

David Wevill

ALSO BY DAVID WEVILL

POETRY

Penguin Modern Poets 4 (1963)

(with David Holbrook & Christopher Middleton)

Birth of a Shark (Macmillan, 1964)

A Christ of the Ice-Floes (Macmillan, 1966)

Firebreak (Macmillan, 1971)

Where the Arrow Falls (Macmillan, 1973)

Other Names for the Heart:

New and Selected Poems 1964-1984 (Exile, 1985)

Figure of Eight:

New Poems and Selected Translations (Exile, 1987)

Child Eating Snow (Exile, 1994)

Solo With Grazing Deer (Exile, 2001)

Asterisks (Exile, 2007)

To Build My Shadow a Fire:

The Poetry and Translations of David Wevill

(Truman State University Press, 2010)

Prose

Casual Ties (Exile, 1983; Tavern Books, 2010)

Translations

Sándor Weöres & Ferenc Juhász

(Penguin Modern European Poets, 1970)

David Wevill

DEPARTURES

SELECTED POEMS

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This second edition corrects a few very minor typographical errors
and is presented in a larger format, and with larger type.
It is otherwise unchanged.

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FOREWORD

Looking through the poems in this selection, I found many I'd forgotten, or half-forgotten, and the voice sometimes of a stranger, or a younger brother. Over time, the contexts have shifted, the loci have changed, though the poems are neither regional nor cosmopolitan. I find that metaphor and image are still my natural tools of composition, and the poems remain rooted in personal concerns. I have moved many times, and resisted moving even more. As a Pisces I have always been of two minds, neither of which seemed sufficient.

I was born in Japan before the war, spent half my childhood there, grew up in Canada, lived ten years in England, and the past thirty-odd years in Texas. My moves, I realize, have been circumstantial rather than planned, and this is true of the poems as well, and my career as a teacher. I am blessed with a living family, but the ghosts remain strong; they live on in the bloodstream, and are present in most of the poems. There is a female shadow in many of the poems, which I'd hesitate to call muse or anima. Nature, too, is a strong presence, though more often an occasion for elegy than for celebration. The poems might touch upon, but do not address, public issues—a shortcoming I regret in an age when speaking out seems more and more important.

Over the years, I notice, the voice in the poems has grown quieter, the syntax has changed, the language has become less energetic and more reflective. But the field I think has remained much the same. It has often been said that one writes the same poem over and over again, but in different guises. I'm reminded of a thought of Roberto Calasso's, from his book *KA: Stories of the Mind and Gods of India*, where he writes: "In the beginning is always something that later gets hidden". It is a genetic intuition that might apply to poetry as well as other forms of life, a germ of first identity that is hidden but not lost in the passage of time.

“...an inner persistence toward the source”, to borrow from the poet Robert Duncan. This, I think, is the journey one is making when starting a poem. The risk of failure is always there, but the compulsion seems imperative.

The poems in this selection are taken from eight books dating from 1964 to 2001, the better part of forty years. I owe a large debt of thanks to Tony Frazer, a persistent and invaluable force in the dissemination of poetry in our time. It was he who conceived of this book, and played by far the greater part in selecting the poems. Any shortcoming is mine, as these are my words.

David Wevill
Austin, Texas
2003

MY FATHER SLEEPS

Who brought from the snow-wrecked
Hulk of winter his salvaged
Purpose; who came, blind but friendly
By these lines his mouth and his eyes
Have fixed; and without further talk
Taught me at last how to walk,
Until by his power I came
Out of innocence like the worm's flame
Into daylight. What practical need
His patience had, and anger bred
Of disillusionment, has gone with age.
I have this white-haired image,
Arrogant perhaps, and too much the hero
For our friendship's good: Lear, although
Afraid of words as of madness,
Of procrastination as of disease—
A lover of plain-spokenness—
Though not where it hurt, that he could understand.
If I trace the scars in my right hand
They tell me of purpose disobeyed,
Of old and factual truths my head
Cannot alter. And watching him thus
Sprawled like a crooked frame of clothes
In the sleep of sixty years, jaws firm,
Breathing through the obstacle of his nose
A stubborn air that is truth for him,
I confront my plainest self. And feel
In the slow hardening of my bones, a questioning
Depth that his pride could never reveal;
That in his sleep stirs its cruel beginning.

BODY OF A ROOK

God broke upon this upturned field; trees
Wedge tangled and thick as black crotch-hair—
But an eyelid in the field's face flutters,
Winks, blindingly. Whose
Sunrise through that blazing shrub glows
Ram's horns? twin forks of a tree,
Dividing, splitting. And nothing disturbs
These soft tussocks, the woman's one-eyed love.

In the scenery of crushed glass, here,
Among kneading hands of mud, the scoured head lies,
A world seized between sunlit clouds,
Spinning with sense, one eye gone black.
I stare out over my roof of towns,
And shiver off my sperm of wet dog-hair—

Night's claw, where cats couple among
The strict soldiering lupins. As afterthoughts,
My manners brush their teeth into the sink
A cloud keeps my bed, the hot patch kept,
Warmth of armpits and incendiary struggles—
I return where my love gloats and swarms to sleep.

Imagine, if our naked bones
Broke up on these same stones, that freed stubble
Mouth jagged as smashed plastic—
Our nakedness breathes and shifts through warm holes,
Sighs from pricked gaps (the manners torn);
We know our natures and our flaws
Closer, from such uncharitable hunting...

I prise the blue-black feathers back. The beak glows,
Soft at the edges, like an urchin's valve-

Mouth. I know my own violence too.
I feel her gnawing, clinging, flesh-stubbed
Teeth in me, my remembrance of her mouth.
It is a killing but who dies?

I killed it slowly with a lump of flint.
Shot down and left to die, what soft thing jerks
Its pulped head, face, body, nerves
Beak-deep in the pasture mud? I watched
Those last sufferings leave her body too,
Twitching black and rook-supple before
I kicked my damaged violence into the wood.

A LEGEND

The sinewy nerves of a cabbage now
Contain my head. Its pulse-count
Falls to a trickle, under the icing of hope.

I am more things than a vegetable,
Or a landscape battered blue by March;
I run over them. I perpetrate
Cruelties at their roots. And still they follow
Their needs and ways: burns
Heal in the generations, old wounds grow stony
And bother nothing but the mind.

Through it all, my telltale streaks in the wind
From her quarter. I am more
Than these things. Who would judge my secrets?

So I wake one morning, and tell my legs
Of the difficult journey made
Aghast in the dream. How small I must make myself!
And how great—

With catastrophe! The beating of rain
Eats into the sun's thaw. I have gathered wood
To build my shadow a fire—
Is she female? At lunch I chew my meat
Slowly, wondering if I am vegetarian.

I nibble drily at crusts and become
The whole, huskless grain before an aching fire.
A pride like mine must have
More lives in its hands than one,
And in such generous variety that
The stars seem egotistical. Who would complain

Of the number of swordblades and ploughblades
Through which the earthworm now
Pushes his waste? And still

The deserted, the dead, and the blind go underground,
To weep at these monstrous remains
That never grew in them.

I watch them now;
My altars of fire and sunlight become
Too crowded with worshippers. I go down
Hoping, Eurydice, to find you there.

WATER POEM

In this sea I find a lake,
Its white-ribbed waves and grey deep flesh
Drags skeletons up by the hair,
Every wavelet a luminous eyeball.
For boys who loved water, for men who tear at it
Frenziedly, like a fifth wife,
The sea's salt distills
To birth-freshness. But now, when the wind
Drives down hard, and the big clouds turn and heave
Ploughshares of wet grey over the water,
I see through the salt a clear eye
Closed for ever on a night of deep water—
A man's lungs burst with fresh water,
A man's throat choked with salt.

Some body that drowned

Would grow that perpetual lull in its cells,
Sweeping and washing with
The eardrum-poised crayfish: flesh
Discarded, the sea's afterbirth—
Freshwater cells and the salt pores tight
As wet drumskins, unwinding with
The sea's time that unravelled Ahab—
The sea's freshwater diet, men and the rain.

In our childhood there was a lake
That changed its cry three times a day, and the fourth
Time was night. Its deadheads rose up
Erect out of the washlight,
Fertilized dragonflies, stove boat-hulls in.
These were incidentals. We knew
That a lake is as deep as the land around it
Allows: as a man is deep,
But dies to that greater depth, sea and the rain.

FUGUE FOR WIND AND RAIN

We come into a new time; the heavy-mooned
Darkness hangs its orange crater flare
Above the sea.
My beaches are quiet: not a crab
Shuffles to disgorge its load of soft bulk from its outworn
Shell and die
In patterns on the sand. To-night
The wind sickens with heat : late strollers loaf
And stumble over kerbs; and all
Earth's energy's coiled with this soaking sheet wrung
From the insomniac's dreamed sleep of the windstorm.

We come into a new time,
The world and myself: parable of the dog
Who buried his sense of smell with the bone-scrap,
And could find neither.
Consuls, lictors, slaves—
Dipped in Caesar's blood, blood of the fishes;
Men and their knives of rule, manners, lives, hypocrisy
Of bride and groom, ride on
Bloodily to rebirths. In my effort to call them back
I make slaves of everything I see: that ditch
Where wineskin-fat cactuses gripped
The white solid fortress rock,
Where red-back beetles fought and tore at each other's
Strung nerves: in the violence of thunder off the hills'
One rainstorm in a month,—
In our bodies gored by the flame of July night.

Night along the sea promenade,
Black as my boots and finer than hair,
Drifts with the flickering torches of ships towards that far
White mustering of daybreak—

Time of the Greeks and before, the sea, these coasts
A haze of bound chapters now.
Over this nurturing ache of black
Nothing breaks; but is made to know its final breakage plain
And whole as a part
Of the fissure it came from. I look,
And can see no change: but am myself
The sign itself of change in everything: the clean, sharp
Fissure that bleeds the cactus, the deadly
Rote and scrabble of the red
Beetles spitting out their eggs...

Storm draw the water out of me.

This sea has many coasts,
And every inch and brown pool
Is a fingerprint. The gannets come
Plunging, wreck their sight; the sea-salt keeps
The crab-flesh it corrodes ; and the grape-
Avenging Dog-star locks
These fiery lives to the pillows we drown on.
Age has its lovers:
And neither history nor bad experience can ever redeem my one
Fault-finding
First error. I look for the change of light, now
Over this sea: which tomorrow promises only by small chance
To reveal, be re-revealed
Through its weak heart of water, my body, my blood.

THE BIRTH OF A SHARK

What had become of the young shark?
It was time for the ocean to move on.
Somehow, sheathed in the warm current
He'd lost his youthful bite, and fell
Shuddering among the feelers of kelp
And dragging weeds.
His belly touched sand,
The shark ran aground on his shadow.

Shark-shape, he lay there.
But in the world above
Six white legs dangled, thrashing for the fun of it,
Fifty feet above the newborn shadow.

The shark nosed up to spy them out;
He rose slowly, a long grey feather
Slendering up through the dense air of the sea.
His eyes of bolted glass were fixed
On a roundness of sun and whetted flesh,
Glittering like stars above his small brain—

The shark rose gradually. He was half-grown,
About four feet: strength of a man's thigh
Wrapped in emery, his mouth a watery
Ash of brambles. As he rose
His shadow paled and entered the sand,
Dissolved, in the twinkling shoals of driftsand
Which his thrusting tail spawned.

This was the shark's birth in our world.

His grey parents had left him
Mysteriously and rapidly—

How else is a shark born?
They had bequeathed him the odour of blood,
And a sense half of anguish at being
Perpetually the forerunner of blood:
A desire to sleep in the currents fought
Against the strong enchainings links of hunger,
In shoals, or alone,
Cruising the white haze off Africa,
Bucked Gibraltar, rode into the Atlantic—
Diet of squid, pulps, a few sea-perch.

But what fish-sense the shark had
Died with his shadow. This commonplace
Of kicking legs he had never seen:
He was attracted. High above him
The sunsoaked heads were unaware of the shark—
He was something rising under their minds
You could not have told them about: grey thought
Beneath the fortnight's seaside spell—
A jagged effort to get at something painful.

He knew the path up was direct:
But the young shark was curious.
He dawdled awhile, circling like a bee
Above stems, cutting this new smell
From the water in shapes of fresh razors.
He wasn't even aware he would strike
That triggered last thrust was beyond his edgy
Power to choose or predict. This
Was carefully to be savoured first, as later
He'd get it, with expertise, and hit fast.

He knew he was alone.
He knew he could only snap off
A foot or a hand at a time—
And without fuss—for sharks and dogs

Do not like to share.
The taste for killing was not even pleasure to him.
And this was new:
This was not sea-flesh, but a kind
Of smoky scent of suntan oil and salt,
Hot blood and wet cloth. When he struck at it
He only grazed his snout,
And skulked away like a pickpocket—

Swerved, paused, turned on his side,
And cocked a round eye up at the dense
Thrashings of frightened spray his climb touched.

And the thrashing commotion moved
Fast as fire away, on the surface of sun.
The shark lay puzzling
In the calm water ten feet down,
As the top of his eye exploded above
Reef and sand, heading for the shallows.
Here was his time of choice—
Twisting, he thought himself round and round
In a slow circling of doubt,
Powerless to be shark, a spawned insult.

But while he was thinking, the sea ahead of him
Suddenly reddened; and black
Shapes with snouts of blunted knives
Swarmed past him and struck
At the bladder of sunlight, snapping at it.
The shark was blinded—
His vision came to him,
Shred by piece, bone by bone
And fragments of bone. Instinctively
His jaws widened to take these crumbs
Of blood from the bigger, experienced jaws,
Whose aim lay in their twice-his-length

Trust in the body and shadow as one
Mouthful of mastery, speed, and blood—

He learned this, when they came for him;
The young shark found his shadow again.
He learned his place among the weeds.