### The Old

Have you noticed how sanguine the old are about the deaths of friends?
They are soldiers in the line of fire.
'There goes another,' they think, 'and it wasn't me.
Well done, corporal!' To one another they say
'Poor old Maurice, it was time, he was losing it.'
That's what they fear, not death, but that life might become one very long senior moment.

When they do weep it's for themselves – not grief or remorse but regret for the thing not dared, the challenge not taken up, the word of love not spoken.

The old are not noble or deserving of special regard – just realists, mercenaries, soldiers of fortune, survivors.

# The Death of Odysseus

Abandoned by Fame and Popularity in his last days he took to singing in bed

things learned at school, ballads and songs of his youth. The voice was ragged – age and the smoke of caves

had done the damage. Still his head could hold a tune, and the words, and knew the middle of the note.

Penelope dead, their children long since scattered, he was shunned by a world that would sooner call him

cunning and vicious than clever and victorious. So from a timber palace high on a hill

villagers heard the hero singing his heart out, faltering on high notes, whistling like wind in the rigging –

until he remembered, at last, the song of the Sirens, and stopped to listen, and fell silent for ever.

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### The New Husband

A long-time friend who married the beautiful blonde widow of a soldier killed in the War

tells in a poem how, naked after sex, drifting asleep they heard a knock at the door.

The poem does not explain why he refused to answer, just told her it was the wind

and curled around her in fear pretending to go to sleep.

Did he think they were haunted –

that it might be the soldier hell-bent on taking her back or killing the new husband?

'Who knocked?' my friend's poem asks and answers, 'I do not know, and do not want to know.'

They're all dead now – the poet, the blonde wife who was also a poet, and her soldier.

That ghost had need of them both to apprehend and fear him. Only the poem remains.

#### Curno

The name on the box on Lone Kauri Road
has a letter missing
standing perhaps for 'without' –
without the one who has gone on a very long journey.

Under nikau and karaka in the half light or among manuka and kauri

Piwaiwaka flits and taunts. The poet was her friend but when the time came she brought her unwelcome message.

The stream had its say but only in opal and silver.

He was master and mentor, the hard mind, the cool old man who wouldn't say his prayers or pay his dues; the long memory, the cleverest wit, the abominable temper, the diplomat.

Today the beach has turned itself around, a flat sand plain all the way out to Paratahi rock. The lagoon is gone.

Sky-high improbable clouds float like fleeces, and from the rocks the ghost of a poet fishes for metaphor and cod.

A big surf slams its door, and opens it, and slams it again.

## Syllabics for Roger Morton

It was my friend Roger told me stairways in French houses were built with one uneven step to trip an intruder in the night;

and that swallows (or was it swifts?)
after leaving the nest must fly
for three years, not stopping to rest.
This seemed to me unlikely.

Stairways, and starlings too – are these no more than an alliterative conjunction representing my wish for a steadier world?

Today the mistral is blowing and the swallows seem to struggle climbing the stairway to heaven where they take their first breakfast.

Life's not easy for high-fliers and stair-climbers. The trick, it seems, is steer into the wind at speed and, high there, hit cruising mode.

Something will always come along, and the view – the fields, the *garrigue*, the river under Roman stones – is (like virtue) its own reward.

## The Angel

In Novi Sad where squares
and parks are peopled
by poets in bronze
my English tea was served
by Fellini's angel,
she who farewelled Marcello
across the sands,
older now but with the same
delicate profile
sweet smile and faint frown.

As the bill was paid I left on the table another fifty dinars.

'It's because,' my friend began . . .

'I know,' she said having heard our conversation and understood.

When I looked back my anxious angel was smiling, giving that Italian farewell that seems almost to beckon – fingers opening and closing like a butterfly's wing on an upturned hand.

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