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Also by Laurie Duggan:

Poetry

East: Poems 1970-74 (1976)

Under the Weather (1978)

Adventures in Paradise (1982, 1991)

The Great Divide, Poems 1973-83 (1985)

The Ash Range (1987; 2nd edition, 2005)

The Epigrams of Martial (1989)

Blue Notes (1990)

The Home Paddock (1991)

Memorials (1996)

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Compared to What

Selected Poems 1971-2003

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Front cover illustration shows the author's father (on the right) dressed for a part in a school Shakespeare production in the early 1920s. Reproduced here by courtesy of the author. Rear cover photograph of the author, ca. 1980, by John Tranter.

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IV

1986 2003

All Blues

From Boston comes the message:

 Go for it
then throw it away.

If it makes you glow

 eat it
then beat it.

Your life is a new address book.

Your visa is almost done.

But the pilot light burns in your kitchen
 all night long.

Mashed Potatoes

Sittin' here alone
no place to go
listenin' to myself
on the radio.

Compared To What

This house faintly resembles
sets in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*,
and if you walked across this room
you would not diminish
though the notes of St Matthew's
Passion would recede to a hum
around about your earplugs.

At Rapallo

Sun rises over San Ambrogio.
Small terraces and chapels glint in the hills behind Rapallo;
a town landlocked between rail tunnels.

From a dirt road,
 the Sal al Pianello descends;
its rock steps,
 piano keys, buried vertically.
Smell of woodsmoke and burnt rubber from a garden
 down in the Via Aurelia,
and the Torrente
 clear over smoothed pebbles
meets a mud canal at the Via Trento.

Palm Sunday in the Giardino Ezra Pound,
fishermen slice apples into sugar tubs.
Masts shadow the waterfront.
Sun flares on the Ligurian Sea
 then drops behind the breakwater.

At night the moon is almost full over San Ambrogio,
and old women in furs
walk fluffy dogs on the promenade.

Crossing Aragon

Around Morte La Nieva
rocks and soil break through the scrub,
terraces of loose stone with no apparent crop.

Near Caspe, the Ebro is sandy and shallow, choked with yellow slime;
the earth cracked beneath green flats.

Road signs point across the river to Huesca, Teruel, Lerida,
as apartments rise from the rubble of '36.
The place was always a frontier;
 'Caesar Augusta' corrupted to Zaragoza;
its over-ornate church
 stylish as formal cruelty:
the product of obeying distant orders.

Monday after Easter, monks, hooded, in black and white robes
beat drums and blow bugles in a death march out of Goya;
haul crucifixes up a hillside
 near the site of Bilbilis,
the birthplace of Martial, who lived in Rome,
and wrote often of simple life in the provinces.

and an old man in khaki,
weighed down by enormous red epaulettes,
steps out of a public lavatory.

Mont Ségur

Yellow lucerne fields outside Toulouse.

Mirepoix, a small walled town.

At Lavelanet, a disused merry-go-round in the main street,
the Christmas lights still overhead.

Directly south, towards Spain,
the blue form of the chateau,
Mont Ségur,
its keep, an arrowhead
filled with rubble from a broken well;
the Cathars seven hundred years gone.

White Saint Barthélémy shines
through a broached wall
above the village of Mont Ségur;
a sharp drop from the battlement,
the clear sound of a rivulet,
and further,
mountains on mountains: Pound's Cathay.

A cuckoo hoots in the valley.
Purple flowers bud at the base of the chateau.
Lizards, black slugs and small brown snakes
stir in the equinoctial sun
immune to decrees of Paris or Rome.

The road twines through summer pastures
to the village, an ochre amphitheatre
empty at midday.

Cowbells ring in the streets;
a faint odour of sweet shit
hangs in the restaurant.

The Front

1

The balloon-like mechanisms of reputation
hang in a barrage, gas escaping in print
and everything else consigned,
as though the whole tent of it
would blow away,
but the struts are no more real, the measures of what is politic
as insubstantial as clouds,
a civilization that could shut down
when the power is cut.

Here, the stone wall
runs for miles, defining a sea;
sand that would not define
providing instead a barrier.

The city was an accident,
a sport on the banks of what river?,
a collection of plate and cotton. And this place?

This
has the city's back turned upon it.
Lights hung upside down once,
along the road headed for the water
where the trams fell away at night
in a murk of razors and greenish limbs;
where a curved horn, blown by a black man
was an imagination of Harlem;
where the garish light of hotels serrated across the promenade
became the East River,
and the caps of sailors thrown at the heavens turned to stars.
Money owns it
as it once did, altering the image
to suit a popular conception: cast iron pastiche.
What hope for the can of 7-up
until the new interior decorator arrives?
The water is no more constant,

it reflects a prevailing imagery,
as poetry narrows and widens its trousers
out on the pier, by the rehabilitated kiosk.

2

From the Junction, tramlines ran straight towards the pier and the
Catani gardens. The last railway station bisected this stretch, where
Grey ran up to Dalgety and over the hill to Barkly; spire atop a
medieval village whose industry was flesh. Gulls circle the 'forty-five'
flats and cries go up into the night air from Luna Park, its maw, and
that of Private Joseph Leonski, U.S. army, who killed one because 'she
twittered like a bird', killed two others, and Violet McLeod

lay dying in full view
of Harold Wilson, working man,
Victoria Avenue;

mud on the Private's boots identifying with local soil as he lay in his
tent at Parkville.

3

Figures dance around a decayed building;
linked images

cross-hatched by ladders:
cracked green heads,
tongues
licking up the suburb.

The dance
is Matisse
but the field
is an insurance job
and a firm handshake

the faces
interchangeable in shades,
an inscription circles
loops into a knot
and runs off the field
onto a red brick wall
a ballroom's side

in which the dance
continues its measures,
allotting time
and 'coming attractions',
looking out over the sea,
waiting for the dancers to rise;
their luminous ankles
and jackets of weed,
the clutch of bottles, broken,
smoothed into mineral shapes.

Slurring
from a hotel, the image of an author
fond of clean sheets, manicured, impeccable,
joins the dance, the despised music,
who
had been accustomed to extended periods and over-lush cadences,
whose inkings crammed with detail
lost the form itself, a point buried in incidentals
– but he is dead and the mouth that breathed him out – inflammable,
courteous, back-biting – has a notice slapped overhead.

Paint flakes, the dancers
peel from walls, rain
gavottes in the streets.
Around the dance,
curved track of the roller-coaster,
its rope border.

Penguin Modern Painters: Ben Shahn; and Henry Moore's tube drawings, figures Vesuvius petrified; these, left behind in the bungalow by an itinerant drummer as back-payment. A room left pristine by the duo – Mr & Mrs – he ending in a police photograph, draped beside a '57 Holden near the gates of the pier. Seasonal workers floating in the city, filling in at the abattoirs, plaiting leather belts. The comic, who slid from the tiles. Others, nameless. These the inhabitants of One-ninety-five, drinkers at the Vic. and the Bleak; an archaeology of the '50's.

The sky moves over Williamstown
 as smoke angles across Hobson's Bay;
 lines let you breathe, or you fall into it;
 a white stick tapping up from the salt
 by those arches between shops
 where two-up and the meat markets
 arrange themselves over a time
 and vanish

– as the smell of coffee
 cuts off that trope. But there's space
 to enter it all into. And a small triangle
 of dark sky above the suggested location.

– hot steel

at the Works, the tyre specialist
 closed; sand heaped against the shutters
 some winter days.

– but I step ahead.

Best to concentrate on the guest house,
 now obliterated, its strong wood gate
 and the grandmother's balcony, children
 sinking into a sofa, sniffing jonquils. The sand
 mounts up; a sun-shelter on the beach
 is a storm shelter when the waves

broach stone and wash asphalt,
and the Motors concrete battlement. . . .
its tin roof. . . .

– the Works are a stretch
toward the estuary, on the bend behind
a reclaimed swamp; the office
confident nineteen-thirties, the Plant
like a vast hangar; roads empty of address
flanking the south wharf and the river,
the swinging basin, Victoria Dock.

Southwest
from the river mouth
a truckload of sailboards wait,
banners aflap, the surface, still, green,
where a yacht tilts on its keel
in a sandbar.

Its slanted mast
cuts one diagonal across the anchorage as,
plate glass of the Bleak hit by gusts,
The Burghers of Calais lean
out of whack with the poles
and the curve the Bay takes en route to St Kilda.

6

Tuesday afternoon, back-streets
are given to the cats. One floats
on a crushed hedge. In Alfred Square
a white, helmeted figure, raises a rifle, leans
forward, its back scarred by the claws
of *felis tigris*, facing, over the water
a rusty container, slipping through a grid of palms,
the You Yangs distant, clear today, unconcerned.

Two decades back one read from the Town Hall podium
long lines, the smiling workers trailing down
St Kilda Road to the beach.

A decade ago, another,
now running to fat, urged the poets
onto the streets; years later, his sign
above a coffee house in Middle Park:

Street Poetry Inside

a descent
into artefact, as yet another sits, opposite ceramics and horoscopes,
intoning:

Poems on subjects of your choice

Most of my heroes are dead
diffident, but defiant,
the way they'd catch
evening light on milk bottles
becoming Edward Hopper
too particular
for wine and cheese,
the brackets of 'discussion'.

I want to pull up
this bevelled plantation,
write, say,
an area of sand
not an old seascape
forged
that the present should resemble the past. . . .

— but enough of this real-estate Edwardian,
this 'classicism', dated as an 'all-steel' kitchen.

Instead

trace the limbless graffiti, its red strokes
on lavatory-green of The Met.

Try

to argue with that.

7

Deep and dissolving verticals of light
submerge alliteration in a shallow tub
 of salt, weed, and jetsam,
and the new mob shine
with bastard similes and kind hearts,

so that we are thrown back on these
 baleful decorations, unable
to show us how to cross the road, inedible,
finally a confused wrack
in which we sink or swim.

8

Fixed ideas arrive on the beach;
as the storm falters
they disport themselves, will make
colourful patterns for art photography,
even then, fade, become one with their surrounds,
uninteresting edges to be tripped over.

So the mind makes a sequence:
freeze-frame, rusty nail in a gate,
weathered lines radiating, lost
in the whorl of the grain, the iris
disappearing to depths
beyond the back of a head

like a diagram of Garden City
and its bus routes, grey and red-brick
familiarities which make a door-knocker,
a set number of steps, some guide
to location. When streets take a semi-circle
blocks are thrown from perspective.

Hewn wood, chunks of mallee root,
brown against grey palings, carpets
of muddied sawdust, patterns in hard
concrete there for the invention of games:
hop this one, miss the lines, step on
a crack; ridges of moss on broken pipes;

old dog in a wooden box, flesh
lapping against splintering sides,
will sleep through noon, wake
when a downpipe cuts off the sun
and potplants strain forward. Observed closely
this landscape induces vertigo;

the ball spins back from New Right graffiti
to the half-cupped palm, is pitched again
and takes a tangent from a white line across asphalt,
shooting leftward over grass and nets,
and the park's inhabitants, barrelled in prams
or propped on sticks; its language. . . .

9

'Dreadnoughts of the Tramway Board
Forge up the furious street'
so, Furnley Maurice.

The city
is no more than a map, and this isolated hook
south of the river, a bay within a bay;
sets of words superimposed,
highlight, erased;
black and white diagonals
grimy on the rail-bridge, where there's a sign, black and white again,
pattern on pattern; as wires dangle
currentless.

The new line swings

from Clarendon up to the old,
and derelict stations cling in the air
down to the Port.

When power fails, a bank of passengers, muted,
observe the city, its towers as promises;
flags risen beyond a bunker:

a glittering idea

fit for some Chamber of Commerce to sweat over,
that the suburb should twin the city, this line
a causeway across low ground,
green space marking the path of a creek;
sludged channel
abutting where the beach at slack tide emits
weed smell,
mussel smell.

Captain Cook stares out
at a stretch of water he never saw;
the imagination erects one locality, government
erects another.