

Keel and Drift

Notes on some poems

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These notes describe briefly where some of the poems in *Keel and Drift* came from. For me, poems begin in many different ways, and this is a small sample of those ways. There's also a little about editing poems.

Horizon p.10

I once read quite a lot about early navigation. That's when I read about Thales, and his simple method of navigating long distances.

About the same time an aunt was dying. She was a person much loved by all her family, and four of us took turns to sit with her for ten days. It was a long quiet dying, and when you sit with someone who is dying you have a lot of time to think.

This poem shaped up in my mind. I think the mind has an amazing ability to select and rearrange all kinds of random stuff, and make connections, and somehow my mind brought together Thales' navigation system and my aunt dying.

This is how poetry often works – you find a strong image for the thing you are actually writing about.

I found it very difficult to get the last three lines right. You don't want to tie a poem up neatly at the end – there's something about poetry that asks you not to do that. But in fact this poem did have a very clear end. How could I say it?

The spirit wrestling gallery p.14

There is an art gallery in Vancouver called the Spirit Wrestler Gallery. I came across this gallery a few years ago when I was working at Te Papa and writing about Māori art. I loved the name of it. A few years later I wrote a poem imagining a gallery like this. I didn't remember the name correctly, but I'm happy about that – I didn't want to suggest that I was writing about that particular gallery.

But what would happen in a spirit wrestling gallery? I imagined that things would constantly change, there would be a different sense of reality, some unexpectedness.

For some reason (and I have no idea why), a bird, or birds, became important in this poem. That was never a conscious choice. It just happened. A lot of things just happen in a poem.

Perhaps a poem is like our own internal spirit wrestling gallery, where things change, where we get a different sense of perspective, where things seem to come out of nowhere and surprise us.

Rock artist p.19

I saw a copy of a figure drawn onto the rock face in a cave, and what I noticed more than anything else was that the ends of the arms and legs of the figure were open. There were no hands or feet. Later, when I came to write a poem about it, that was the detail that I remembered. Maybe it was significant or maybe it wasn't, but it was striking.

I thought that the figure had been discovered in caves in Canterbury. But I've gone back looking for that image on the internet, and I can't find it. Did I imagine it? Or was it a drawing made by an artist like Theo Schoon, who was influenced by Māori cave art? I haven't yet found the answer. But in a way it doesn't matter – a poem takes a fact, or a memory, or maybe a mis-memory, and turns it into something else.

Local p.20

Here's how I wrote this poem.

I belong to a writing group, and I decided that each time we met I'd take a new poem. The first week, I was on the bus going home to Titahi Bay and I saw a girl carrying a tray of eggs on her fingertips. That's not usual! I wrote a poem about her.

The next time I needed a new poem, I was on the bus and I saw a man with a Zimmerframe, and with a boy beside him who had a cellphone.

Then I knew I wanted to write a series of poems, all centred on people around our small run-down shopping centre. I became interested in the idea that there were connections between these people, so I started to add those tiny links.

All the people in the poem are people I actually saw except the two women in hats – a niece told me about them and I imported them from Christchurch!

I still see some of these people regularly – the man waving his arms for example. Maybe I could take him a copy of the poem. But the problem is that I borrowed his white socks from someone else. He might say, 'I never wear white socks' and be offended. People can be very literal about poems

Scorching rollerblades p.35

There's a writing exercise which I love doing. You take a piece of paper and fold it vertically down the centre, then on the right side of the fold you write a list of ten nouns. You fold it and give it to someone else, who, without seeing your list of nouns, writes a list of ten adjectives. You end up with completely random pairs of nouns and adjectives. It shines a whole new light on language! An extension of the exercise is to write a poem or a prose piece using as many of these random pairs as you can.

Once when I did this exercise with a bunch of students the phrase 'scorching rollerblades' appeared. I loved it, and wrote a poem from it. The phrase 'scorching rollerblades' informed all of the poem.

The cellist and the guard p.64

I wrote this poem when I was doing a weekend writing workshop with Lesley Wheeler, an American poet. She pushed us to use a variety of forms – it's very good to be pushed in that way – and as I remember, she would often begin an exercise by asking us to make lists of words that rhymed. I still have some of those lists. I wrote a lot about the rain, which probably explains why I also wrote a poem about a train!

One person who read this poem thought that the ending was too much of a slap in the face. It needed something more delicate and cello-like – maybe the guard should propose to the girl?

This poem is loosely written in the terza rima form. Each stanza has three lines and there is an interlocking rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc, ded etc). I haven't been very rigorous about following the terza rima form – I've got some dodgy rhymes and rhythm.

Skills honed to such an edge p.34

I've often watched my son rolling his own cigarettes. Such skill! No wonder I wrote a poem about it.

The second stanza of this poem originally read:

He smokes on the porch,
an amphitheatre of houses
as his spectators,
each with their baggage
of smoky wallpaper, stacked –up bottles,
five TVs, or four cars on the lawn
– all the addictions of our neighbourhood.

The editor of these poems thought that the last 4 lines of the stanza made the point 'too loudly' so I cut them out. I often overwrite poetry, and need to cut it back. What do you think?

Picnic, 1854 p.68

The unexpected photographer, 1898 p.69

Both of these poems were written to/about photographs. Working at Te Papa as an exhibitions writer, I often looked at historical photographs. I would look at the photograph, and read the information about it. But then I would think about other possibilities. What about the story within the photograph? What was actually happening there? Or what was about to happen? The imagination can run around and ask all kinds of questions.

In 'The unexpected photographer', the photographer himself obviously wasn't in the original photo, but he had to be present, so I've put him into the poem too.