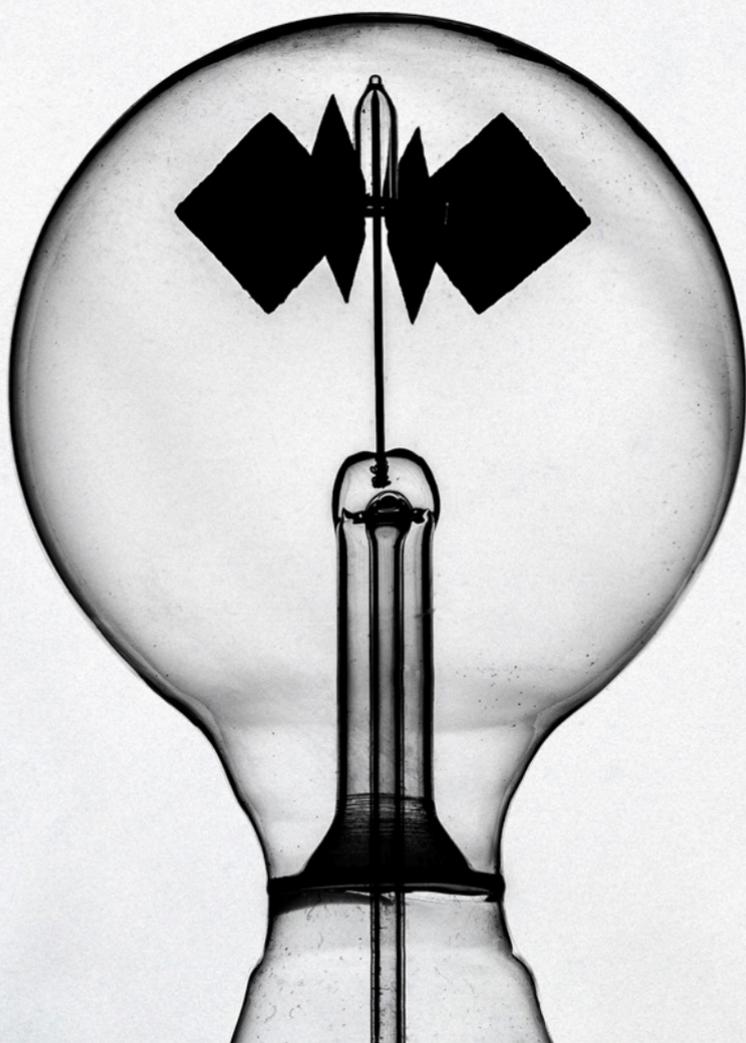


# JOHN DENNISON

OTHERWISE



## *We are so otherwise, and elsewhere lies our hope*

John Dennison's first collection, *Otherwise*, is a finely crafted marvel. The poems here are concerned, above all, with love, and with the strange, unlooked-for manner of its appearances among us. Marked by an emotional acuity and formal deftness, the lyricism of *Otherwise* draws us into confrontations with human equivocacy and finitude. A trio of elegies for poet Seamus Heaney is moving; a heart-shaking sequence recounts an encounter in Calcutta. Spanning the distance between Scotland and home, these poems embrace the New Zealand literary tradition, with poems that recall Baxter's bees, use Duggan's emendations, invoke Bethell, and argue with Curnow. And here too, because 'some things bear repeating', are singular moments of turning, of grace and our refusals. This is a moving, meditative and vulnerable manifesto from an assured new voice.

*Otherwise* will also be published in the United Kingdom by Carcanet Press.

**The great thing in these poems is their unsentimental assertion (unspoken) that grace, warmth, love, the heart, faith – rapture even – can be present in the modern, compromised, run-down world. – GREGORY O'BRIEN**

John Dennison was born in Sydney in 1978, and grew up in Tawa. He has lived and studied in Wellington, Dunedin and St Andrews, Scotland, and now lives with his family in Wellington, where he is a university chaplain. His poems have appeared in magazines in the UK, New Zealand and Australia, and were anthologised in Carcanet's *New Poetries V* (2011); several poems have also been published in Italian translation. John Dennison is also the author of *Seamus Heaney and the Adequacy of Poetry* (Oxford, forthcoming 2015).



## *Crookes's Radiometer*

Hand-blown; how clear things become  
pushed near to breaking point, breath  
in the hot glob of dust: the bright form  
of the skull. *I opened my mouth*  
*and drew in my breath:* a partial vacuum,  
a loosening readiness, raised about a spike,  
obsessive pivot round which the vanes hum,  
things opting for the flipside, flick!  
off the leading edge, the sun's bobbin  
threading on – it winds me up no end,  
amen, the utter answerability  
of the least scintilla leaves me chastened,  
my small sphere humming the silicate hymn:  
after the dark, the morning and its mercy.

*Lone Kauri (reprise)*

So take for starters the surge-black fissure,  
the waves which register the lunatic sense  
it is all well beyond us. Our flooded nature

rages at the dying light, measures  
its measures down some lone goat-track,  
works up some incorrigible reprise

on grace, etc., a tuning fork  
striking itself out of true on the table  
of the elements. But blow, burn, break

and be done with it: baptism will  
look like this, the flailing, the flensing of waves  
and the breath knocked into you, the haul

that finds you first-footing land, brings  
the morning. Forgive my making light of  
the glass half-empty and you weighing up the dregs;

but I will get up like a love-cast father  
awakening to children's voices, the night-  
time true underfoot, who hears their laughter

and finds, at the unclosed door, the seam of light.

## *Nocturne*

Drawn in the shallow breath of the night,  
I wait for you to come back home,  
willing the shadows to find your form;

but how can they carry your bright step,  
the house of light that is your face?  
My lighthouse, my love, the rocks are night all around.

Standing on the porch, I drive these backroads –  
some hurt unwinding, some dry-mouthed valley,  
and the sounds – drab, surd syllables:

the cough of a sheep;  
the hills, their sodden bales as they slump;  
small branches fret the roofing iron.

Turn, heart, turn – go back home;  
leave this road unwound.

## *Clarities*

Scotland was a westerly and a had-it Aga,  
miles away from the nearest and with anger  
milling. It was a full table, our families  
all arms, the kids scrapping and feral

after the main was over and the pudding still  
to come; we fell to talking opacities,  
all quip and allusion lightly round the tipping  
point, heart's overflow, his mouth pumped

by the flywheel of a sick, decentred love:  
boy-grown-man still wants his father's yes,  
that usual story which underlies too much  
then cuts across a marriage like a spring-

tooth harrow used drunk. Now, Kincapple!  
think of that small farmhouse to your east,  
the pre-teen's rife, her mother's siloed grist;  
call the unseen guest to the potluck table.

## *Sleepers*

Friends decide to separate. After,  
we enter the clearing, retrace our steps. A fine  
rain settles, and everything is un-  
accountably beautiful, unaccountable,  
being not promised. Promise – it hung  
in the air over the improvised picnic table,  
between the opened faces; we nearly sang.  
Depressions in the grass, the shape of laughter.  
All that time the lines lay, unconverging,  
fiercely gauged off each other, overgrown in the dirt –  
now ripped out like spade-struck fencing wire,  
turf turned and agape the length of the clearing.  
We look down. *Gutted for you, mate.*  
And there, unrotted, their pitch glinting, the sleepers.

## *Promissory*

Love, I never looked to find us here:  
the night below, spreading like a slick,  
we hurtle the hearts' acres, wanting the clear  
line lifting from the cutting. The track,  
even so, shines as if bio-  
luminescent, promissory and mutual,  
so that we come through things, so  
that the sleepers sheet into a blurred still,  
and the siding waste and hedging, the miry verge,  
are made to fall behind. What was purposed  
when by grace we vowed to enter marriage  
was quite beyond us: we shone undiverted  
into the way of things, not alone  
ever again, profoundly moved towards home.

## *Tawa*

Thinly yellow, and fibrous in the heat,  
fennel is legion, rank beside the lines,  
which shimmer, robing the air in a ferrous stink.  
Flowchart rampant! The stalk, and then the branchings,  
mnemonic of throughput and outcome, of progress  
and its needling filiform leaf, the scent so hard  
to shake. Do not consider the flowers, the seed  
falling across the sleepers. There, sudden  
between the tracks, a penetrative, metro-  
nomic knocking from a torso-like box,  
locked and knocking in the valley of your childhood.  
O dark kernel, o burr of ambition,  
remember the boy in his switch-flicking trance  
in love not with the light, but with the switching.

## *Pitched*

The night's lateness comes down early  
and you're relegated to the loo. Unlooked for,  
and all natural enough. But how surely

we lose our grip: the kids' door  
across the hall blanks like a fart,  
surgent, unsignifying to the floor:

fear fear, shake shake! The intimate dark  
pitches and sheets as the motions go through  
(let the reader understand: our opaque art).

So much – there there – is what passes for you:  
the frame the (hinge) dear (hinge) values the shape  
of things to come? We know not what we do:

we are so otherwise, and elsewhere lies our hope.

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