IAN WEDDE
With selections from 1971’s Homage to Matisse all the way through to 2013’s The Lifeguard, Ian Wedde’s Selected Poems will introduce readers new and old to one of New Zealand’s most distinguished contemporary poets.

Ian Wedde has been a major presence in New Zealand poetry since his work began appearing in journals in the late 1960s. His first book of poetry appeared in 1971; his sixth book won the New Zealand Book Award for Poetry in 1978; his sixteenth and most recent was a finalist in 2014. By the mid-1980s, as well as shaping his own verse, he had become an influential critic and shaper of larger trends in poetry as one of the co-editors of The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse (1985) and The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry – Ngā Kupu Tītohu o Aotearoa (1989).

While Wedde has constantly experimented with and pushed boundaries of form and influence in his poetry, his work returns often to key themes and ideas, preoccupations and effects that this book throws into brilliant relief: a politics of language, social and ecological relationships, how memory works, the perceptual world. The son Carlos of Earthly: Sonnets for Carlos (1975) is now a father himself; Ian Wedde’s poems are now more likely to feature grandchildren. But the ranging, tenacious, conceptual-romantic poet, with his linguistically rich but intellectually rigorous voice, is the same, and tracing that voice through nearly five decades will be one of the many pleasures readers take from this book.

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Ian Wedde is the author of sixteen collections of poetry, seven novels, two collections of essays, a collection of short stories, a monograph on the artist Bill Culbert, several art catalogues, a memoir, and has been co-editor of two poetry anthologies. In 2010 Wedde was awarded an ONZM in the Queen’s Birthday Honours, and in 2011 was made New Zealand Poet Laureate. He was awarded the Creative New Zealand Writer’s Residency in Berlin in 2013–14, and in 2014 received the Prime Minister’s Award for Literary Achievement (poetry).
I PARADISO TERRESTRE

5 to start with & in memoriam Ezra Pound

1 Madonna

The world stretches out

    time yawns

hours, on the pillow burns in its halo
of boredom. So what are we waiting for?
A birth, naturally.

    O forgive me, this

is no light matter . . . you no she stretches
till your joints crack. You, I do not know you.
She watches little fists & knees in your
belly, I watch her watching your famous
blue tits. She yawns with your mouth,

    with your voice

she tells me ‘it’s not long now’, her halo,
lost hours, burns east of me in bed, I think
this lovely strange madonna has no choice

I think that in the end she will whelp you,

biche, it will be so good to have you back.

* * *

2 It’s time

A beautiful evening, early summer.
I’m walking from the hospital. His head
was a bright nebula

    a firmament

swimming in the vulva’s lens . . . the colour
of stars / ‘Terraces the colour of stars . . .’
I gazed through my tears.

The gifts of the dead
crown the heads of the newborn
She said
‘It’s time’ & now I have a son
time for

naming the given
the camellia
which is casting this hoar of petals (stars?)
on the grass . . . all winter the wind kept from
the south, driving eyes & heart to shelter.
Then came morning when she said ‘It’s time, it’s
time!’
time’s
careless nebula of blossom /

* * *

3 Paradiso terrestre

The room fills up with smoke. Their faces are
imprecise with the imprecision of
their perfect intentions, all that loving
menagerie which the old man’s left for
good & which the newborn entered in a
rage & through which he now sleeps: a profound
indifference he will lose the knack of
in spite of love or because of it more
likely . . . oh, I’d be glad if he became
a carpenter & built a house for my
old age: a paradiso, well . . . but earth-
ly anyway, straight planks above a plain
or seacoast, the trees & mountains known, high
familiar stars still bright in heaven’s hearth.

* * *

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GOOD BUSINESS

for my father ‘Chick’ Wedde

Toyota

In mid-March the city fills up with monarch butterflies. The red flags of the Toyota sale yards all flap south.

In some way I find hard to describe
I know it’s always been like this.

Tony’s Tyre Service

Tony’s Tyre Service is customer-focused. When they change my tyres they also freshen up my car’s interior. I like these guys

and their amiable TV commercial is a song-and-dance hoot.
Tony – listen to me: I can sing along. I hope you read this,

Tony, and give me a break. I’m bald
and stale and need a cheerful tune.

Metalworx Engineering

It’s as though Metalworx Engineering in Vivian Street has always been there. Always, that ancient smell

of the mineral earth smelted, beaten and twisted into mild-steel elbows, the gothic interior
flickering with acetylene and loud with iron bashing, 
itss ventilators paddling sunlight in

and metal dust out. The display-window samples 
of metalcraft with lumpy welds have been there

glory forever and especially the rusting toy crane that’s always 
been for sale but will never

be sold. Can’t ever be sold unless there’s a buyer somewhere 
who understands that the forever crane’s lifting

the entire weight of the future, which will end 
along with Metalworx Engineering

if the crane’s ever taken from its alchemical window 
and expected to be half as real in another place.

**Mighty Mats**

‘Expert advice freely given’ is what’s promised 
by the helpful proprietors of Mighty Mats

next to Metalworx Engineering on Vivian Street, Wellington. 
I’ve seen these guys

roll out a sample along the footpath 
right across the road from the Cotton Shop

whose clientele pays big money 
for unbleached fabrics direct from the sweats

of Bangladesh. ‘Go on!’ says the friendly salesman 
at Mighty Mats. ‘Pluck that tuft!’ What say
we unroll a sample in the road
and I drive my car’s new tyres down it? I’d like to do that,

if only to see what the competition makes of it,
over there – let’s see the expert quality of their advice.

Wellington Scrap Metals

Okay, so they’re sitting outside on the footpath
in the sun, but who can blame them after
two weeks of filthy wind, first puckering
the last of summer’s tomatoes on their storm-scorched vines,

next sucking up the whole of the north’s galvanic dust
and spitting it out all over town. They’re sick of it,

the two guys and the woman at Wellington Scrap Metals,
so who can blame them for not keeping their promise that

‘We recycle scrap metal’? There’s always going to be time
for more junk, and it’s the inevitability of junk

that makes time into space, the kind of space
you know will wait for you to fill it, even if

you don’t want to wait, even if you
can feel your own time going utterly to waste already.
Shadow stands up

1

*Shadow stands up* under the trees in Victoria Park whose own filigree shadows lie across matted russet leaves on the sodden green turf that the morning’s tai chi moves barely mar – I see this from the Link bus window as we cross the intersection at the bottom of the hill where Kathmandu’s winter sale fails to persuade me there’s much to gain from any promise of warmth other than what I get when, while rain rattles against the bedroom window at dawn, I press my ear to the smooth skin between Donna’s shoulder-blades and hear, in the hollow chamber where she’s making dream words, a voice that’s not the same as hers say eerily, ‘Shadow stands up.’ It’s morning.

2

*Please don’t squeeze me until I’m yours* reads the greengrocer’s sign on his ripe avocados whose enticing location in a tilted tray on the footpath outside his shop says, we live in a country of ripe words, which is why the im-
print of memory may be all that mars the surfaces where the outlines of trees can seem to rise up at any time and become the shadows of runners circling the park a green Link bus goes past with me in it, thinking, ‘How can I know what memory is going to offer me unless I can feel it’s ready to?’

Augmented reality was what Donna talked about on the way to lunch in the food court on Ponsonby Road but I forgot all about it when she next told me that the mummified body of an Egyptian princess had been diagnosed with a heart condition at forty years of age despite a presumed diet of vegetables, fruit, and fish, pretty much what we eat most of the time and believe we’re doing enough thereby to earn a decent stretch. Memory, though, what a shadowy mystery that is, how it mars the surface of the present it then stands up in, augmented, a dead presence that should have lasted.
My first home, which I shared with my twin brother David, was our mother’s womb. This is the first sentence of the book that’s got me thinking about what exactly memory does and what time it does that in, for example, when was I ‘I’ when I wrote that sentence, was I in the time of the tardy twin hanging back in the warm, shady womb, or was I out here in the cold light of day, too late now to say wait as Dave’s shadow stands up and moves into the neither here nor there we live in while everything remarkable in the world packs the foreground’s augmented reality that never lasts long enough.

A green Link bus goes past with Sorry in lights on its forehead, windscreen wipers dashing tears from its face, the shadows of empty seats on fogged-up glass, and I am, too – sorry – I’m sorry that life’s too short and the memory of it much shorter. Magnificent obsession sale now on reads the shop-front signage the next unapologetic bus passes not long afterwards
with my confused face looking out through the wet, blurry glass, messed up somehow, unable to settle for sorrow or jubilation — but then it’s over, it’s gone, that moment when I thought I’d remembered something that reminded me you just can’t hope to do that — remember, I mean, too late, when it’s too late to do that.

6

I get up early hoping I’ll encounter the line drawn under *night time*, the red streak that bisects the shadow of dawn standing up, horizon of dark buildings in the east whose windows begin to flash, the gassy aquamarine sky pouring itself into the gaps between high-rise glass, laser-streaks of gulls lit by the afterburn of early sunrise over there where hope appears inevitable and unwise, but worth getting up early enough for, to remember why you do this.