

# broadsheet

*new new zealand poetry*

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*Editor: Mark Pirie*

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*Please Note:* At this stage no  
submissions will be read. The poems  
included are solicited by the editor.  
All submissions will be returned. Thank you.

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*Michael Duffett*: The poem 'Sarah' was recorded on the jazz CD, *Within and without* (MusicLabs, 1999), with James Hackworth.

*A R D Fairburn*: 'Jazz' from *Count Potocki de Montalk, the all time bad boy of Aotearoa letters: news of some recent developments in Potocki studies: a report*, F W N Wright (Wellington: Cultural and Political Booklets, 1997).

*Jan FitzGerald*: 'Sea Captain' from *London Magazine* (UK).

*Ruth Gilbert*: 'Poems from Sappho' and 'J B M' from *Selected Poems 1941-1998* (Wellington: Original Books, 2008).

*Michael Harlow*: 'Canticle' from *The Tram Conductor's Blue Cap* (Auckland: AUP, 2009).

*Michael Steven*: 'Port Waikato' from *Centreville Springs* (Dunedin: Kilmog Press, 2009); and 'Lottie's Song' from *Bartering Lines* (Dunedin: Kilmog Press, 2009).

## Preface

Ruth Gilbert published her first book, *Lazarus and Other Poems*, in 1949, and throughout the '50s and '60s she became a well-established and anthologized name in New Zealand poetry. Since that time she has continued to publish, however, her more recent work may not be as well known. For instance, in the 1990s, she completed a series of translations from the classical poet Sappho's original Aeolic dialect. Her Sappho translations are very finely rendered and worthy of more interest. As with her striking post-war *Lazarus* poems that have been much anthologised, these Sappho translations add to her reputation.

It's noteworthy, then, that revived interest in Gilbert's work has come from overseas. This year, a Canadian academic has included Ruth Gilbert's work on the University of Toronto Library's web page (next to the greats of English language poetry, including Bob Dylan): <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poet/537.html> (This recognition is partly due to the continued efforts of Niel Wright, Ruth's current publisher and long-time friend, who received the request from Canada by email. Niel also sent me Ruth's unpublished Sappho translation from 2005 included here.)

So, in order to recognise Ruth's stature as a poet, I have devoted much of this issue of *broadsheet* to her work. In addition to a selection from her Sappho translations, I have included a chapter from Niel Wright's interpretive study of Ruth's poems published in 1985 to coincide with Ruth's *Collected Poems* (Black Robin, 1984). The chapter focuses on her 1966 collection, *The Luthier*.

Along with Gilbert's work, I'm delighted to present an unpublished poem from the late Alistair Te Ariki Campbell who died in August of this year. Alistair was one of our finest poets and as Alistair Paterson commented after his death, 'brought a distinction to New Zealand letters perhaps only equalled by Jim Baxter and Allen Curnow'. Earlier in the year, Alistair kindly sent me two unpublished poems by his wife Meg Campbell to include as well. Meg's poems remind us there is work still to be done on her poems too.

A R D Fairburn, another who brought early distinction to New Zealand verse, is also included here with a 'lost' sonnet 'Jazz', which I came across in a bibliographical pamphlet published by Niel Wright relating to Count Potocki's work. This fugitive piece is not in Fairburn's *Collected Poems*.

Elsewhere, *broadsheet* continues to cast its net wide and far. I welcome the following established and new faces: Michael Harlow, Brian Turner, Michael Steven, Jill Chan, Bill Dacker, Siobhan Harvey, Lynn Davidson, Jan FitzGerald and Leonard Lambert. Read on.

Mark Pirie

Wellington, November 2009

*Jeanne Bernhardt*

**DAMIANS POEM**

Goldenness outside window  
The fine and fragile points of leaving  
Lifting skin and shining

Today I see roofs and skyscrapers  
Tree light on the pavements in Boston  
The separation isn't painful. Inevitable  
His shed in the morning sun

Crying ova dead bee  
in flower as  
*if not perfect*

How is the weirdness? You ask. Weirder, I say  
Nothing taken back or altered

All things one day makes possible

*Alistair Te Ariki Campbell*

**ODE TO WELLINGTON CITY**

*Wellington, thou art the flower  
of cities all. Who can deny  
thy loveliness seen at night  
from the top of Mt Victoria,  
a sunken treasure ship,  
exquisite, every gem aglow?*

But who can deny the past?  
Seddon howling myths of Empire,  
Te Rangihaeata hurling profanities  
at Governor Grey who catches them  
in his teeth, and spits out broken  
promises. Kapiti sinking slowly  
into the sea, its back bristling  
with innuendoes hurled by demented  
whalers. A stray shot disembowels  
the moon, blood spreading across  
the water. O my people, who can  
forget Muldoon's massive head  
turning ponderously, exposing  
terrible teeth; Lange sinking  
into the mire of the House,  
stung to death by his own  
one-liners; Te Rauparaha dragging  
a sackful of shrunken heads  
into Bellamy's? Hey, Maui, leave  
the bloody fish alone. Every time  
you hack out a hill or a valley,  
a gash appears on my body.  
O my people, church spires prick  
God's tender underbelly. His  
indignant cries are echoed by the  
screams of little children.

See, they join hands and are hurled  
naked into the jaws of the New  
Hereafter... Words, words, words,  
let me not betray you. Let the flame  
return to the spark, the spark  
to the flint, and, only then  
would I consign you to derision,  
and the fate of the Great Unread.

*6 March 2007*

**CHRISTMAS DAY, 1998**

How could it be that I have no  
present for you, the one who meets  
my needs, and who supports me,  
and by whom I am protected?  
How could I forget? It's little  
things you want these days,  
endurance being most prized.  
There's nothing I could buy  
at North City Plaza without your  
chiding me for wasting money.  
And so I come to you at  
Christmas, empty-handed, as usual.  
But it bothers me, because you  
are first in my world,  
and should receive my first gift.  
Will it do, if I say,  
"I honour you, I trust you  
to live long with me until I die,  
and be sorry when I'm ghostly.  
Will it do? Will you know that I give  
nothing, because nothing will do?"

## THE BURDEN

It is my sorrow that I can't live  
without you, and it is my tragedy  
that thinking of life, and you  
not here, tortures my whole body  
as though you are my imagination,  
my reason for being. I am so truly  
wed to you that severance would  
bring about my death. I have  
tried, against my own interests,  
to set you free, but, strangely,  
you need the burden of me.

*April '82*

**I CALL YOU FATHER :  
INSISTENCE**

You keep wanting to turn on  
the light in the room, my light,  
though you are so insistent,  
I forget momentarily  
where I begin or where you end,  
each point coming to the other  
without want or light or room –  
Each a borderless name now  
for referring where you stand  
in this relationship –  
Father, the only moment  
this moment refers to.  
I've a thought to refuse  
but nothing to refuse me.

## THE BLIND ONE

I'm thinking of how  
you've come to me.

You were hiding  
near something I'd found.

An arrival or something older;  
a danger that kept losing its edge,

naming its velocity;  
a present, perhaps,

that left too soon,  
that a future could argue about.

You are always the blind one.  
I dance in front of you

and all you cannot see  
is the dark

wanting to be  
the both of us.

## **A S O N G F O R T H E R I V E R**

Somewhere between upstream and downstream  
come from State Highway 1 to State Highway 8,  
turn from the traffic onto a river road where ghost  
trains run from station to station that have closed.

In the valley of the living you've made sometimes  
blossom falls like snow, sometimes falling fruit  
drums on earth, sometimes a distant thunder  
and there's no shelter, this wind will rock you,  
sometimes beneath you a sudden shifting of solid  
ground decrees you will go where its flood takes you.

Somewhere between upstream and downstream  
come from State Highway 1 to State Highway 8  
turn from the traffic onto a river road where ghost  
trains run from station to station that have closed.

In this valley when you're swept off your feet  
a daughter of the sky will gather you in and put  
you down on a rock of ages, then singing free  
in the bed of their making, release your heart  
from the cost of shakedown hours that take  
the beloved, that take fortune, that take life itself.

Somewhere between upstream and downstream  
come from State Highway 1 to State Highway 8, turn  
from the traffic onto a river road to a place where  
this daughter of the sky with the grace of her beauty  
will welcome you and in the truth of her song  
release you from the cost of living we all pay.

Do not turn aside when the gentlemen come by,  
their business as usual to silence more of the river  
with dammed falls from the grace of her flow.  
Turning it into power for the people they say  
will gain time to find a way to pay for costs  
they did not reckon before and costs not being  
paid elsewhere while increasing comfort  
and consolation for hard earned days.

But the only thing they will renew this way will be  
gold lining their pockets. The day to make unusual  
business usual and pay accumulated and combined  
costs of profligate ways, is here and now, a time  
of reckoning that cannot be put off or there will be  
greater loss of graces like hers that cannot be  
renewed, that make life worth living for folk less  
powerful than them, a reckoning the many who  
do not know her will also pay, ensuring  
everywhere damnation of another sort.

So come from State Highway 1 to State Highway 8,  
turn from the traffic onto a river road into the valley  
where fruit, fallen from ghost trains, spread root  
and branch in the still spaces between river and road,  
to bloom again, fruit again. Let the grace of this daughter  
of the sky freely singing inspire you to make unusual  
business usual and prevent days of reckoning ahead.

**CALLING UP THE FOOL**

the face between two trees  
and two faces more and ten and a thousand

a pale leaf fluttering

loose-limbed with loose ways  
one slim foot on a mushroom

and where the trees grow closer

your head in someone's lap  
you who are always

stretched out after pleasure

feeding berries  
to a pretty mouth

whose silence is a small flame

one hand touching earth  
and one hot hand beyond redemption

someone is asking for you

## RINGING THE BELL BACKWARDS

His whistle in the house –  
sometimes a recognisable tune  
sometimes made up.  
Made up is worse

the reverse of happy  
the reverse of a light-heart  
the reverse of making up.  
An un-made sound

with a limp  
with an eye-patch  
taking corners like a racing car.

She backs out the back door  
feels for the lip of three concrete steps.  
Her heart makes its own  
stupid, tuneless song.

On the edge of town  
in a dank bell tower  
the fool rings the bell backwards,

in his pocket six stones  
with dark lines in them  
like cave drawings  
about journeys and landmarks  
and bringing down a beast.

**SARAH POEM**

*(for Denis Glover)*

Sarah is sick.  
Is Sarah bored?  
Is she imaginative, creative?  
Is imagination given or learned?  
I am not interested in Sarah.  
I am interested in her mind.  
The mind.  
Sarah is the envelope  
And the world abounds in envelopes,  
And imaginative children  
And vicious adults  
And birds and plants and trees  
And elephants, antelope,  
Mammals and flowers and fleas.  
Sarah takes pink goo  
From the doctor  
“For the bugs in my mouth,” Sarah says.  
Sarah is getting better.

## MAN AND GOD AND CHILD

*(for Allen Curnow)*

He who has not mouthed a prayer  
Over a sick and sleeping child  
Has not ached in his bones for the end of all,  
Has not known the pain, not that we're born with  
(That we all, among the men, have only to guess  
From rumblings in volcano mother's core)  
But that which we all know as we grow  
Towards the grave from which no man, Sheol-bound,  
Our holy ancestors have said  
As they have said that sparks fly upwards,  
Trouble-born and blown by winds that scatter ash  
Back to a soil that, womb-like, nurtures  
Seed and root and branch that withers  
With the passing of the hours that no mere man  
May stop or interrupt or cause to pause.

## ***From* THE HOMECOMING**

### **Section VI “The Southern Hemisphere”**

#### *Farewell To A Poet*

Once back in Wellington I rendezvous'd  
With Glover, took him snoring home one day  
Squeezed in the back. “Is that Denis Glover  
You’ve got in there?” (as if I’d kidnapped  
A national figure) the petrol-pump  
Attendant asked, amazed. I took him home,  
Arranged to take him into town next day.  
I did and as we parted, fierce yet fond  
And fondling yellow eyes gleamed at me,  
Knowing they were seeing me forever.  
We never met again; he must have known it.  
Dear Denis, human man, fell in his bath  
A few weeks later, and never rose again,  
Went back to his Maker at that moment  
As he came, as innocent and free  
As naked, striding, new-born babe.

**JAZZ**

I watch them from the shadow of the palms,  
    “The youth and beauty of the countryside...”  
With drunken gravity they lurch and slide.  
    Thick in the flabby folds of necks and arms  
Lie gleaming gems like dew on rotting dung,  
    And underneath, the thicker gleam of sweat.  
Ten grinning blacks thump out with faces wet  
    Wild barbarous times age-old when Christ was young.

They hounded Cain from out the ancient Garden,  
    Putting a mark upon him, that no pardon,  
Friendship, or help from men should comfort him.  
    There on this night among the shadows dim  
I hear a voice that laughs with pagan glee,  
    And over the swaying mass Cain waves to me.

*1924*

**SEA CAPTAIN**

Time sinks into the grass  
and dredges up the smell of the ocean.  
Here, the man from Hull,  
apprentice of the North Sea,  
spread his net across the lawn,  
over the trees,  
a trellis for fish to climb.

All day  
he gathered tangle up to his lap,  
fingers full of knots & nimble,  
a man goading tides  
through his own back yard,  
canary & English wife at porthole

all day,  
roughness tenderly threaded,  
coaxing out the woman's name  
of each trawler  
caught with a full catch in a storm...

Now in a pensioner flat,  
galleons drowning  
on the mantel,  
compass & barometer  
on the wall,  
an old woman listens  
to a crackling Ships' Radio

waiting for Jack to come home.

**POEMS FROM SAPPHO**

**Her Song**

This song is not my own  
But of the Muse begotten,  
A gift, that when I die  
I shall not be forgotten.

**“The desire of the sunlight”**

“Sappho,” you said, “we shall crown you  
Best of all players of the clear-voiced lyre.”  
“My children, such words bring  
Dishonour to the Muses for whom I sing.  
Only look on me:  
My skin is wrinkled, my black hair turned white,  
My feet, once nimble in the dance,  
Scarce hold my frame upright.  
But this I cannot help; not Zeus himself is free  
To change what needs must be.  
Death stalks and catches all life in the end,  
But this I swear –  
I shall not go, submissive, to his lair  
For I love brilliance, beauty  
And all things that belong  
To light and sunlight – music, dancing, song.  
Until I go my way  
One wish alone I have – to stay  
Loving and loved in this same house with you  
As heretofore;  
This is enough; I do not ask for more.”

## Midnight

Midnight is near – moon, stars  
All that gave light is gone,  
And I who slept with many loves  
Now sleep alone.

## Untitled (August, 2005)

Children, guard well the Muses' precious gifts  
And doubly well the loved, the clear-voiced lyre  
For age has found me, and grown old, I tire.  
And this I mourn, but being human  
Such is the fate of man and woman.  
Is it not told how Dawn the rosy-armed  
Loving Tithonus, handsome then and young,  
Carried him where the eternal songs are sung  
Exchanging darkness for a world of light  
And how, youth's morning turned too soon to night  
She saw him grey and old; lost to both love and life:  
A mortal husband wedded to an immortal wife.

## Sappho to One of Her Translators

By Zeus and Aphrodite!  
When you pass  
You tread my poems underfoot  
Like grass;  
Distort my meaning; trample  
Text and truth apart:  
Watch where you walk –  
That papyrus is my heart.

## **Is it time?**

“Yes, Gongyla,” I answered her,  
“For in my dream  
Hermes appeared to me.  
Master, I said, I care no more for fame  
Or that my name  
Be known and honoured by posterity,  
Desire, delight are gone;  
Lead me, I pray, for I would look upon  
The cool, the dew-filled lotus flowers  
Of Acheron.”

## **“They shall not forget us”**

And we do not forget:  
The apple-trees, the streams  
Of Lesbos haunt our dreams;  
We laugh with Atthis; see, between Spring showers,  
The gentle child you watched once, picking flowers.  
We speak of Phaon; mention in our talking  
Absent Anactoria’s lovely way of walking  
And sigh for her return;  
You grieve, and our hearts burn...  
Young poets praise you, love you,  
Old poets in the night  
Repeat your words with fresh  
Amazement, new delight;  
The roses of Pieria perfume our garments yet:  
Sappho of Lesbos, we do not forget.

**J B M**

*(1918-1995)*

If I knew the words I would speak them;  
Low and clear  
I would speak each one  
And you, my Lazarus, would hear –  
Would hear and wake, and finding  
This death undone  
Rise up and walk with me  
Into the sun –  
Free as the flying clouds are free  
Or birds:  
Love, forgive my silence;  
I do not know the words.

*1998*

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*Editor's Note:* Ruth Gilbert's poem on pg. 23, 'Untitled (August, 2005)', is unpublished.

**CANTICLE**

This young boy and his sister  
on their skipping way to school  
and everywhere tossing shouts  
of laughter into the air. In a shower

of light on the bright whitewash wall  
of the Church of Saint Dionysia, they throw  
their shadows. They sign themselves  
and their animal friends, letting words

talk to each other; they tell their dreams.  
They do no less than risk delight: despite  
every dark thing there is in the world,  
there will always be music. And they  
wonder: what is the name of this song?

**SAINT PAULINE OF ARANUI**

*for Sister Pauline O'Regan*

Her Aranui is a road  
which leads to a city, a nimbus  
whose light originates from  
her Hampshire Street statie.

There, once, she alit  
and, donning everyday robes,  
went forth amongst Muldoon's  
poorest, lamest and sickest.

Without wine or fish, she fed the multitude  
from Rowan Avenue to Porchester Street.  
She spread the word in Aranui High.  
She nursed and ministered the Mongrels.  
Her crusades were cuts to the DP,  
utility price hikes, wars in Iraq and fighting,  
like Teresa of Jesus, for the elevation  
of her flock.

Now she rises to the morning  
as if it's her calling,  
takes up the pen and writes.  
There on the page is a piety  
stronger than Gravity.  
There on the page is a waiting  
for the time to ascend.

## THE ROAD TAKEN

*after Robert Frost*

Not a highway  
travelled at 120kph  
in a cabriolet, wind in the hair.  
Too much thrill-seeking there.

Not a neat drive  
hosting a Parnell mansion  
neighbouring a boutique thoroughfare.  
Too much net twitching there.

Not a stroll  
through the Ruapekapekas  
taking in birdsong and fresh air.  
Too much *au naturel* there.

But words  
arrived at randomly  
like *love*,  
*passport*, *flight*,

or the fleetingness  
of a kiss:

here the road taken  
begins at the edge  
of your lover's lips.

Track each word through their body.  
Follow them wherever they lead.

**FLY - P A S T**

*The Avro Vulcan was a long-range subsonic bomber operated by the RAF from 1953 to 1984. In September 1956 it made a fly-the-flag mission to New Zealand.*

Fifty years ago  
the Vulcan flew over our town.  
A delta-wing beauty,  
it came in low along the coast,  
then put on a climb for show,  
the Bristol Siddeleys roaring  
effortlessly into the blue.  
Russia had nothing to match it,  
nor Grumman, Lockheed or Boeing.  
Even so, it was a swan-song of sorts,  
I see that now, a gesture of farewell.  
The roundel, a civil & civilian sign,  
was soon outshone by the star,  
red menace on the tail of the MiG,  
all wing-flash and swagger  
on Sabre, Crusader, Bell X-5.  
Our inventive race  
which had given the world the Spitfire,  
and the jet itself, was weary,  
weary of War. 'Pity about the bombs,'  
you could almost hear them say,  
the decent men of Aldershot Farnborough  
Biggin Hill, the day the Vulcan flew  
in a southern sky  
and a small boy's heart stood still.

**PORT WAIKATO**

Bone white –  
her bare arms bent  
at the elbow:

inside the soft flesh there,  
a shadow. She digs her heels  
into the dark sand:

her face tilted towards  
the sun: her wet hair falling  
wherever it chooses –

out over stones hurled  
at seagulls by children howling  
from the dunes: beyond

bright lines of endless breakers  
where mist sits unreal  
& refuses to lift.

**LOTTIE'S SONG**

1.  
The famous archer's lips quiver.  
He knocks down two large clouds.

2.  
Lottie sits on top of the pile.  
She waits to feel his teeth, the pain:  
the empty face of morning.

**CRICKET AT OTUREHUA**

Rain's snarky after a long run in from the east  
from whence it seldom comes this time of the year.

Women from town and country are playing a trial  
cricket match on a ground that is said to be

*green for December.* And when someone says  
two magpies are *pissing him off* and if they *don't*

*bugger off soon* he'll *go get the gun and deal*  
*to them* there are approving nods all round.

*Tock, clock* of ball on bat, *thud* on pad. Such  
is music to the ears if you love the game.

The bowling's tame so runs are coming at a decent clip  
despite a slow pitch and the heavy grey cloud curdling

over the mountains in the north which is why  
locals assert *it won't be long before the girls*

*have to come off for the light.* They've been lucky  
*so far*, a friend says, *except for the one given out LB*

*after a big nick onto the pad.* And when he grins  
the sun comes out for the first time today.

**RUTH GILBERT'S *THE LUTHIER***

1

I first got to know Ruth Gilbert in person about 1965 at the motion of J H E Schroder. By then most of the short poems that were published with *The Luthier* collection in 1966 had already been written. While Ruth may seem a very self-possessed and tradition centred poet, in fact she has always been responsive to the times and in contact with the literary climate about her. She has always participated in the literary organisations, been a president of PEN, judged prizes, and sat on committees. *The Luthier* volume of 1966 reflects its times. The shorter poems have the quality noticeable in our poetry say from 1957 to 1967: a tendency to short direct poems that are perhaps a little spare. My own poetry of that time shows a good deal of this. But interestingly the same qualities can be seen in Baxter's poetry from 1960 on as presented in his *Collected Poems*. Brasch also at least in the 1960s cultivated the same spare approach.

For whatever reason, it was in the air. My own practice had no influence in this regard on Ruth, I am sure. But we were on a similar wavelength; I was able to admire then, as I do now, her short poems in this vein. Ruth has been rather severe on them in her later *Collected Poems* (1984), omitting a substantial proportion of them, not altogether justifiably.

*The Luthier* volume sold reasonably well, I gather, but perhaps did not win a wholesale approval as Ruth might have wished. It was not going against the grain at the time; but it may still have tended to give Ruth a staid and passé complexion towards the late 1960s, when the literary climate and scene in this country made its most profound change of character for 20 years. Ruth responded to this change to a degree and in a way that surprised most readers and myself. I will discuss these changes hereafter. But these developments did tend to overshadow *The Luthier* collection; so that instead of consolidating Ruth's stature and popularity as a poet, perhaps that volume rather fell into the

shade, and gave the impression that Ruth would be less marketable in the 1970s. It was in other words a book that published work of the decade 1956-1966 when that decade was about to seem outdated.

*The Luthier* rather caught the tide on the turn, and so in my opinion failed to receive its due. For myself I was very pleased with it at the time. I have commented individually on every poem in it in my critical study on Ruth. As a collection, it was Ruth's best to that date. Its merits lay across its contents: on the one hand these shorter poems to which I allude, on the other hand 'The Luthier' sequence. I wish to emphasise that the book had merit in both areas. The shorter poems loomed larger than in Ruth's earlier two books, since sequences whether longer or shorter have continuously predominated in her work. These shorter poems, at least 25 of which were not organised in sequences but stand alone, really need to be valued for their own sake. I don't know how they got written over that decade. At the time Ruth had a growing family; perhaps lacked the time or energy for longer efforts. Also, the *New Zealand Listener* would have been a primary outlet; perhaps the form suited that medium. But of that 25 poems Ruth does not reprint nine in her *Collected Poems*. In a poet who habitually writes sequences, such self-standing pieces have a value simply by being rarities. The short poems like these are a very special genre, to be relished for their own inherent features. I have said enough.

When I got to know Ruth in 1965 'The Luthier' sequence had not been written, or begun. I am particularly proud to think that I may have given just a little fillip to its composition. At the time I was quite alone in this country in wishing to write poems in sequences on the epic scale. But it was more wish than actuality, because the first six books of *The Alexandrians* (my epic poem now complete at Book 120) were not obviously sequences; but my theoretical comments advocated the longer, sequential poetical work in preference to short self-standing pieces. I remember Ruth saying at the time, or some time thereafter, that Denis Glover pooh-poohed the concept of the longer poem: it was not an age

for epic, he said. Yet, he went on to make increasing use of sequences himself, particularly in his last volume *Towards Banks Peninsula*. Of course Ruth had previously written sequences of poems. So any stimulus from me merely led her back to her own practice. I had no doubt from the first that 'The Luthier' sequence was and would remain Ruth's masterpiece. It has been very cordially received by readers and reviewers. It amazed Schroder; trying to read it in public he almost broke down with a display of emotion not anticipated from a not very emotional man. Of course he had very deep and very strong emotions, well buried, but this poem tapped them. I am not going to go through a list of admirers of 'The Luthier' sequence, though it would be lengthy and impressive.

'The Luthier' is the sequence which any knowledgeable reader would single out as Ruth's outstanding example. But after saying all this it remains that the sequence has rarely if ever been given its due as a remarkable, brilliant, totally successful work, quite unique, quite extraordinary in every regard. It is my ideal of what poetry should be. I consider that not enough fuss has been made of it to date. This is a pity because lacking this broad whole-hearted enthusiasm among readers for the genre, Ruth has only written one other in the same mode, 'The Lovely Acres'. Finding it insuperable to get 'The Lovely Acres' into print in its entirety, she afterwards turned to more succinct, punchy sequences in 'Too Many Storeys High'. She got a good reception with these punchier sequences; but it was at the expense of discontinuing a mode that is higher, and grander and more difficult in the literary scale. Had this country had an audience that supported the poet on this higher level of performance, Ruth might have produced a greater volume in the mode. It is a mode which calls for detail, discursive treatment, elaborate presentation of the topic, not just overall, but in the individual sections. But after two such performances, Ruth turned to the opposite kind of sequence: one aiming for brevity, epigrammatic presentation, allusive even cryptic snapshots. There is no doubt that this later approach was well received, made a good impression, appealed to the taste of the

audience, brought Ruth her greatest recognition in the 20 years (1966-1986), but a great artist should still be supported in painting in oil on large canvasses. Still we do have 'The Luthier' sequence, perfect in its way, and 'The Lovely Acres', even more impressive in parts.

## 2

'The Luthier' sequence is about a child observing their father making a violin. It is of course autobiographical: Ruth is the child, her father the violin maker. The details of the setting match those in other poems about Ruth's childhood, particularly 'The Lovely Acres'. 'The Luthier' is quite thorough on the technicalities of violin making: this detail is not just drawn from memory, but Ruth at the time of composition consulted an old violin maker around Wellington – possibly the one who used to have a shop on Bowen Street.

'The Luthier' at no time claims to be more than an account of violin making. But the poem has two additional dimensions, one explicit, the other implicit. The explicit one is the relationship of music, indeed art generally to the natural world. The object in the natural world can be made into the artefact which embodies or expresses beauty: '...mere wood shall sing.'

But it requires craftsmanship to execute the job specification: 'Given: A Log Of Wood; Make: A Fiddle' with success. The children as observers learn this lesson. For the father craft activity is a compulsion given the opportunity: 'what sculptor's fingers rest / Who sees his marble mute and beckoning?' It is exactness that creates beauty: 'in exactness lies / That lovely tone by which a wood will sing / And, lacking which, all song, all music dies.' This is a generality that holds true for all art.

The craftsman has a sylvan workshop. It is close to trees. The workshop is frequented by bees, birds, children, and overhung with ferns. The workshop is full of tools. What the craftsman with his tools seeks to reveal and construct exists in the wood or is exemplified in the natural world: 'the secret grain'; the ponga

frond is 'The perfect Scroll'; a tui shows 'how a note should sound.'

The objects and qualities of the natural world in turn are characterised by other objects. A sound has 'Something of honey in it – yes, and sun.' They are also compared to powerful biblical symbols. So the maple back of the violin is the 'fabled water an angel stirred.' This is by no means an obvious use of the Bible symbol. The angel stirring the water is here made in the likeness of the maple back of the violin giving rise to music. By implication the production of music; any art from the natural world is an intervention of the divine.

This I most devoutly believe. Even if nothing more is under consideration than the natural grain of the maple, the same point is implied. What Ruth is doing in both these cases is continually reinforcing the natural object or artefact by association with other natural objects or biblical images. The artwork, the art performance in the same way are enclosed in a natural environment ('one moonlit night' amid 'the silence of the trees') that surrounds them with further associations of delight and beauty.

The children similarly are equated to fantails observing the manufacture: 'Three fantails ... / Inquisitive as children.'

Of course 'The silver scraper flashing in your hand' is 'Caught by the sun.' 'Summer, cicadas, and you, working there' make 'in memory a timeless place.' Naturally 'the glue' is 'Like amber honey.' The section called 'Into The Trees' has the most intensive evocation of trees, particularly the trees of Ruth's neighbourhood as a child: 'Fern-shadows ... tall magnolia flowers.' The manufacture occurs in the natural world: 'the shadows gather ... The shavings glimmer.' The result of work adds interest to the evening.

Work is seen here as an attractive activity in the natural world. The middle sections of 'The Luthier' are devoted to the craft activities: bending the ribs, gluing, seasoning, varnishing. To the child observing, the lesson that craft and meticulous work are necessary to success is well taken.

The implicit dimension is located in the confusion of persons. In 'The Workshop' the father's remarks are given in quotation marks. But the last seven lines are unquoted. They may be taken most naturally as the father's words. But are they not rather the poet's? In 'Moulding The Sides', the phrase 'in the craft I chose' is not quoted as if spoken by the father; they might be the poet's self-reference.

This confusion of persons implies that the craft of the poet, Ruth, is comparable to that of her father as violin maker; that Ruth in 'The Luthier' is describing not just her father's art-working, but her own.

In the last section called 'He Plays', the violin maker speaks of himself: 'I knew, I knew,' 'I come at last'; but addresses his violin in 'When years have mellowed you' and 'May other hands hold you as lovingly...'

But I find it inescapable that we are required to equate the violin and the daughter, Ruth the poet. The poet is mellowed by the years, evokes the memories of the past, is held by other hands as lovingly as father held daughter, and 'Sweet-tongued, / Bird-throated' sings. But Ruth only says this by an inescapable implication. In 'The Glue' the question is asked: 'Do you remember / As now I do...' Later in the poem the violin maker is addressed as You: 'You laugh and say' etc.

One supposes that 'The Luthier' is an elegy in part in memory of the poet's father a good few years following his death. I don't know whether this is so in fact. But Ruth at this point is addressing someone as if still alive. There are many references to the violin maker as You, but these are in a context of historical recollection. 'Do you remember,' however, is in a different time frame. For one thing it implies that the poet is so borne back by memory as to be back in the past narrated. Or for another it implies that the violin maker and the poet are together once again in a timeless world. This timeless world has arisen out of the preoccupation with the work. Work occurs in the sempiternal world. It becomes the totally shared experience of craftspeople.

The episode of the rib-bending (in 'Moulding The Sides') also carries the association of Jehovah making woman out of the rib of Adam. The father in making the violin by bending ribs is by association making a woman. So far as Ruth identifies her father's violin making with her own development by example and tuition as a poet she is the woman made in this way by her father's work. Ruth doesn't say this in as many words but the implication cannot be escaped.

The violin maker has told his children that 'Wood ... is a living thing' which absorbs its surroundings. This may well be a scientific truth. For Ruth it is a poetic truth that wood has special qualities. The varnishes applied to wood for Ruth as for many others have names 'steeped in beauty.' The varnish improves the wood artefact in various ways, heightens the tone, preserves the wood, beautifies. In doing so, the varnish produces the results, as it is supposed to contain the qualities, of magic/science.

At the end of the sequence, the violin maker, referring to his death, says, '...when, to these same trees, / Familiar, strong, / I come at last / (O Night, be deep, be long)' etc. Here again the wood has profound significance. It is the concept of death into life in the natural world that we have seen elsewhere.

When work on the violin is finished, the father walks in the silence of the trees. He does so 'fiddle under arm' – he is not playing, 'light bow swinging' – he is not bowing. This jaunty movement expresses what? The poet tells her father he is here going to or in 'The shining instant in your Book of Hours.' A Book of Hours is a missal, prayer book, book of devotions. 'The shining instant' is what? For Ruth 'shining' often connotes terror. Ruth's language here is hardly transparent; it asks us to make the transition into myth. Indeed the violin maker is like Moses at Sinai, entering the presence the divine. So in the next section, in this instant, the violin addresses the 'Master of Music', that the violin maker may be rewarded with the music he dreamed of. The Master of Music is not described as God/Jehovah. Is he Pan? In the Book of Hours of the violin maker the devotions are

addressed by the artefact not to a specifically religious deity, but to a Master of Music, whoever that may be.

In the last section of 'The Luthier', the violin maker considers lifting his 'bow / In the final Evensong' at death, again a Book of Hours image.

'The Luthier' is a sequence that seems on the surface very simple. Those complications which enter into it are themselves simple. But the range of implications that arise seems to me elaborate, intense and rich. I want to add one further turn, though I do not suggest it should be emphasised. 'The Luthier' suggests that Ruth recognises a debt to her father for making her an artist. All the narrative specifies her father. But of course Schroder has some claim for fostering Ruth's development as a poet. Does then 'The Luthier' cryptically commemorate Schroder's role in Ruth's life? I'm sure it does. The emotion the poem occasioned in Schroder bears this out. Schroder himself saw himself as creating the artefact that gave rise to beauty – not in fact, but in intention. Schroder was the poet's father manqué all his life, for Robin Hyde as well as for Ruth. What Ruth's own father, the violin maker, achieved in fact, Schroder desired to achieve. He certainly had some contributing role in Ruth's case.

In passing, my own anticipatory elegy on Schroder, written in 1967 characteristically takes the form of an adaptation of the late Latin pastoral-funeral poem on Meliboeus by Nemesianus.

F W N Wright, Wellington

*Editor's Note:* F W N Wright's essay is an abridged version of Chapter 9 from his interpretive critical study, *Ruth Gilbert: An Account of Her Poetry* (Te Aro: Cultural and Political Booklets, 1985). Ruth Gilbert comments on this essay: 'pg. 32. *The Luthier* sold its edition of 750 copies. It received the Jessie Mackay Award with James K Baxter's volume, *Pig Island Letters*. pg. 37. Not just my father's craft and mine – all creative work – music, painting, sculpture etc.'

## Notes on Contributors

**JEANNE BERNHARDT**'s recent books include *Wood, Fast Down Turk* and *26 Poems* from Kilmog Press. She is currently living in Vermont, USA.

**ALISTAIR TE ARIKI CAMPBELL** (1925-2009) was a prolific, widely admired and distinguished New Zealand and Pacific poet.

**MEG CAMPBELL** (1937-2007) was a well-known New Zealand poet. She published six collections of poetry as well as a joint collection of love poems with her husband Alistair Te Ariki Campbell.

**JILL CHAN** is the author of three collections of poetry, including *These Hands Are Not Ours* (2009), awarded the 2009 Earl of Seacliff Poetry Prize.

**BILL DACKER** is an Otago poet and historian. His first collection of poetry, *To...*, was published by Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop in 2004.

**LYNN DAVIDSON** is the author of three collections of poetry, *How to live by the sea*, *Tender* and *Mary Shelley's Window*, and a novel, *Ghost Net*. Lynn lives on the Kapiti Coast.

**MICHAEL DUFFETT**, a poet now living and writing in California, visited New Zealand in 1979 at the invitation of Frank McKay and was treated with royal hospitality by most of the distinguished poets in that land. He has never forgotten it.

**A R D FAIRBURN** (1904-1957) was a popular and widely-admired New Zealand poet. This is the first publication of his 'Jazz' sonnet.

**JAN FITZGERALD** has been in local literary journals since the '70s and in the *London Magazine* and *Acumen* (UK), and others.

**RUTH GILBERT** is a distinguished New Zealand poet. She received an ONZM in 2002 for services to poetry.

**MICHAEL HARLOW** is the 2009 Robert Burns Fellow at the University of Otago. His new book, *The Tram Conductor's Blue Cap*, is available from AUP.

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**F W N WRIGHT** is the author of the epic poem *The Alexandrians* in 120 books (published from 1961 to 2007). He lives in Wellington and operates Original Books and its other imprint Cultural and Political Booklets.