

This time no other male voice  
just the murmur as your husband cooks for you  
and coaxes one old cat to eat  
while pushing away the young one,  
The odd caressing tone with the dog,

The slightest of exclamations  
as some ingredient misses the pan,  
lands on the floor,  
the gentle laugh as the dog cleans it up.

You are home but it is emptier now with the loss of  
that one other voice,  
indistinguishable then, now absent  
— a missing track  
on the music of home.

## Forensic Jumper

*(For Jenny and Mathew in London)*

You return my French designed,  
Italian wool  
jumper,  
*Animale, by Roger Duc,*  
after I rejected it,  
too heavy for the flight home  
to summer.

Now, unpacked, unwashed  
it traces northern nights  
dark, long,  
yet threaded with metallic light.

There's a whiff —  
dark slime  
wintry footpaths,  
fire, smoke,  
crisp air.

On the sleeve a daub,  
warm beer, spilled in laughter  
in front, a scab of milky sauce  
some not especially game bird  
poached in wine.

Hairs of an antipodean cat  
spike out, three-toned  
and, on the shoulder,  
two of my hairs,  
six months younger then.

Doubtless, too, residues of skin or scalp  
around the neckline  
could be scraped or plucked,  
sent to laboratories.  
All evidence of happy times.

## Swansong (For Pamela Gray)<sup>1</sup>

Today, for you, I braved a storm.  
Glutted gutters,  
rain swept,  
wind poured all over me  
and the streets of my town.  
Leaves locked on pavement  
rubbish brushed at knees  
litter collected cowering in corners.  
And then you burst upon us  
full sun-red, yellow-lined, blue-eyed you —  
brandishing your eyebrows  
winding up your voice  
sliding down your 'cello  
to make your swansong.  
Ah, no swansong here, my friend —  
more full-throttled, pounding,  
new-hatched energy!

Homing,  
I shrugged off the storm  
like water off a duck's back.

<sup>1</sup>*Pamela Gray is a New Zealand 'cellist, singer and composer, whose work Swan updated Saint-Saëns' The Swan, dying from an oil spill and pollution.*

## **Eight AM.**

Daylight saving time...  
and the daylight, saved, is grateful.  
It is still cool outside;  
the time of new beginnings:  
the rain has just shaken itself off and drifted away  
the garden drunkenly lolls about  
a bold snail crosses the gravel path.

I break the web that links both sides of the hedge,  
there each morning —  
a tiny head height thread,  
a civic opening ribbon,  
a mere distraction as I wipe it away  
'til tomorrow.  
I now declare this morning  
— Open.

## Three Gothic Novels

*(In six lines each)*

I

'It was evening all afternoon'\*

The macrocarpas clumped like clouds along the fence  
line. The farmer looked at the sky;

"There's a beauty coming," he said to no one in  
particular. The blackbirds wheeled and hurried the last  
chores of the day, then sang short bursts of prayer.

\*From Wallace Stevens' *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a  
Blackbird*

II

Tarnished circle

why do you stay locked on the finger  
long after the marriage is over?

Like him

you have burrowed your way  
into skin and bone.

### III

Watch  
where did your name  
come from?

Time snatcher,  
no amount of watching  
will catch you up



## **What We Did in the Easter Break**

*(For composition classes everywhere)*

We always go somewhere  
even if we don't leave home;  
the white room, the dark bed  
narrate themselves.

Or even if we travel —  
to Taupo or Auckland, say —  
it is only to eat and sleep  
more.

Or at the beach, any beach, say Cooks Beach,  
you might lie in a tent,  
imagine Kelly Tarltoned waters teaming with night life,  
grotesque as a Leonardo cartoon —  
brother and sister fish  
eating each other.

Or out at sea,  
watch wave-tossed children puke on  
their hands,  
pieces of dried apricot, sputum  
drizzle onto purple books.

Or it might be ANZAC Day  
and, all over New Zealand  
the RSA, full of smoke and soldiers and tales  
of smoking guns —  
one vast TradeMe site  
    — the beaches  
    — the beatings  
    — the bastards  
No holiday.

## Unwelcome

The evening you left  
I scrubbed down the porch  
your base for three months, or more.  
You'd brought little,  
left with a little more,  
and the space, now empty,  
barely changed by your stay,  
seems pointless somehow.

I'd been waiting for you to go  
since you arrived,  
but you had babies on the way  
seemed so happy and possessive  
about the empty old porch,  
as if you had lived there before.

So we co-existed for a summer  
you on the porch, us inside,  
and, occasionally, to wind you up  
we'd walk out and talk or drink —  
or just stand there looking into the distance;  
enjoying your annoyance.

When your twins came  
we were a little more respectful  
after all, that's why we let you stay.  
Apart from the filth and the noise  
you were all pretty independent  
not needing our provisions  
while the twins grew strong.

Then one weekend we left you to it  
and went away to the beach  
For one last autumn fling.  
When we came back you'd packed up and gone  
— all of you —  
north I suppose, to another verandah in the sun.

Two swallows may not make a summer, but  
your departure ended it for us that day.

## Pukeko

There is no escape,  
you know,  
when a

flat-footed flamingo, prideless peacock  
parrot-marionette, clicking stickbird  
of graunchy ruttings and soggy spawnings

tries to out-wit and out-lope  
a van  
with washing machine mangles out front.

So where are you now half-wit?  
Now that your lopers have been lopped —  
Those spindle-shanks that cramped and clamped  
your style?

Has your soul taken flight at last?  
Do you brood and flit above tree tops, squawking  
timeless, sexless rhapsodies,  
Flicking the stench of the swamp  
from your angel wings?

Or do you merely decay out-side-in?  
Flattened panic in the streets?

A peacock-crimson splat mat  
On the tacky tarseal of time?

## **In the Country**

You are inside, at table  
it is twilight, winter, and the house is beginning to  
distinguish itself,  
with light, from the surrounding gloom.  
A knock at the door  
And a woman, distressed, looks in at you, and says  
— Do you own a dog?  
— A Labrador?  
— It's just been killed on the road.

Then, breaking down,  
— The bastards, they swerved right at it,  
then just drove off.

So begins the horror.  
You gather up the still warm pet,  
but, too heavy to carry, you park the car in the middle  
of the road,  
in the dark  
roll her into the car boot  
and bring her through the gate to bury her.

You dig a grave by torchlight;  
so much earth for such a short life  
and, sobbing, come in to the fireside,  
where the children have laid her in state  
on her favourite rug,  
scattered with Paris daisies.  
— Lottie's still dead, says Max  
as you kneel down.

A year goes by. A knock at the door.  
Outside, through the glass, a man in singlet and shorts  
one side of his face a livid rash,  
so the whites of his eyes catch the flash of the kitchen  
light.

— Do you own stock? He rasps,  
His voice sounds threatening.  
— No, not at all, not even a dog.

— There's a beast on the road someways back —  
Someone needs to get it off, or  
there'll be a nasty accident.



Your husband goes with him.  
He does not return.

Was it a ruse, you wonder?  
How vulnerable you are,  
in the country,  
in the privacy of night;  
that anyone can come  
and take your husband away,  
to look for a beast that you don't own.

Eventually you go out to look for him  
but there is no sign,  
only vast skies  
the odd flicker and twitch in the leaves  
a distant drone of trains.

You go inside and prepare for life  
without a husband.  
Anything can happen after all  
in the country.

Eventually he comes in and says

— No sign of the beast.

But he must be out there somewhere.

## Interislander

Be ready to pay the Ferryman –  
The cost is higher these days,  
he'll take credit  
old pennies won't cut it —  
but there's no going between islands without it.

Best to embark on foot  
you won't need your car at the other end  
but you'll miss the drive up the heavy steel ramp;  
the crew in their heavy gloves steering you  
about the turning circle, as you shunt around the  
parking deck and nose in  
— each park a harbour, a bay.

No, instead, walk up the hot gangway  
Through the glass covered tunnel,  
avoiding the heels of the folk ahead.  
No-one, you notice, has luggage.

It's crowded at first; in the jostling  
you worry about security, then remember  
you don't have a bag; all you have is the means

To pay, not yet taken  
and there's still no sign of the Ferryman.

Perhaps he's on the radio to the next port,  
checking the weather,  
taking soundings? Making the passage right.

So you go on deck to look at the city behind —

Already dwindling to flat pack blocks  
and plastic towers.

Avoiding a funnel, weird tubes and pipes,  
places you can't enter, you find

A piece of rail to hang over and watch

As wharf cranes semaphore

The music of the spheres.

With hardly a lurch, the ferry pulls out  
and you are suddenly inter-island.  
Ahead, as yet invisible, the other shore,  
the island which you are inter;  
as over the Tannoy loudspeaker,  
the Ferryman  
welcomes you  
aboard.

## **I'd Like to Be\***

I'd like to be sung:  
a tune that is versatile  
a ditty pretty enough,  
yet simple, to hum.

I could be played on the radio,  
or taught to children  
who'd shout me out  
at the tops of voices  
in school assemblies  
and dingy halls.  
Or Else.

Perhaps an orchestra  
might arrange me.  
Or a rapper?  
Even a folk band would do.

In the morning  
I could bugle people to work.  
At night babies would sleep  
against the deep hum of their father's chests;  
to me.

In time, snatches of my rhythms  
might repeat in the memories  
of listeners  
long after I have gone out of fashion.

\*In response to Glenn Colquhoun's poem *I'd Like to be  
a Story*.

## **Author's note**

Gail lives in the lush Waikato region of New Zealand and lectures at Wintec in Creative writing, Media theory, and Drama and Storytelling on the Bachelor of Media Arts and Graduate Diploma in Communication programmes.

Several of these poems have been published in *TEXT* online journal and I gratefully acknowledge the support of Professor Donna Lee Brien who has championed my writing – both as poet and academic.



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